Storytelling and reading skills among tenth graders at an Ecuadorian public school

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ABSTRACT

This is an action-research study aimed to improve reading skills through the application of storytelling among tenth-grade students at a public school in Loja, Ecuador. A convenience sample of 29 students, 17 female, and 12 male students, participated in the study for 10 weeks with 40 hours of instruction. To achieve the objective of the study, a researcher-made pretest, posttest, questionnaire, and field notes were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The test included five questions about reading components: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. A mixed-type questionnaire was administered to discover students' perceptions about storytelling elements such as characters, setting, plot, conflict, solution, and point of view. The pretest and posttest differences indicated that the students increased significantly in reading skills. Moreover, the questionnaire and field notes revealed that storytelling improved students' reading skills because they got engaged in the stories which simultaneously captured their interest and enthusiasm to keep reading.

Keywords *storytelling; reading skills; storytelling elements; reading components*

Habilidades de narración y lectura en estudiantes de décimo grado de una escuela pública ecuatoriana

RESUMEN

Este es un estudio de investigación-acción dirigido a mejorar las habilidades de lectura a través de la aplicación de la narración de cuentos entre los estudiantes de décimo grado en una escuela pública en Loja, Ecuador. Una muestra de conveniencia de 29 estudiantes, 17 mujeres y 12 varones, participaron en el estudio durante 10 semanas con 40 horas de instrucción. Para alcanzar el objetivo del estudio, se utilizó un pretest y un postest elaborados por el investigador, un cuestionario y notas de campo para recoger datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. La prueba incluía cinco preguntas sobre los componentes de la lectura: fonética, conciencia fonémica, vocabulario, fluidez y comprensión. Se administró un cuestionario de tipo mixto para descubrir las percepciones de los alumnos sobre los elementos de la narración, como los personajes, el escenario, la trama, el conflicto, la solución y el punto de vista. Las diferencias entre el pretest y el postest indicaron que los alumnos aumentaron significativamente sus destrezas lectoras. Además, el cuestionario y las notas de campo revelaron que la narración de cuentos mejoraba las habilidades lectoras de los alumnos porque se implicaban en las historias, que a la vez captaban su interés y entusiasmo por seguir leyendo.

Palabras clave: narración de cuentos; destrezas lectoras, elementos de la narración; componentes de la lectura.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a process of great importance, even more during academic life. Reading refers to the process of looking at writing letters and symbols to understand the meaning of them (Sheth & Chauhan, 2015). Therefore, to acquire a new language, it is essential to have a reading level that allows further understanding. Through reading, a great deal of knowledge is acquired, whether academic, cultural, or scientific, which helps the cognitive and communicative development of each individual, and therefore, the acquisition of a language. Specifically, reading skills refer to "the process of decoding words and constructing knowledge and meaning simultaneously through interaction and engagement with written language" (Radaideh et. al 2020). Similarly, Sheth and Chauhan (2015) defined reading as a process that involves multifaceted skills in decoding the meaning of written texts. Casteleiro (2011) stressed that reading does not always have to be understood when starting to read, but rather it is important to maintain a reading rhythm, to obtain correct pronunciation. In addition, cognitive and metacognitive skills are eventually essential that lead to the analysis, research, interpretation, and production of texts as stated by Monroy and Gomez (2009).

Previous studies found difficulties such as a lack of motivation and the application of other strategies to enhance reading skills. Simultaneously, suggested the use of storytelling to motivate students to study English and take it more seriously making more practice, especially in English reading skills. On the other hand, previous researchers recommend using local stories as the content of short stories for different groups of students. Storytelling is an effective strategy that should be incorporated to improve academic performance in reading skills. Thus, storytelling helps teachers as a pedagogical strategy to develop positive attitudes toward instructions Miller and Pennycuff (2017). In the same context, storytelling brings improves the student's scores and it can raise learners' interest in reading stories (Anggeraini & Afifah (2017).

On the other hand, storytelling is an ancient art that has had quite an impact throughout the ages and it is a great way to share human experiences, cultures, and civilization (Tinckler, 2017). Similarly, Robin (2017) defined storytelling as the way of relating, communicating, and transmitting knowledge or lived experiences that can be real or fictional each one containing a purpose. In the same context, Lopéz

(2017) considers that storytelling narratives can be exaggerated or embellished according to the provenance where the facts are usually not altered. In addition, Anderson (2014) mentioned that storytelling is part of humanity since people communicate or naturally respond to biblical impulses. On the other hand, Sonday (2021) defines storytelling through technology as digital storytelling because it uses a series of interactions, sounds, adding images, voices, music, or videos that promote motivation and curiosity in people. Digital storytelling has been pointed out as a tool that makes use of various electronic devices such as smart boards, cell phones, computers, or sound equipment promoting a different experience from the traditional (Sonday 2021). According to Robin (2008), digital stories help to understand personal narratives, historical documentaries, and at the same time stories that inform and instruct from concept to practice.

In Ecuador, English as a foreign language must be acquired from the second grade of primary school to the third year of high school. In consequence, the national curriculum proposed by the Ministry of Education (2019) proposes "The principal goal of the Reading curricular thread is to develop learners who are willing and able to interact autonomously with written texts to do a variety of tasks, such as extract information, learn about the world around them, and communicate" (p. 432).

The researcher observed during her teaching practicum that students in tenth grade presented deficiencies in reading skills; thus, the required level established by the national standards was not reached. Similarly, several researchers have reported that students had difficulties reading and pronouncing letters which became a challenging task when dealing with reading English as a foreign language (EFL) texts. Other researchers have found that low reading comprehension presented by students may refer to the inadequate use of reading pedagogical strategies or lack of innovation in teaching English (Anggeraini & Afifah, 2017; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Radaideh et al., 2020).

The findings of this research would support EFL teachers with the use of storytelling in their classrooms. Their students will be able to improve their reading skills through the identification of storytelling elements. In addition, it promotes the use of different strategies with digital tools within the classroom to create motivation, and good behavior to develop learners' multiple intelligences. This research also provides reliable information about the public education reality in Ecuador.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study was action research design. The pretest was used to discover the learners' initial knowledge of reading comprehension skills before the intervention plan. After the intervention, the post-test was applied to the participants. This was to find out whether the application of storytelling helped learners to improve their reading skills. Thus, this method made it possible to broaden the understanding of the research problem (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Creswell, 2012).

The participants of this research were 29 tenth-graders at a public school in Loja, Ecuador, 12 females, and 17 males, with ages between thirteen and fifteen years old. They were selected based on convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012). The researcher selected this institution because of its availability and openness access to implement new strategies to teach English as a foreign language (EFL).

A criterion-referenced scoring proposed by Gay et al., (2014) allowed the researchers to compare the test results with the grading scale standard provided by the Ministry of Education. In this regard, the pretest and posttest addressed five closed-ended questions that contained selection items as multiple choice, matching, and complete questions which were based on the reading components: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The first question presented a reading to measure fluency in reading skills using a previously designed rubric to verify the level of prosody, accuracy, and automaticity in reading. From this same question, the other questions were broken down to measure the rest of the components.

The researcher reflected and analyzed the results from the pretest/post-test and the questionnaire using central measures of tendency presented in frequency tables. Data from obtained open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the field notes were analyzed and described using thematic analysis.

The use of the action research design by Kurt Lewin (1940) proposed the following stages: Planning, Acting, Observing, and reflecting (Adelman, 2006; Giddings & Winter, 2001).

In the stage of planning, the main problem was identified through a previous observation made to tenth-

grade students of a public institution, especially in reading skills. After this, to know the learners' performance, a pretest was applied. In addition, lesson plans were designed based on the nine instructional events proposed by Gagné (1965). These lesson plans were adjusted with the storytelling elements and reading components.

Next, in the acting stage, it was carried out the intervention proposal during seven weeks. Each class session continuously was monitored, evaluated, and revised to determine storytelling effectiveness in reading skills. Gagné's nine events were classified into the 5 stages of learning: warm-up and objective discussion, instruction and model, guided practice, independent practice, and assessment which helped to arrange English classes. The classes were conducted using didactic materials such as short stories, flashcards, and an online story jumper application, which helped to obtain the final results in the improvement of reading skills in the teaching-learning process of the English language. Within each class period, the researcher recorded descriptive and reflective notes through field notes to evidence learner attitudes and perceptions in the classroom.

In step three about observing, the teacher (researcher) observed students' behavior, responses, participation, and achievement during the proposal's application. Field notes and a questionnaire permitted the registration of relevant information. The flexibility of the plan allowed the researcher to make specific adjustments during the action stage by monitoring the strategies applied as an effective response to the questions that guided the research process.

The researcher reflected and analyzed the results obtained during the intervention by interpreting the results obtained in the pretest and posttest and the data collected during the action through field notes and questionnaires. Finally, the researcher described the data and communicated the outcomes through detailed and theoretically grounded documentation.

RESULTS

Pretest and posttest

Figure 1. *Comparison of the Pre-test and Post-test Means*
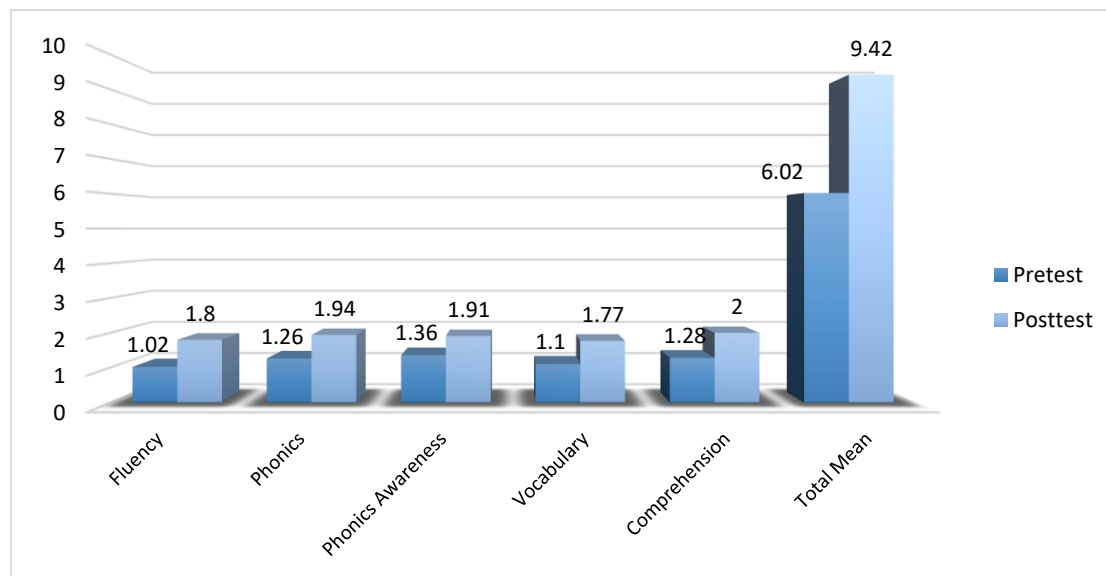
As can be evidenced Figure 1, the students improved significantly in reading skills when using storytelling, which is proven by the 3,40 points increase the students obtained from the pre-test mean score of 6,02/10 to the post-test maximum score of 9.42/10. The main improvement that the students achieved was in the "comprehension" aspect, which is proven by the score of 1,28/2 on the pre-test and the mean score of 2/2 points on the post-test. Next, in phonics use, a score of 1,26/2 was obtained at the beginning and then rose to 1,94/2 points. Similarly, the fluency score was 1,02/2 but in the case of the post-test a score of 1,80/2, where prosody, accuracy, and automaticity of reading were put into practice. In addition, phonemic awareness had a score of 1,36 /2 before the intervention and after this, a score of 1.91/2 was obtained. Finally, in vocabulary, we had a score of 1,10/2, and it rose to 1,77/2. This means that each of the components gradually improved with the use of storytelling.

In summary, it was evident that storytelling greatly improved the reading skills of the tenth-graders. Learners increased their ability to read and comprehend the entire text. The students also became independent readers, as the storytelling motivated them to continue with this skill, they acquired knowledge based on phonemic sounds as well as phonemic awareness of the English language and comprehended content by making use of new vocabulary on their own.

Questionnaire to identify students' perceptions

Table 1. *Kind of Stories that Learners Prefer to Read*

Options	*f*	*%*
Legends	23	83%
Fables	9	12%
Drama	4	5%
Total	36	100%

As a general trend, Table 1 shows that the types of stories (legends, fables, theater) were the most useful during the classes. Thus, it is evident that more than half of the students (83%) expressed a preference for legends. In effect, the field notes collected in each class corroborated this fact, legends were read more frequently than fables and drama. Therefore, among the lowest preferences are fables at 12% and drama stories we have 5%.

Table 2. *The Easiest and Most Difficult Storytelling Elements Identified After Reading*

Options	Easy elements		Difficult elements	
	F	*%*	*f*	*%*
Character	18	32%	3	5%
Setting	13	23%	2	4%
Plot	10	5%	19	43%
Conflict	5	9%	9	20%
Resolution	6	11%	3	6%
Point of view	4	7%	10	22%
Total	51	100%	41	100%

The results in Table 2 show the easiest and most difficult elements for students to identify. The easiest elements to identify were the characters (32%) and setting (23%). Student 2 mentioned that " these stories talk about people and the people are the characters" and Student 5 said that "it is very easy to see them at a glance." Similarly the characters in a story are the names of the people or animals that stand out in the stories. Also, the setting was highlighted by the description of the place, time, or climate in which the story was told. Students found it easier to identify these elements because they do not need reasoning.

On the other hand, it can be visualized that the most difficult element to identify was the plot, with 43%. This means that, after reading the stories, some students found it difficult to identify the plot because they had to summarize the chronological order of the story in their own words. This is supported by the answer of Student 11 " I do not remember sometimes the names so it is more difficult for me" and Student 9 mentioned that "because sometimes the plot is not very clear." The researcher's reflective notes registered that the students did not understand the whole narrative text due to the lack of practice and time to achieve the objective.

Table 3. *Storytelling Motivates Reading and Use of Story Jumper Application*

Questions	Motivation		Story jumper	
Options	*f*	%	*f*	%
Yes	28	97%	15	52%
No	0	0%	5	17%
Not sure	1	3%	9	31%
Total	29	100%	29	100%

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of students (97%) responded affirmatively. This shows that storytelling was a strategy that helped them improve their reading. The opinions given in the open-ended questions corroborate these results; for example, Student 6 wrote that "every time a story is told, it gives you more intrigue and incites you to read" and Student 1 said, "there are cute and eye-catching stories which catch people's attention". This shows that the vast majority of students were attracted to storytelling. In addition, it was evident the interest and enthusiasm that the students showed during the lessons, especially because they wanted to know what happened in the story. Thus, the students had to keep reading and researching unknown words to understand. On the other hand, in the use of story jumper, 52% of the students responded that they would continue to use the online story jumper application to improve their reading. While 31% mentioned "maybe". This indicates that students experienced the functionality of this application because it has different functions to create their own stories or read stories within it. Likewise, Student 9 mentioned that "it is more fun to learn in the application" and Student 12 mentioned that "it is an interactive application" so the use should be applied. From the field notes, it was noticed that the implementation of this application during class produced

curiosity and entertainment, but it was not fully carried out because of the lack of technological equipment in the students' homes prevented the use of this application beyond the clasroom.

Table 4. *Frequency of Storytelling in Class*

Options	f	%
Never	0	0%
Almost never	0	0%
Occasionally	4	14%
Almost every day.	23	79%
Every day.	2	7%
Total	29	100%

The data in Table 4 shows that after the intervention plan, more than half of the students (79%) answered that the frequency of storytelling was almost every day. This shows that the use of storytelling during the intervention has been gradual. However, it was not possible to use storytelling in all classes, mainly because of the time to carry out each lesson plan, and also because some topics such as "language tips (also, too, either)" were not found to be related to the topic. In addition, of the ten lesson plans structured for the intervention, eight contained storytelling and two contained only thematic storytelling. This indicates that storytelling was not applied in all classes.

Table 5. *Improvement of Reading Skills and Positive Teaching Through Storytelling*

Questions	Reading Improvement		Positive Teaching	
Options	f	%	f	%
Strongly Agree	17	59%	17	59%
Agree	4	14%	4	14%
Neutral	7	24%	8	28%
Disagree	1	3%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Total	29	100%	29	100%

In Table 5 we can see that more than half of the students (59%) responded that they strongly agree and others agree (14%) that it is possible to improve reading skills through storytelling. Evidently, the

activities carried out with the implementation of storytelling helped students' reading and its components. The opinion of Student 9 mentioned that "he agrees because it draws his attention" and Student 23 said that "he agrees because it helps to inspire young people to read stories and be interested". This means that the storytelling created motivation in the students making them want to continue reading stories to improve their reading.

In the same way, more than half of the students (59%) expressed full agreement that storytelling provides positive teaching. In addition, 14% of them agree, while 28% maintain a neutral position. This means that most of the students agreed with the postulation. Most stories applied had positive teaching but not all stories were easy to understand for them which reflects that not all students were sure about whether stories should have positive teaching. Based on the field notes, students demonstrated attraction to stories with positive teaching but not all.

Table 6. *Most Favorite Storytelling Ends*

Options	*f*	%
Anecdotic	14	31%
Dramatic	6	13%
Horror	14	31%
Suspenseful	4	9%
Fiction	7	16%
Total	65	100%

As can be seen in Table 6, 31% of students chose anecdotal endings, and the same percentage (31%) chose horror endings. This is similar to the idea that the endings of each story can vary according to the preferences of each student. Anecdotal stories often arouse the reader's curiosity and encourage further reading. Similarly, in horror stories, although scary, many like to know how the story ends or what happened. Each story or tale is unique in the way it creates intrigue, and curiosity about the events described and how they end. At the same time, all stories are emotional stimulators that awaken different feelings in the reader, some of the doubt, others curiosity, fear, or fright.

Table 7. *The Most Frequent Feeling after Using Storytelling*

Options	*f*	%
Enthusiastic	13	45%
Motivated	9	31%
Regular	7	24%
Bored	0	0%
Extremely bored	0	0%
Total	29	100%

As it is presented in Table 7, 45% of the students answered that they felt enthusiastic when storytelling was used frequently. Another 31% mentioned that were motivated by using storytelling to read. Also, evidently can be seen that some students (24%) felt regular, which means that their motivation was not very high. Furthermore, field notes demonstrated that many learners were enthusiastic and motivated to read stories. Many of them expressed curiosity and interest in the plot that the stories had. This is because stories were selected according to the student's level in which the storytelling elements could be identified which were part of the enthusiasm and motivation during the reading. On the other hand, some students felt frustrated because they didn't understand the story.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to improve reading skills by storytelling with tenth graders students at a public institution in Loja during the 2022-2023 school year. In this section, the researcher presents the answers to the research questions.

In this regard, **what is storytelling's effectiveness in enhancing reading skills among tenth-grade students at a public institution in Loja?**

In the present study, it was found that students significantly increased their reading skills with the use of storytelling. In the pretest, the students' mean was 6,2, while after the intervention plan with the use of storytelling, the students reached 9,42 as a total average. These results showed a significant improvement in reading skills through storytelling. This result corroborates what Bravo et. al (2021) affirmed. Storytelling enriches education by creating opportunities for students to share feelings and opinions and helps them to understand abstract or complex content.

Five components of reading were established to identify students' reading skills: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. In the pretest, the students presented difficulties in all these aspects, especially in reading fluency. Another problem was in word recognition (vocabulary). However, in the posttest, the students significantly improved their performance in reading skills. Similarly, Anggeraini and Afifah (2017) found that storytelling met the student's needs, and they also acquired different criteria after reading the stories.

Based on the above, Esra'a Radaideh (2020) also mentioned that storytelling was a good strategy to teach. She found that storytelling effectively improves students' reading comprehension. Consequently, learners outperformed in the overall reading comprehension posttest.

What are the students' perceptions towards the use of storytelling to enhance reading skills among tenth graders students at a public school in Loja?

Findings demonstrated that the type of stories they preferred the most were legends. In addition, it was found that the students felt motivated and interested in the use of storytelling to improve reading skills. Similarly, Miller and Pennycuff (2008) found in their research that storytelling can improve reading, and motivates students to connect their knowledge. Likewise, during an intervention in an English curriculum Anggerainni and Afifah (2017) demonstrated that digital storytelling meets students' needs, and it can improve and increase vocabulary. Students demonstrated high scores after the application of digital storytelling. In the same way, Maila D.H Rahiem (2021) in her analytical study discovered that with the use of technology, storytelling could be more entertaining, captivating, and engaging for learners.

In summary, the use of storytelling helps to improve reading according to the opinions and perceptions of students who have made use of this strategy. Furthermore, this theory is reaffirmed according to researchers such as Miller and Pennnycuff, 2008; Maila D.H Rahiem, 2021 and Anggerainni and Afifah, 2017. Thus, the use of storytelling is recommended to create motivation, curiosity, and entertainment in students when acquiring another language. Finally, it became evident that the use of the online story jumper application was well received, but its full development was not possible. The application is a tool that captures the attention of the audience, but its use has to be linked to a computer or tablet, which was the factor that prevented its full use because the students did not have enough technological devices

or internet access. Another limiting factor was that there was no opportunity to implement their topics in the lesson plans, but they had to be adapted to those provided by the institution.

CONCLUSIONS

Students demonstrated an effective advance with the implementation of storytelling on reading skills, especially in comprehension, phonics, and phonemic awareness in which students acquired further progress. Students were able to understand and read short texts more fluently and with improved word pronunciation. Based on the results of the analysis, learners must keep working to improve reading fluency and vocabulary. Thus, the researcher concludes that storytelling effectively is a strategy that helped learners to enhance their reading skills.

Storytelling encouraged students' participation, creating interest, motivation, and curiosity to learn information about storytelling. The student's preferences for storytelling centered on legends. In addition, the endings that stood out the most were the anecdotal and terrifying ones, because of the sense of humor they cause. This is because the stories create and unburden a set of emotions through reading whether it is doubt, fright, love, and others. In addition, the use of the online story jumper application is well received by students, especially because it contains decorative multimedia details or audio that promote motivation. Consequently, the use of storytelling arouses the reader's interest and promotes the continuous reading practice.

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