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Using Storytelling to Improve Afghan EFL Students' Oral Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT
Good oral communication is widely considered a coveted skill for learners as it has implications on their employability prospects and career development at their workplace. Mastering oral communication skills in English is a great challenge for English as Foreign Language learners in the context of countries like Afghanistan. Studies have highlighted that storytelling technique has been used to promote language learners' oral communication skills in various educational contexts. However, the effectiveness of this technique for the language learning purposes has been scarcely examined in Afghanistan. Hence, the present study aims to (i) investigate the effect of storytelling technique on Afghan EFL learners' oral communication skills development, and (ii) to determine Afghan EFL learners' improvement of speaking skill aspects after using the storytelling technique. Using convenience sampling technique, 31 Afghan EFL undergraduates were sampled from a public university in Afghanistan. A quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design was employed and the data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0. An independent sample t-test to compare the pre-test and post-test scores showed a statistically significant difference (t [30] = -10.98, p< 0.05). The result obtained from the t-test indicated that storytelling had a significant effect on Afghan EFL learners' oral communication skills development. This suggests the incorporation of the storytelling technique in language classes to

enhance EFL learners' comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and fluency in the target language.

Keywords: Story-telling technique; English language; oral communication skills; active learning

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication refers to the verbal exchange of information, opinion and ideas among senders and receivers of message through spoken language. Having a good command of English language is supposed to be a priority in many societies and it indicates one's mastery of the language. Today, excellent oral communication skills are an important requirement for most employment. Being able to speak in English opens up many job opportunities in companies around the world (Ompusunggu, 2018; Akther, 2022). Therefore, mastering this productive skill is a need for undergraduates who are future job seekers. On the other hand, mastering oral communication skills is considered to be difficult especially for second or foreign language learners (Raja Yacob & Mohamad, 2022). In the context of Afghanistan, English is a foreign language (Narasuman et al., 2019) and it has had a tumultuous history, which further complicates the context for conducive learning of a language foreign to her culture. Many learners experience inadequate oral communication skills of the target language as ethic languages are effective used for day to day activities. Language learners may encounter speaking difficulties in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and fluency (Hidayati, 2019) as English is taught as a foreign language in education domain.

Ikrammuddin (2017) claimed that the storytelling technique can improve language learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, creativity, organization of ideas and overall communication skills. Storytelling is a process that enables the storyteller to think, create suspension for the listeners and speak in front of the audience. Therefore, this technique enhances learners' confidence, language skills, positive attitude toward learning a new language, and evokes emotions that pave the way for interaction. Moreover, it assists learners to improve their listening skills and background knowledge. In an experimental study by Hidayati (2019), the treatment group showed improvement in their communication skills after receiving the storytelling telling technique as the treatment. This is not surprising as storytelling has been part of human oral tradition for ages, and has elements of entertainment and human interest. Thus, the researcher found a significant difference between the result of the experimental and control group in the post-test whereby the experimental group showed improvement in five areas: vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension compared to the control group. In another experimental study, Ompusunggu (2018) reported that the learners in the treatment group outperformed the control group in oral communivation performance and motivation.

As mentioned, storytelling is one the most common and ancient techniques that humans used to educate one another. It holds a significant place in Islam as a powerful means or tool for conveying message, moral lesson, teaching and learning. The Quran itself is filled with stories of prophets. Throughout Islamic history, storytelling has been utilized to elaborate complex concepts, and to impart wisdom on a deeper level. In short, storytelling has been used as a medium of "human's social interaction" particularly for learning (Li & Hew, 2017). In this context, the target language is English which is a foreign language used for limited purpose in a

society that has previously experience uncertainties due to war and pandemic of COVID-19.

It is widely acknowledged that English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners spend lots of time learning English, yet they struggle with their oral communication skills (Wei et al., 2018). Based on observations of Afghan EFL classes, these undergraduate learners have difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar when using the target language, similar to the reported findings. Shinwari and Miakhel's (2023) study also confirmed that "due to poor pronunciation and low level of grammar and vocabulary knowledge," Afghan EFL learners have poor speaking performance. Several studies have indicated that second language and foreign language learners faced with disfluency when learning a new language and story-telling technique has a significant role in improving learners' oral communication skills (Putri et al., 2021; Swari, 2022; Zuhriyah, 2017).

However, there is a paucity of published studies, particularly in context of Afghanistan, that assesses the effectiveness of storytelling technique on students' speaking skill development. Hence, the current paper employed the story-telling technique to examine its effects on improvement of Afghan EFL learners' oral communication skills. The research objectives are twofold, (1) to investigate the effects of the storytelling technique on Afghan EFL undergraduates' oral communication skills, and (2) to determine Afghan EFL undergraduates' improvement of speaking skill aspects after using the storytelling technique. Accordingly, the research questions raised are (1) does the storytelling technique have a significant effect on Afghan EFL undergraduates' oral communication skills?, and (2) what speaking aspects of Afghan EFL undergraduates have greatly improved after using the storytelling technique? Additionally, the research hypotheses are stated as follow:

(H0): Story-telling has no significant effect on Afghan EFL learners' oral communication skills development.
H1: Story-telling has significant effect on Afghan EFL learners' oral communication skills development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active learning
Active learning is an approach that actively engages students in the learning process and provides them with opportunities to explore and use their potential, rather than just passively receiving information. It helps learners retain information, foster communication and collaboration and develop creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Kamarulzaman et al., 2018). Active learning through storytelling in a language class requires students to utilize the target language by creating and sharing stories which results in improving language skills and sub-skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in a more memorable way. Students can take turns telling stories, listening to each other, and even creating their own stories. This interactive approach can make language learning more enjoyable and effective.

There has been a considerable amount of literature published in the past on the use of the story-telling technique for improving learners' communication skills. Storytelling refers to retelling a past story in one's own words. It is a learner-centered activity involving the teller and

listeners in certain interactions. Moreover, it is an effective tool for checking students' comprehension, and an influential technique for engaging learners in the process of learning (Putri et al., 2021). Hence, it can be deduced that this technique establishes an active learning environment and enhances higher order and deep-thinking skills in learners (Setyarini, 2019). They not only practice language skills, but also learn real life lessons based on their peers' narrations. This leads to a conclusion that storytelling could contribute to autonomous and cooperative learning.

Storytelling technique

 pre-experimental study in the context of Indonesia confirmed that after applying "life-story-telling" in one single group, a significant difference between the score of the pre-test and post-test was reported. The researchers applied video storytelling and assigned students to retell myths, fables, fairy tales or legends and record them through video recorders. As a result, storytelling positively impacted students in terms of class participation, contribution by sharing ideas and speaking fluency. This technique enables students to feel confident and not to be afraid making mistakes when speaking (Putri et al., 2021). Furthermore, Silviyanti et al. (2022) emphasized that storytelling impacted learners' communication skills in various aspects of language: grammar, fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, this technique did not assist learners in improving their non-verbal communication.

Comparatively, an action research study in two cycles also showed that storytelling improved learners' oral communication skills and motivation during discussions in front of the audience. In the first cycle, the instructor asked students to form groups of five students. A reading text was read and translated by the instructor to the students. Then the students were instructed to discuss the text and present the content of the story after group discussion in front of the class and the instructor provided them with feedback regarding aspects of their speaking. In the second cycle, the activity was the same, however, students were given more time to retell the story as they had suggested. Presentation time was extended for the students as well (Zuhriyah, 2017).

Besides, the combination of the storytelling technique with a problem-based learning approach (PBL) makes the learning experience very appealing and evoking to learners. In this formula, learners follow each phase of PBL and tell a story, starting from the description of setting or establishing context and problem statement to solution and ending (DavidLeeEdTech, 2020). In fact, learners share and cascade viable solutions to a complicated situation or problem in the form of well-developed stories with inspirational messages to the audience. The other advantage of storytelling is that learners can review and reflect on their problems related to language skills and aspects after their narration. Moreover, learners can understand their problems in oral communication and attempt to solve them (Putri et al., 2021; Morrow, 1985).

Kallinikou and Nicolaidou (2019) carried out a study in Cyprus focusing on digital storytelling to develop adults' oral skills in a new language. Digital storytelling or multimedia storytelling refers to the use of images, texts, audios, videos and music to develop learners' oral skill, motivation and independent learning. The result of the independent sample t-test indicated that digital storytelling had significantly influenced students' oral communication skills and students' motivation level in learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design
Utilizing quantitative research approach, a quasi-experimental research, namely one-group pretest-posttest design was carried out to collect data. This particular design allowed the researchers to examine the effect of storytelling technique, the independent variable, on EFL learners' communication skills development, the dependent variable in the present study. One-group pretest-posttest design is one of the commonly used quasi-experimental research designs in which only one group of subjects is given a pretest, a treatment that the researcher is testing and eventually a posttest.

Sample
The subjects of the current study were 31 female undergraduates in the English Language and Literature Department of a public university in Afghaistan. The researchers were allowed to conduct the research only with a female group. Hence, using the convenience sampling technique, the subjects were selected to take part in the experiment. The experiment was conducted during the fall semester when these sophomores, the subjects of this study, were taking Listening and Speaking Professional Course. All subjects have given their informed consent.

Instrument
The instrument utilized was speaking test using the storytelling technique and assessed by using a rubric adapted from studies by Saeed et al. (2019) and Maulany (2013). The oral test functioned as the instrument of data collection. The adapted rubric consists of five criteria: comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, fluency and pronunciation. Subjects planned and rehearsed their selected 5-7 minutes stories to get ready for retelling in their in-person class. They were well-informed that their storytelling activity was going to be assessed by the given rubric dealing with language aspects.

Table 1
Rubric for evaluating students' storytelling

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1
Comprehension	Appears to understand everything without difficulty	Understands nearly everything at normal speed, although occasional repetition may be necessary.	Understands most of what is said at slower than-normal speed with many repetitions.	Has great difficulty understanding what is said, often misunderstands the questions.	Unable to comprehend the material so that unable to express/respond the questions correctly.

Vocabulary	Speaks in L2 with accurate English words	Speaks mostly in L2 with few L1 words	has difficulty using a wide range of vocabulary. Has difficulty using appropriate vocabulary	Hardly uses a wide range of vocabulary effectively (very limited vocabulary). Hardly uses appropriate vocabulary	Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make conversation in L2 virtually impossible so that the student speaks in L1 all the time.
Grammar	Produces complete and accurate sentences	Produces some phrases instead of complete sentences with consistent and accurate word order or produces consistent omitted sentences.	Produces inconsistent and incorrect sentences/ phrases (E.g. I can walking around, buy food, some game, etc).	Answers mostly in L1.	Unidentified because of speaking in L1 all the time.
Fluency	Speaks in L2 very fluently and effortlessly.	Speaks in L2 less fluently due to a few problems of vocabulary/selection of word.	Speaks mostly in L2 with some long pauses and hesitancy.	Speaks mostly in L1, tries to speak in L2 but so halting with so many pauses and "em.."	Unidentified because of speaking in L1 all the time.
Pronunciation	Speaks in L2 intelligibly and has few traces of foreign accent.	Speaks mostly in L2 intelligibly with mother tongue accent.	Speaks mostly in L1, but produces 1-3 English words and pronounces them in intelligible mother tongue accent.	Speaks mostly in L1, but produces 1-3 English words. Needs some repetition in pronouncing the words to understand them.	Unidentified because of speaking in L1 all the time.

Note: Adapted from Saeed et al. (2019), and Maulany (2013).

Data collection procedure
Prior to commencing the investigation, subjects were informed regarding the nature of the present research and ethical clearance was obtained from subjects. Also, they were informed that their personal data would be kept confidential. Despite the advantages of storytelling, it has been reported that imitating a story from a source or narrating a boring story seems to make other learners "lazy and fall asleep" (Ismi & Syafei, 2018). Hence, in the present study, subjects were assigned to retell their personal real-life stories or others' inspirational and motivational stories to create an interesting, engaging, enjoyable, and encouraging learning environment in the classroom.

The researcher administered a pre-test to the sample of study. Students were required to retell a given story in the pre-test and it measured subjects' oral communication skills before any

treatment. Then, the subjects received treatment for four weeks. During the experiment, subjects were exposed to watching videos, seeing pictures, and reading texts to practice storytelling and to use their imagination and creativity to create a story and retell it. After the completion of four weeks, the subjects were post tested to measure their improvement in oral communication skills. In the post-test subjects were asked to tell their selected story within 5-7 minutes. This performance by students was in the form of a speaking test. The scoring of both pre-test and post-test were determined by the adapted rubric which is composed of the five following aspects: comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation.

Table 2
One group pre-test and post-test design

Pre-test	Independent variable (Treatment)	Post-test
Week 1	Storytelling technique	Week 6
	✓ Familiarizing subjects with the retelling technique and the rubirc ✓ Exposing subjects to watch videos, see pictures and read texts to practice storytelling ✓ using their imagination and creativity to create stories and retell them	

Data analysis
Based on the current research objectives, the data analysis was performed by the statistical package for social science (SPSS) 25.0. Descriptive and inferential statistics analysis specifically mean, standard deviation and paired sample t-test were carried out. According to Singh et al. (2009), paired samples t-test is also called repeated measure design; in which only one group is measured before and after a treatment. Then the two obtained sets of scores from the same sample are compared to investigate if the mean scores significantly and statistically differ from each other or not.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
In accordance with the current research objectives, a quasi-experimental study was conducted to measure the effect of storytelling on EFL learners' oral communication skills development. In the following visuals, the pre-test and post-test results highlighted the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

Table 3
Pre-test result

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	15.35	4.910

Table 3 illustrates the pre-test result. Based on this table, the mean score of subjects' pre-test was (mean= 15.35, SD= 4.91). It is noteworthy to state that prior to taking the pre-test, students did not receive any treatment related to storytelling. After the pre-test, students were exposed to the treatment for the duration of four weeks. During this period, subjects received lectures on how to deliver and present a story in front of the audience. They practiced multimedia storytelling using video, image, text and their own experience. Upon completion of the four weeks, they were post-tested. Table 4 demonstrated the result of post-test (Mean= 23.90, SD=1.22). As shown in the table below, the mean score of the post-test is higher compared to the pre-test mean score.

Table 4
Post-test result

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Post-test	23.90	1.221

Comparison of both the pre-test and post-test indicated that speaking helped students develop their oral communication skills. The result of paired sample t-test analysis in Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test. The post-test score depicted a significant increase in the areas of comprehension, pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary. As Table 5 shows, the descriptive data for the pre-test is (Mean = 15.35, Sd = 4.91) and the post-test is (Mean = 23.90, Sd = 1.22). The mean score of the post-test was found to be higher than the mean score of the pre-test. The t-test indicates that the difference was significant at $p < .05$ (t [30] = -10.98). This seems to imply that the pre-test does differ from the post-test in the scoring of the subjects' speaking test. Therefore, the decision is to accept H1 and reject H0.

Table 5
Paired sample t-test

Variables	n	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig.
Pre-test	31	15.35	4.91	-10.980	30	.000
Post-test	31	23.90	1.22			

Table 6 shows the mean scores of five aspects of speaking test in the post-test that provides answer to the second research objective. Each aspect had the mean score of four. It was deduced that the average level of five aspects of speaking test were in the range of 'Higher', and 'Almost highest'. Speaking aspects which gained higher mean scores in the speaking test were identified as 'Comprehension' (M=4.94, SD=.250), 'Vocabulary' (M=4.90, SD=.301) and 'Pronunciation' (M=4.74, SD=.514). Meanwhile, the two aspects of speaking test with relatively

lower mean scores were 'Grammar' (M=4.68, SD=.475) and 'Fluency' (M=4.65, SD=.486). Overall, the results revealed that storytelling significantly improved students' oral communication skills.

Table 6
Post-test mean scores

Post-test	Mean	SD
Comprehension	4.94	.250
Vocabulary	4.90	.301
Grammar	4.68	.475
Fluency	4.65	.486
Pronunciation	4.74	.514

The finding of this study confirmed that the story telling technique has significantly affected Afghan EFL undergraduates' oral communication skills development. This experiment is consistent with the previous studies (Ompusunggu, 2018; Ikrammuddin, 2017). They also revealed that the retelling technique positively and significantly improved learners' oral communication skills. Remarkably, the striking result to emerge from the data of the current study is that storytelling improves different speaking aspects such as comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and fluency. This substantiates the earlier findings in the literature by Swari (2022), Hidayati (2019) and Zuhriyah (2017). These researchers through conducting quasi-experimental and action research affirmed that comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency were enhanced after the implementation of storytelling.

In accordance with the present result, previous studies have demonstrated that storytelling has improved learners' pronunciation, vocabulary use, grammar, and fluency at the satisfactory level after experiencing the retelling technique (Silviyanti et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2021; Altun, 2020). Another study entitled "Applying project-based-learning to improve learners' oral communication skills", by Maulany (2013) substantiated that the storytelling technique has helped students boost four speaking aspects: comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation.

Additionally, it has been observed that using this technique establishes an enjoyable, exciting and inspiring learning atmosphere in the classroom in which learners are engaged and experience active learning. When the researcher educated learners regarding this technique and gave the treatment, it empowered them to eagerly participate and present their stories in the class. Putri et al. (2021) and Ompusunggu (2018) in a pre-experimental study highlighted that students feel motivated and interested to be active in the class and tried to speak in English by using the life story telling technique which is in agreement with the current study. In fact, this technique expanded students' opportunity to communicate confidently – without fear of failure or making mistakes and engaged them in the class. Narrating one's own story or someone else's story inspired other students in the class and created a competitive atmosphere to perform better, in line with Inayah (2015) who found that personal stories are inspirational and motivational for

others.

When students were retelling their personal life experiences, they used their creativity and imagination by creating twists and suspense and made their stories very attractive, impressive and inspirational. This finding corroborates the idea of Putri et al. (2021) who indicated that the retelling technique enables students to tell their own experiences as stories using their imagination and creativity.

As reported by Wei et al. (2018), Chinese English major undergraduates' oral communication in English and autonomy is achieved after receiving the treatment of digital storytelling. This study is based on true experimental research in which one control group and one treatment or experimental group were the subjects. After the treatment, the finding demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control group in the post-test. The finding indicated that storytelling improved their communication skills in English which is consistent with the present study's finding.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling has contributed to oral communication skills improvement as well as to an increase in classroom engagement. This paper examined the effects of the storytelling technique on Afghan EFL undergraduates' oral communication skills development and determined their improvement of speaking skill aspects after using the storytelling technique. Through conducting a quasi-experimental study, the result of speaking performance revealed that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test indicating EFL learner's development in oral communication skills in English. There were improvements in the five speaking aspect: comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and grammar. Hence, the incorporation of the storytelling technique in language courses which promotes mastery of speaking in learning English as a foreign language is recommended. Furthermore, storytelling is a potent tool that maintains classroom environment engaging, inspiring and enjoyable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It is suggested that researchers conduct such studies with two groups, experimental group and treatment group or employ mixed methods design to deeply assess the significant results of the storytelling technique. Moreover, current paper focused on limited number of students due to the climate of the context. There it is hard to generalize the result. Further studies may consider a larger sample size in other EFL contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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