

Storytelling as a Pedagogical tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study is to determine how educators and students at the university level are using storytelling to support the educational process. This study provides a general framework about educational uses of storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English Language in the Higher Education and describes the different perceptions of people (Teachers and Students) at different levels.

A survey is used to collect responses from a group of educators and students in educational settings to determine how they are using storytelling for educational purposes at the undergraduate level. The results show the current situation of educational uses of storytelling and explore some of the benefits and challenges educators face in implementing storytelling in their institutions.

The purpose of our research is to investigate the impact of Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to teach and learn English Language in Higher Education and its academic achievements on ESL students. It highlights findings that address the following questions:

1. Is Storytelling beneficial for students to learn English language at university
2. To what extent do teacher and student prefer Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to teach and learn English Language in Higher Education?

KEYWORDS

Storytelling, Teacher's Beliefs, Student's Beliefs, Student's Academic Achievement, Narrative, Pedagogy, ESL

INTRODUCTION

Albert Einstein says "If you want your children to be intelligent, tell them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, tell them more fairy tales. When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking." (Einstein)

It can be said that from the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century like other field of life, English Language Teaching (ELT) is explored and innovated. Due to these explorations teachers and students should be familiar with the changing trends of ELT. The changed trends have not left room for any of them to be guided by the fixed ideas and values. This allows pedagogy to make ELT to be flexible and contextual.

The pedagogical flexibility of teaching English language realizes that there is no single teaching method to be the best because students are very different from one another at intellectual level and so are teachers. For a teaching method to take place, it has to be appropriate for both the students and the teachers and the subject matter as well.

What makes a method to be perfect is related to many important variations in the teaching context. The variations can be language environment, class-size, language policy, cultural attitudes, linguistic and instructional objectives, classroom ethos, teacher-related factors like skill, autonomy training, and learner-related factors like age, previous learning experience, attitudes to learning, and etc.. Prabhu (1990, p.162)

There are many methods of teaching which are used by language teachers. These methods range from grammar translation method, functional approach, direct method, nativist approach, audio-lingual method, communicative method, oral structural situational approach, task-based approach, storytelling. All these have own importance in their own places. They all have positives and negatives and none of them can be regarded as the best method from the first stage to the fourth stage of teaching English language skills, and for all instructors and students.

According to Brown, it is the context of the subject matter which may make a teaching method best or worst and impractical. (1994, p. 15). Storytelling as a method of teaching can be best or worst in its own right. Again it is the context which makes this approach to be effective or ineffective.

Universities need to employ different pedagogical strategies in order to improve the learning of all students. Using storytelling in the classroom is one of the methods to improve teaching oral language, reading comprehension, and writing. Because of the interrelated nature of the processes involved in reading and writing, storytelling can be an effective pedagogical strategy that can be woven into instruction to increase students' competencies in all areas.

This paper will address how storytelling can be used as a pedagogical tool in the classroom to enhance teaching and learning of English language in the higher education and specifically in the department of English language.

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool to Teach and Learn

According to Champion (199) Storytelling is an oral activity where language and gestures are used in a colourful way to create scenes in a sequence. According to Mcdrury and Alterio (2002) Storytelling is a unique way to enable learners to convey their human experiences through the language of words. Parkin (1998) gives special values to storytelling and he believes that there are many characteristics such as metaphors, legends, myths, and figures of speeches which can make storytelling to be used as a pedagogical tool for communication and teaching. According to Isabel et al (2004) storytelling is not a new method of teaching; it is used for as a powerful and promising educational means for teaching and learning. The results of the studies show that stories draw the learners' attention and thus can carry out certain messages more easily to them. One of the significant aspects of storytelling is that the words are not memorized, but should be comprehended by audience participation and interaction.

According to Bloch the reason behind using storytelling is because it is a significant pedagogical tool to build speaking, writing, reading and listening skills in the language classroom. According to Haven (2000), one of the powerful and effective ways to improve and develop language skills is using storytelling in the classroom, and moreover that activities where students participate in telling, writing, reading and listening. The results of the studies show that storytelling, as a folk art, is accessible

to all ages and abilities. As a pedagogical tool, storytelling can motivate learners to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten their capacity to communicate thoughts, emotions and feelings. In this respect, Pagano (1991) states that when we teach we tell stories about the world, some stories are scientific, historical, philosophical and so on, from this opinion, teachers tell stories to students for many reasons: to present new material in interesting ways, to share practice experiences and to reveal aspects of themselves. Teachers should encourage their students to tell stories about events they have experienced and to make interaction between stories of the world and their own stories and they should also encourage students to tell stories about their special events.

For thousands of years, educators, philosophers, scholars and teachers talked about the importance of Storytelling on the academic achievement and critical thinking of students. Pellowski (1991) found pedagogy and storytelling as non-compatible and was found to be a major reason storytelling has yet to secure a place in public education.

Zipes (2004) countered that claim. He acknowledged that genuine storytelling pedagogy, as exemplified by Paley (1990), has the power to bring about critical literacy, critical awareness, and critical pedagogy. The historical debate continues right up to today.

Thus, one can summarize all these definitions in the following words: storytelling is the sharing of ideas and experiences through words and actions to communicate and make meaning about our lives and the lives of others.

THE STUDY

This paper provides some detailed information of the research subject instruments and data analysis.

I. Purpose of the study

This study aims at investigating the importance of Storytelling as a Pedagogical tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education in terms of perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards teaching English language. The results obtained may provide the beneficial ideas and useful information for any Kurdish university which intend to implement this approach as the studied conducted in the Kurdish universities.

II. Sampling

The sample of this study consists of 25 lecturers from five public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan namely, Halabja University, Sulaimani University, Salahadin University, Raparin University, and Zakho University, the participants were all instructors of English language. And 25 students from the fourth stage of the department of English language at the university of Halabja answered in the questionnaire survey.

The teaching experience of the lecturers ranged from one year to more than fifteen years, 16 participants with 1-5 years, 4 with 6-10 years, 3 with 11-15 years and 2 with 15 or more years of experience. The majority, 20 participants held master's degrees, 5 held doctorates. The survey was conducted in April of the 2012-2013 academic year in Iraqi Kurdistan.

TABLE I

DISTRIBUTION OF INSTRUCTORS ACCORDING TO THEIR GENDERS

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	18	72
Female	7	28

As it is shown in the Table I, the number of male instructors are more than their opposite gender partners.

III. Methodology

In order to access the opinions and perceptions of the teachers, the questionnaire tool was adopted. 50 copies of two different questionnaires 25 English to instructors from the departments in the universities mentioned above and 25 to the students of the fourth stage of the department of English language at the University of Halabja. All the fifty completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire is composed of open-ended, closed-ended questions and rating scales.

IV. Data collection and analysis, findings and interpretations

In order to determine what trends in the data suggested about the teachers' and students' attitudes and perceptions towards using Storytelling as a Pedagogical tool to learn English language in the department of English languages, responses of the participants were analysed descriptively by calculating percentages and average scores.

Teachers' Perceptions and Opinions about using Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool to Teach and Learn English Language in Higher Education.

TABLE II

Q.1 As a teacher, have you had prior experience with using storytelling?	Yes		No	
	F.	%	F.	%
	7	28	18	72

Results obtained from question one show that 28% of instructors are using story telling in their classes to help their students learn English language while 72% of the lecturers are not aware of Storytelling as a method of teaching.

TABLE III

Q.2 How easy did/will you find to use storytelling in the classroom?	Very Easy		Easy		Normal		Hard		Very Hard	
	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
	0	0	0	0	1	4	4	16	20	80

The data received from table III shows that it is hard for the instructors to use Storytelling in their classes. 80% of the participants found very hard to use storytelling for teaching and learning English language. 16% of them found hard and 4% of the instructors ticked the question as normal to use this method of teaching. None of the instructors found Storytelling as an easy approach to teach English language.

The data received from table II & III tell us that there is a strong correlation between the prior experience of the teachers with Storytelling and the way they see the Storytelling as the methods of teaching.

Q.3 Read the statements about TEACHING and LEARNING THROUGH STORYTELLING and then put a tick in the box according to the rating scales below.

Strong agree = 5 Agree = 4 Uncertain = 3 Disagree = 2
strong disagree = 1

TABLE IV

No	Statements	5		4		3		2		1	
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
1	It is more enjoyable to learn	16	64	5	20	3	12	1	4	0	0
2	Learning subjects/new topics through Storytelling is fun	12	48	9	36	3	12	1	4	1	4
3	It would be more motivated to write in English classes	19	76	4	16	2	8	0	0	0	0
4	It Improves their Presentation skills	22	88	2	8	1	4	0	0	0	0
5	It Improves their Research skills	15	60	7	28	2	8	1	4	0	0
6	It Improves their Organizational skills	21	84	3	12	1	4	0	0	0	0
7	It Improves their Writing skills	13	52	11	44	1	4	0	0	0	0
8	It Improves their Reading Skills	23	92	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	It Improves their Thinking Skills	20	80	5	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	It Improves their Social Skills	9	36	8	32	8	32	0	0	0	0
11	It Improves their Communication Skills	21	84	4	16	0	0	0	0	0	0

One of the research questions posed by this project was about motivational factors of using storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool for learning English language.

One of the big factors for using this approach is fun! Instructors regard Storytelling as a mean of entertainment for their students. 64% of the participants strongly agree that the usage of this approach is enjoyable. Almost all the participants agree that Storytelling may make classroom fun. 76% of the lecturers strongly agree that using this method of teaching encourages their students to write in English classes.

88% of them definitely agree that Storytelling is an important factor to improve the presentation skills of the learners.

The participants thought that teaching English language in classes was through Storytelling is more suitable for enhancing receptive skills such as reading and listening even though it is also appropriate for productive skills like speaking or writing which require more attention and interaction from teachers.

As can be seen in Table IV, the analysis of the question items regarding using Storytelling improve certain skills in students. 60% agree that it improves students' research skills, 80% strongly agree that it may develop their organizational skills, 92% of the lecturers agree that Storytelling can be one of the best factors to improve one of the basic skills of English language. 80% of them agree that Storytelling is a good mean to enhance students' thinking skill which is badly neglected in the system of education in Iraqi Kurdistan as the students try to memorize rather than understanding the materials which are covered by their teachers and 84% of the participants agree that the best method to improve communication skills is storytelling.

Q.4 Read the statements about the Reasons for Using Storytelling with Students and then put a tick in the box according to the rating scales below.

Strong agree = 5 Agree = 4 Uncertain = 3 Disagree = 2 strong disagree = 1

TABLE V

No	Statements	5		4		3		2		1	
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
1	It allow students to Construct their own understanding or experience in a content area	9	36	11	44	3	12	2	8	0	0
2	It allows them to facilitate collaborative activities in which students work together in a small group	23	92	1	4	1	4	0	0	0	0
3	It allows them to promote in-class discussion	22	88	3	12	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	It helps them learn problem solving and critical thinking skills	19	76	5	20	1	4	0	0	0	0
5	Students still have chance to practise or work in groups	23	92	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	It helps them to understand complex ideas	13	42	9	36	3	12	0	0	0	0
7	It helps them to share knowledge and ideas from a personal perspective and understanding	16	64	7	28	2	8	0	0	0	0
8	It helps them to express themselves and remove barriers between people	20	80	5	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	It helps them to develop their oral and written expressions	21	84	4	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	It helps them to develop their critical listening skills	8	32	12	48	3	12	2	8	0	0
11	It helps them to be a good storyteller	14	56	8	32	1	4	1	4	1	4
12	It helps them to be more creative	9	36	13	52	3	12	0	0	0	0
13	It helps them to be a more positive view of being in the group	6	24	17	68	2	8	0	0	0	0
14	It helps them to demonstrate greater tolerance of other's views	4	16	11	44	10	40	0	0	0	0
15	It helps them to be a justify their own likes and dislikes	18	72	6	24	1	4	0	0	0	0

The results of table V show that there is a consensus between English instructors at different English language departments that there are many reasons which make them to believe that Storytelling as Pedagogical Tool to Learn English Language in

Higher Education might contribute to higher achievement. 92% of them agree that using Storytelling facilitates collaborative activities, 88% agree that Storytelling leads students to have classroom discussion. 76% of them believe learning problem solving and critical thinking skills is much easier if Storytelling is used. 92% of the teachers agree that this approach motivated students to work in groups. 42% agree that understanding complex ideas is much easier through storytelling, 64% of the instructors think that sharing knowledge and ideas from a personal perspective is possible if storytelling is used, 80% of them believe that students may express themselves and removing barriers between people as the result of teaching through Storytelling, 84% of the participants agree that developing oral and written expressions can be achieved if Storytelling is used to learn English language. Teachers agree that Storytelling may help to develop critical listening skills to be a good storyteller, be more creative, and more positive view of being in the group, demonstrate greater tolerance of other's views and justify their own likes and dislikes. English instructors believe that teaching through Storytelling is not easy but it engages students in a variety of academic activities.

Therefore English instructors lobby Storytelling as an approach of teaching English language in the Higher Education in order to achieve the above mentioned reasons, they also badly believe that this pedagogical tool can provide students with many benefits like greater opportunities for participation, more individual attention, and improved instruction.

According to Davies and Alison some teachers regardless of grade level, favor instructional approaches that emphasize problem solving, discussion, extensive writing, and small groups without prescribed activities, and students who encounter such instruction may obtain higher test scores if their classes are smaller, since this approach to teaching seems likely to be more effective in smaller classes. Davies , Alison. (2007)

Q.5 What are the difficulties facing English language teachers in using storytelling technique?

In answer to this open-ended question, nearly all of participant English instructors suggested that big class sizes, layout of the classroom and different levels of the students make Storytelling quiet difficult to be used as a pedagogical tool to teach English language in Higher Education.

76% of the teachers mentioned in their response that "Big Class Size" is the highest ranked choice that prevents them to use Storytelling; they mentioned that their usual class size is between 30-40 students. They believe that in such a kind of environment neither students nor teachers can manage their classes, teachers can not control the class and students would not be benefited. 20% of the participants believe that varying academic standards of the students are another big difficulty which faces them to use Storytelling as teaching method. Teachers realized many students with high academic achievement while there are many other students who have receptive skills namely listening and productive skill problems specifically speaking. 4% of the participants mentioned other reasons like layout of the classroom and lack of experience with using this approach of teaching.

Students

TABLE VI

Q.1 Have you had prior experience with using storytelling?	Yes		No	
	F.	%	F.	%
	21	84	4	16

According to the results, the majority of the students in this research study didn't have experience with storytelling. In answer to the above question 84% of the students are not aware of Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language, and 16% of them said 'Yes' to the question.

The result received from table 6 shows a clear correlation between teachers response to 'As a teacher, have you had prior experience with using storytelling?'

TABLE VII

Q.2 Have any of your teachers used storytelling to teach his/her subject?	Yes		No	
	F.	%	F.	%
	22	88	3	12

The data from table VII shows that students do not have enough experience with storytelling because their instructors have not taught them.

TABLE VIII

Q.3 Would you like to see your teachers use storytelling?	Yes		No	
	F.	%	F.	%
	20	80	5	20

Q.4 In what subject would you like your teachers to use storytelling when teaching in the classroom?

TABLE IX.

No	SUBJECTS	F.	%
1	Literature	19	76
2	Linguistics	4	16
3	Grammar	8	32
4	Measurement and Evaluation	12	48
5	Drama	24	96
6	Novel	25	100
7	Communication	17	68
8	Psychology	10	40
9	Composition	5	20
10	Conversation	13	42
11	Methods of Teaching	16	64
12	Others (Please specify)	4	16

In terms of students' preferences of subject choice, the results of this study indicated that students want their teachers to use Storytelling in the process of teaching and learning. Literature, specifically Drama and Novel are the most selected subject by students. Among the other popular subjects are communication, methods of teaching, psychology and even linguistics and grammar.

Q.5 Read the statements about TEACHING and LEARNING THROUGH STORYTELLING and then put a tick in the box according to the rating scales below. Strong agree = 5 Agree = 4 Uncertain = 3 Disagree = 2 strong disagree = 1

TABLE X

No	Statements	5		4		3		2		1	
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
1	It is more enjoyable to learn	20	80	3	12	2	8	0	0	0	0
2	Learning subjects/new topics through Storytelling is fun	18	76	3	12	4	16	0	0	0	0
3	I would be more motivated to write in English classes	15	60	5	20	5	20	0	0	0	0
4	I think that Storytelling would help me with test preparation	12	48	7	28	6	24	0	0	0	0
5	It Improves my Presentation skills	22	88	2	8	1	0	0	0	0	0
6	It Improves my Research skills	10	40	13	52	2	8	0	0	0	0
7	It Improves my Organizational skills	13	52	9	36	3	12	0	0	0	0
8	It Improves my Reading Skill	22	88	3	12	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	It Improves my Writing skills	20	80	5	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	It Improves my Thinking Skills	18	76	4	16	3	12	0	0	0	0
12	It Improves my Social Skills	7	28	5	20	13	52	0	0	0	0
13	It Improves my Communication Skills	21	84	4	16	0	0	0	0	0	0

It has been reported that generally students enjoy learning through stories and they learn a great deal on the subject that they are taught. According to the results, students are mostly felt that it is more enjoyable to learn English language by Storytelling. Also, students felt neutral about being more motivated to write in English classes if Storytelling is taught.

The results received from table X show that students mostly felt that they may develop their perceptive and productive skills

The results show that students believe that Storytelling as Pedagogical Tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education might contribute to higher academic achievement. 88% of them agree that using Storytelling help them improve their presentation skills, 88% of the students agree that Storytelling leads students to have better reading skills, 80% of them believe their writing skills would be improved if the teacher teaches them through Storytelling and this helps the students to memorize various vocabularies which help them to improve their writing later. 76% of the participants agree that their thinking skill might be enhanced because of Storytelling

as a pedagogical tool. 84% of the students believe that their communication skills would be developed if they are taught with Storytelling. Therefore English learners as their teachers lobby Storytelling as an approach of teaching English language in the Higher Education in order to achieve the above mentioned reasons, they also badly believe that this pedagogical tool can help them to understand the subject they are taught and they may have many benefits like greater opportunities for participation, more group working, and improved instruction. Overall, the results implied that a great majority of the students would like their teachers to use storytelling as a teaching tool.

CONCLUSION

The results of our study have found that Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language in Higher Education leads to enhance language development, the results improve that Storytelling is an important educational key to learn both receptive skills such as reading and listening and productive skills like writing and speaking.

The data shows that both teachers and students in this research seem to be in general agreement about the value of storytelling. They also seem to feel a need to learn more about storytelling. Even though majority of the teachers do not use storytelling in the classroom at the time of the survey, but almost all instructors prefer to use it if they have a better environment like smaller class sizes.

Like teachers, students believe using Storytelling increases learning motivation and engagement levels and allows students to be more creative, and making more opportunity for self-expression as key factors in terms of motivational factors.

According to results, teachers and students agreed that learning subjects and new topics through storytelling is fun.

Teachers were asked about the difficulties in using storytelling in the classroom. "Big Class Size" is the highest ranked barrier that would keep teachers from using storytelling. This result is expected because there are many students in a classroom in almost all the public universities in particular in the departments of English language which does not match the process of teaching and learning of English language.

Most teachers reported that the best feature of storytelling as a pedagogical tool is to motivate learner to learn more about the subjects. In addition, being able to share their ideas and work in group discussions.

Due to the lack of research studies on the Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language; results of our research are very valuable in paving a way for further research on the educational uses of storytelling.

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كورتەى توپۇزىنەۋەكە

لە بۋارى وانە وتنەۋەدا ۋەك لە ھەمو بۋارەكانى تىرى ژياندا لە زانست و رۇشنىبىرى و ... ھتد توپۇزەران و مامۇستايان بە ئاساى سود ۋەرنەگرن لە ئەزمون و بىرو بۇچونى پىشۋانايان و تەننەت تا ھاۋسەردەمەكانى خۇيان بەنيازى باشتەر گەياندىنى ئەو زانست و زانياريانەى كە ھەيانە بە ھىرخۋازان. سەدان سالە دامەزراۋەكانى ھىركردن لەژىر ناۋى جياجىادا لە ھەۋلى جىدىدان بۇ ئەۋەى پرۇسەى ھىركردن و پىگەياندىنى نەۋەيكى نۆى كە تواناى ھىركردنى ھەبىت بەباشترىن شىۋە شوپىنى خۇى بگرىت. لەم رۋەشەۋە ھىركاران دەيان رىگاي جۇراۋ جۇريان داھىناۋە بۇ بەدەستەھىنانى ئەو ئامانجە، كە مېژۋى ھەندىك لەو رىگايانە بۇ سەدان سالە دەگەرپتەۋە و ھەشيانە مېژۋەكەى بۇ چەند سالىك.

سەرچەم مامۇستايان و توپۇزەرانى پەرۋەردە ھاۋران لەسەر ئەۋەى كە كارايى و ناكارايى ھەر رىگايەكى وانە وتنەۋە پەيوەندى بە كۇنى و تازەى رىگاي وانە وتنەۋەكە نىە، ھەر لەم رۋانگەيەشەۋە سەرچەميان برۋايان وايە كە ھىچ رىگايەكى وانە وتنەۋە لە رىگايەكى تىرى وانە وتنەۋە باشتر نىە. ئەۋەى ۋادەكات رىگايەكى وانە وتنەۋە لە رىگايەكى تر باشتر و كارىگەرتر بىت برتتە لە چەن ھۇكارىك كە پەيوەندى بە ناۋەرۋۆك و سىروشتى وانەكە، ژمارەى خۋىندكار لە پۇلىكدا، تەمەنى خۋىندكار و چەندىن ھۇكارى تر.

Storytelling يەككىكە لە كۇنترىن رىگايانى وانە وتنەۋە و بۇ سەدان سالە لەلايەن مامۇستايانەۋە بە كارھىنراۋە بۇ باشتر ھىركردنى ھىرخۋازان لە ئاستە جىاۋازەكانى خۋىندندا. لەم لىكۇلىنەۋەيەدا ھەۋل دەدەين تىشكىك بچەينە سەر لايەنى مېژۋى ئەم رىگايەيى وانە وتنەۋە و لە ھەمانكاتدا بىرو بۇچونى مامۇستايان و خۋىندكاران لە ئاستى خۋىندنى بەكالۋرپۇس لە بەشە زانستىەكانى زمانى ئىنگلىزى لە زانكۇكانى كوردستاندا لە رىگەى دوو ھۆرپمى راپرسىەۋە بزانىن كە سەرچەم ۋەلامەكانيان لىكدانەۋەى زاستيان بۇ كراۋە و دەكرىت مامۇستايانى ئەم بەشە زانستىانە سوديان لىببىن بۇ ھەرچى زياتر خزمەتكردنى پرۇسەى خۋىندن و ھىركردن.