# Innovating Grammar Teaching through Story Telling to Low Intermediate Learners

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**ABSTRACT**

Teaching grammar to second language classrooms has been popularly known to be tedious and dull as students are required to remember rules and do drills on structures. This has caused language instructors to try different strategies and techniques to bring fun to the classroom. In the present study, an experiment was conducted to see if the use of storytelling technique can provide a fresh input to learning. The aim is to determine whether this technique is acceptable and what the contributing factors are. Two groups of 20 diploma students each (N=40) were conveniently selected for the purpose of this research. The participants were L2 learners of English who enrolled in the Integrated Language Skills English course. The experimental group was treated with storytelling while the teaching method recommended by the syllabus was used on the control group. Pre and post tests were administered and a comparison of both treatments helped determine the effectiveness of storytelling. A set of questionnaire was distributed to all the participants to gather information on their perception of the parts of speech learned through storytelling and to determine the factors that contributed to its effectiveness.

**Keywords:**     teaching grammar, storytelling, low intermediate learners

**INTRODUCTION**

Educators in general apply a variety of methods and strategies as well as techniques in disseminating concepts and principles so that it can be understood by their students. The popularity of stories as analogies to relate a familiar activity or event to some new unfamiliar

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concept in order for cognition to process and unassumingly accept as something natural to comprehend is indeed a common phenomenon. This is because stories can provoke imagination of familiar objects or situations and therefore the element of panic in unfamiliar territory gradually disappears. Good stories are able to capture one's imagination and hold one's attention. Such stories can easily be best sellers. However, not everyone has the creativity to invent stories that can deliver the point.

To invent a story that has the ability to explain basic grammatical structures is indeed something that can help instructors provide not only the fun aspect for the classroom but more importantly an avenue to explain and clarify grammar rules in a more innovative and receptive manner. Grammar taught using this technique could possibly help learners counter their fear of learning grammar structures directly. In general, learners have been seen to look upon learning grammar rules as dull and repetitive. Unlike native speakers who naturally acquire the rules without formal learning, second language learners find themselves to be less confident when they do not know why the grammatical structures are formed in certain patterns. Therefore it has become a tedious task for language instructors to ensure that they learn the rules.

Learners have been known to memorise rules through drills. However, stories designed to explain each basic grammatical component in a precise manner could open doors, in effect, the hearts and minds of learners, to learning. In a study on the acquisition of verb tenses by second language learners, the use of analogies have been found to provide positive reactions (Soo & Nor Haniza, 2014). At the low intermediate level of language proficiency, learners usually have difficulties with grammar structures and their basic foundation of grammar rules is average to weak. Therefore, language instructors should find ways to provide for effective learning.

*Problem Statement*
Teaching grammar in second language classrooms has been found to be repetitive and ineffective in many grammar classrooms. Language instructors have been experimenting on a variety of methods, strategies and techniques to hopefully make learning grammar rules less scary. One technique is by introducing grammar rules through story telling. The story invented for this research was tailored in a new and innovative manner to suit comprehension of parts of speech in English.

*Objectives*
This study intends to investigate the effectiveness of applying a story telling technique to the teaching of basic grammatical rules and structures to low intermediate learners. If this technique can be proven to provide some positive results, the study also intends to find out the factors that could possibly contribute to the effectiveness of the technique used. As such, this study considers the following research questions:

1. Is the use of storytelling technique effective in teaching language proficiency to low intermediate diploma learners?
2. If so, what are the contributing factors to its effectiveness?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Storytelling is a traditional technique frequently used in explaining difficult constructs. In fact, it is commonly used in explaining science subjects such as physics (Podolefsky and Finkelstein, 2006; Harrison and Treagust, 1993). Story telling in the form of an analogy has been prescribed in many educational lessons particularly in the sciences where concepts are related to shared-familiar attributes of both the teacher and learner. In order for the story telling or analogy to be effective, it is highly essential that both the teacher and learner have the same shared knowledge (Harrison and Treagust, 1993). By comparing two rudiments with similar characteristics, it has been observed that better comprehensible learning is able to take place (Gentner and Namy, 2006). Stories provide learners with an element of difference from routine classroom teaching and learning and therefore language learning is acquired in a less formal and less direct but more meaningful manner (Harrasi, 2012).

Jensen (2006) in exploring non-literal theory, states that there is a strong link between language, perception, knowledge, and meaning so that language becomes a bridge to real world understanding. Language is not taken literally and meaning is derived through social processes. For example, *Life is a box of chocolates.* Literally, life is not a box of chocolates. At the semantic level, the subject complement *a box of chocolates* modifies the subject *life* and is linked by the verb *is*. At the sentence level, no grammatical rules have been violated. So it makes sense, that *life* is equivalent to *a box of chocolates.* Metaphorically however, meaning is not derived from such sentence combination levels. Instead, substitution rules apply in determining language meaning through non-literal connections.

Bartha (2013) found that difficulties in comprehension can be minimized by means of analogical reasoning to provide better understanding of a concept or theory. By means of such reasoning, learners are able to relate the two supportive systems to draw a conclusion by means of deduction. Past research has shown that story grammar has been commonly used as a technique to introduce different parts of speech by means of reading comprehension and dissecting of grammatical forms and functions such as the number of verbs used and how they are used in sentences as a technique for teaching proficiency (Amer, 1992). However, using the analogical reasoning by comparison with a made-up story has yet to be explored for language teaching.

In second language classrooms, there are still many areas to explore as to why and how language proficiency of learners can be enhanced. Traditionally, drills and memorizing of language rules has been mainly used to cater to improving of language proficiency. However, changing trends have brought about different methods, strategies and techniques that can prove to be useful for the second language classroom. Among the many attributes to the difficulty in language acquisition by L2 learners of English is the influence from the learners' L1 (Soo and Wong, 2012). Thus, using a story in a creative manner can infuse positive learning that is fun, playful and exciting.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is experimental in nature focusing on the use of storytelling as a means of explaining grammar rules. The purpose is to find out the effectiveness of using storytelling to teach grammar and if so, to what extent is it effective.

A sample size of N = 40 based on a convenient sampling method was applied in selecting the participants for the research. They were all L2 English learners with low intermediate language proficiency and were all Part 1 diploma students taking an Integrated Language Skills English course. All participants aged between 18 to 22 years old and they were all first language speakers of Malay. For the purpose of the study, the students were placed in two equal groups of 20 students each. While the control group followed the usual classroom learning strategy, the experimental group was treated with the story telling technique. The treatment was given in one language lesson and reinforced subsequently with a pre-test and post-test as well as a set of questionnaire.

The main instrument of this study is a story. To invent a story requires imagination and creativity. To invent a story to explain the rules of grammar requires the ability to relate that story to the rules effectively. This means that the analogy or story has to have characteristics familiar to the systems used by the subjects (Gentner & Namy, 2006; Harrasi, 2012; Bartha, 2013). An effective story should hold the attention of learners and provide elements of fun and play in the process of learning. The selected story is about 20 minutes long and has been made into a video CD. In its elementary form, it has been printed into a book. Both the CD and book has been copyrighted under the copyright act of Malaysia. An extract of the story is as follows:

> *Once upon a time, there lived a man in England called Mr. English. Mr. English fell in love with a beautiful woman and decided to marry her. During their honeymoon, Mrs. English became pregnant. Mr. English was overjoyed. All their relatives were overjoyed. They were all excited to help name the firstborn of the English family. Finally, Mr. English thought very deeply and decided to name his son,* **Noun.** *He felt that this was a suitable name because in English, the names of people, animals, places and things are called Nouns.*

Besides the story, there were two other instruments used in the study – a pre-post test as well as a questionnaire. There were 20 items in the pre-post test. The items were mainly designed to test the proficiency level of the subjects and their basic knowledge of the different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. They were all multiple choice questions with a choice of 4 answers. The pre-test was administered before the lesson to both the control and experimental groups. The post-test was administered after the lesson. The items were exactly the same for both the pre-test and post-test to enable the researchers to see if there was any difference before and after the treatment was given for both the control and experimental groups.

After the experiment was conducted, the subjects in the experimental group were asked to answer the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items pertaining to the subjects' feelings and thoughts of the lesson. The items included questions such as *Did you enjoy the story? Is the story able to help you understand the parts of speech better?Are you better able to*

*remember the concepts of various parts of speech? (For example, verbs represent action words).* The data collected for the pre-post test and the questionnaire was then tabulated and analysed using the SPSS statistical tool

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The pre-test and post-test results were tabulated from the experimental and control groups after the experiment was conducted. Table 1 shows the average score of the tests.

Table 1
Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

|  | Group 1 (Experimental) | Group 2 (Control) |
|---|---|---|
| **Pre-test** | 66.0 % | 66.0 % |
| **Post-test** | 81.4 % | 72.8 % |

Before the lesson was conducted, both the experimental and control groups had an average score of 66.0% for the proficiency test to test the subjects' prior knowledge of basic parts of speech. After the lesson, it was found that both groups had better post-test scores. However, it was noted that the scores for the experimental group was slightly higher (81.4%) than the control group (72.8%).

A survey was then administered to the experimental group. The findings show that majority of the subjects felt that the lesson was innovative and fun (80%). They loved the contents of the story and commented that it was not stressful or dull (85%). They felt that they could understand the principles related to the parts of speech better and have a deeper understanding of what they were learning in terms of the different parts of speech although it was only a 2-hour lesson (75%). They already had some input on the different parts of speech and felt that this was a good refresher course for them (70%). They also liked the different characters played by the different family members that made up the different parts of speech (80%).

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the results were positive and the subjects that were given the input showed improvement in their test scores as shown in Table 1 above. This indicates that the use of storytelling technique in language proficiency classrooms has great potential. Besides that, it can be seen that some of the contributing factors are the "new" element of an original story, the prior knowledge that learners already have, the colourful pictures and comprehensible vocabulary as well as the simple story line with the analogy of a family and the members that make up the family.

Although this study was merely a pilot study, it showed that there is a lot of potential and the initial research is promising. It is recommended that this method be tested on a larger scale to a wider range of subjects from different proficiency levels. For future studies, a research on language instructors' challenges in creating innovation for proficiency classrooms can also be

considered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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