The Role of Storytelling Aloud on the Accuracy of Preintermediate Iranian EFL Students’ Spoken Language in the Classroom

Azizeh Chulak
Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Iran
achulak@khujsf.ac.ir

Shiva Hujian
Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Iran
shiva1068@yahoo.com

Abstract
This study investigated the use of purposeful storytelling aloud as a creative teaching technique to address preintermediate Iranian EFL learners’ difficulty in producing grammatically correct utterances. Three groups of 15 language learners were randomly assigned to two experimental and one control groups. While the control group just received common traditional method of grammar teaching, one of the two experimental groups were exposed to teacher’s storytelling aloud and the second one received both teacher’s and students’ storytelling aloud. Data were gathered from two structured interviews, one as a pretest and the other as a posttest, two raters rated each participant’s recorded interviews. While no difference was observed in the performance of the participants on the pretest, one-way ANOVA, paired sample t-test, and multiple comparisonson the posttest scores showed overwhelming support for the inclusion of storytelling in the accuracy of speaking. The results also revealed that the second experimental group outperformed the first experimental group. This confirmed the efficacy of storytelling aloud on improving the accuracy of preintermediate Iranian language learners’ oral production.

Keywords: Storytelling Aloud; Accuracy; EFL Learners; Spoken Language

1. Introduction

It was from 1970s and especially by the emergence of communicative language teaching that speaking skill became the source of attention and took the ground of language teaching and learning more than ever. At this time, language teachers and educators focused on teaching speaking that was
considered more difficult when compared with teaching other language skills because of the lack of a common view based on which successful speaking is defined.

Most of the English foreign language learners, even at preintermediate levels of language proficiency, have difficulty in producing grammatically correct sentences, with regard to English main three tenses, especially in their oral production. This difficulty of language learners can be regarded as an evidence for the weakness of traditional methods of teaching grammar through which learners are not provided with meaningful real-life examples within which grammatical structures are included.

Undeveloped ways of fostering speaking skill is the main reason of so many efforts which were made to establish different kinds of activities and tasks to improve oral skills (listening, speaking, and pronunciation) in the classroom. Among these activities innovative teaching technique of storytelling can be pointed out.

Teachers and students are linked to each other through the telling of a new tale (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Egan (1989) pointed to the power of storytelling on more meaningful learning and believed that "if one could code the knowledge to be passed on and embed it in a story form, then it could be made more faithfully memorable than by any other means" (p. 456). In addition, Levi-Bruhl (1985) noted that memory in oral cultures is extremely accurate and emotional, thus the permeation of events with emotion makes them more memorable. Story telling as an important technique has influenced learning and understanding by applying concrete examples and substituting them by meaningless generalizations and abstractions. The connectedness of the teller and the listener at a cognitive and emotional level make it possible for them to link their frameworks for perception at the same time and to have a common interpersonal experience. Storytelling is considered as a tool to give meaning to the students' experiences and to make their experiences explicit to others (Miley, 2009; Nygren & Blom, 2001).

According to Morgan and Rinvolucrì (1983), "storytelling has been used as a favorable communicative alternative to traditional language teaching methods" (p. 1). The effectiveness of storytelling in teaching and learning programs represented in the rich related literature in which the efficacy of storytelling is indicated on different language skills and components, and for its effectiveness a considerable amount of interest was aroused to storytelling aloud which led to several follow-up studies.
2. Literature Review

The creative art of storytelling as Zabel (1991) pointed out is “as old as mankind, predating any other form of oral history” (p. 32). Stories are motivating, easily accessible at any time and any place, and hugely interesting. Surely, stories should be a central part of the world of primary teachers whether they are teaching the mother tongue or a foreign language (Wright, 1995).

In fact, storytelling contains some essential features that make it more influential when compared with the read aloud strategy.

McKay (1997) defined storytelling as sharing some measures of magic between teller and listener or audience. In her definition, storytelling is described as the minds’ meeting through which thoughts, beliefs, values, feelings and memories are conveyed by the application of words. Storytellers’ visions are passed out by using words, and some kind of feedback is taken from the listener through the use of body language. After establishing this connection, a unique form of energy which she calls it magic is spread out.

National Storytelling Association (1997) describes telling as presenting a story in a physical, live, person-to-person oral form to one or a group of audiences. By telling a direct contact between the teller and the listener is brought about. By the teller, the story is presented directly. To communicate the images of each story effectively and efficiently, it is essential to provide an appropriate language to vocalize, and to present by physicality. Creating a clear image of the events, actions, happenings, and characters based on the teller’s performance and also their previous experiences, understandings, and beliefs is essential. The way story occurs in the minds of listeners is completely unique and personal.

As Mallan (1991) pointed out “storytelling can demonstrate varied and appropriate use of tense and linking devices; along with indicators of who is speaking, or scripted dialogue, and detailed descriptions: all grammatical features that parallel with written language” (p. 14).

An essential prerequisite for literacy is oral competence (Dyson, 1991; Hall, 1987), and that’s why oral storytelling can be considered as a great input for enhancing oral competence; the result of which would be the sophistication of the oral form. Through storytelling, the patterns of language are molded for students. In this way, sound and pattern imitation of what is heard is possible by learners. Hillman (1975) explained that through reading teachers transfer syntactic order that is seen in the written form of language. Teachers’ storytelling is also combined with some paralinguistic
features like stress, pitch, and so on that lead to a better interpretation of the passage. Young children's vocabulary through the exposure to so many storytelling experiences is increased and this leads to the written form vocabulary enhancement (Cooper, Collin & Saxby, 1994).

Currently, numerous research studies have been conducted to present the effect of storytelling aloud on language learning. In spite of the fact that storytelling aloud has been the focus of attention in first language acquisition, it is ignored by many EFL teachers. However, it can be regarded as an efficient strategy especially when learners are not at high levels of language proficiency. A large number of researchers agree on the fact that students make benefit of listening to the stories (Alna, 1999; Ellis, 1997; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004).

The result of the study conducted by Williamson (1988) demonstrated that by teachers reading aloud, students are provided with a better feeling toward language and its structure. It also increases students’ eagerness to read a large number of passages.

According to Elley (1991), exposing children to interesting storybooks which were fully illustrated by pictures, enhance the process of language learning in a more quick way. Additionally, students’ engagement with a text which excluded vocabulary and structure may lead to incidental learning, and thus provide students with positive views toward their schools and books. It was reported by her that a large number of vocabulary was acquired through teachers’ story telling aloud. Pederson’s (1995) study supported the fact that stories make it possible for ESL learners to “have an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication, not the usual ‘teachers’ of the foreign language classroom ... the full range of language is present in stories” (1995, p. 2). Regarding Pederson’s study, ESL listening skills would be improved and for children’s social and emotional development the affective filter would be decreased.

The effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing communicative skills was studied by Mokhtar, Abdul Halim, and Kamarolzaman (2011). In their study, students worked in groups of three and each one was asked to read a story and tell it to his/her classmates. When compared with control group they became more self-confident in expressing themselves creatively. They were able to use the learned activities and skills in real-life, and they also learned when and where to use certain words and phrases.

Gotjain, Moosavinia, and Shahramiri (2011) investigated the effects of telling oral summary of short stories on 68 preintermediate male/female learners’ speaking proficiency. The results determined the positive effects of
oral summary of short stories on developing speaking proficiency among learners. Findings also showed that male and female high achievers outperformed the male and female low achievers. Additionally, females in both groups performed better than males in the posttest; however, t test analysis showed no significant difference between the two genders.

In a study conducted by Ahmad Khanbeigi, and Yalsharzeh (2012), the positive effects of direct instruction of narrations on the writing ability of adult EFL learners was shown in terms of overall quality of their writings, grammatical accuracy, coherence, spelling, and word choice.

In a study conducted by Pishghadam and Motakef (2012), the effect of narrative intelligence on the students’ language learning on 110 high school EFL students was investigated. In this study participants were supposed to tell the story of the first day of the New Year, and also look at a comic script and construct its story orally. The results showed that there were significant correlations between students’ narrative intelligence and English, Persian, and Arabic achievement.

The present study, intended to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling aloud on Iranian preintermediate EFL learners’ accuracy of oral production who has previously partially acquired the English three main tenses, but still have problems in producing by seeking to answer the following questions:

1. Is teacher’s storytelling aloud an effective technique to improve Iranian EFL accuracy of grammatical structures in their oral production?
2. Is teacher’s storytelling aloud accompanied by student’s storytelling aloud more effective than just teachers’ storytelling aloud to develop grammatical competence of Iranian EFL students?

3. Method

The participants of the study were 45 Iranian EFL learners studying English at Sacra Foreign Language Institute. From the accessible population, the participants were randomly selected by the use of an Oxford Placement Test (OPT), including 100 listening and 100 grammar tests, in which all got the scores 120-134. Based on the OPT, those who obtained such a score were at preintermediate level of proficiency. Referred to the institute levels they were at level four or five. All the participants were highly interested and motivated to learn English, some to get jobs and some others for academic purposes. They had passed some English courses at guidance school, high school, university, or some other institutes. So, they had learned the main
three English tenses before, but had problems in correct usage of them in their productive skills. Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of participants involved in the present study. The participants were assigned randomly into three groups of 15, two were experimental groups and the other one was the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Age Mean</th>
<th>Level of Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iranian</td>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>Preintermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>Preintermediate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Top Notch* books written by Saslow and Ascher (2006) were taught to the participants of the present study. These books are of 12 series and are used for different levels of elementary, preintermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. The *Top Notch* series use the natural language that people really speak and in this way help learners to have international communication. These books provide EFL learners with essential modeling conversations that make social language unforgettable, personalize intensive vocabulary development, and complete grammar support.

The three short stories which were told by teachers were the materials used in the study. Two of the stories were selected from intermediate level of the book *Steps to Understanding* written by Hill (1988). This book contains short stories for four different levels of introductory (750-headword), elementary (1000-headword), intermediate (1500-headword), and advanced (2075-headword). Each story in this book is about 150 words long, and some of the stories contain one or two words outside the grading which should be introduced by the teacher before the work begins, the levels of this book are carefully graded, and this covers not only vocabulary, but also idioms and grammar.

One story in present tense, and one in past tense were selected from the preintermediate level of this book and the story in future was selected from ESL website. The number of 30 stories which were told in present, past, and
future by the participants of the second experimental group were open-ended short stories that had been chosen from TESOL website.

A structured interview including 10 questions in present, past, and future were asked as a pretest before conducting the treatment. Questions selected from interchange questions bank were to the point and consistent with students' proficiency level.

For the first experimental group, the following steps were followed: in the first, fourth, and seventh sessions just like the first, fourth, and seventh sessions of the second experimental group, the teacher provided the students with numerous examples in simple present, simple past, and future tenses respectively to present the application of each one of the English main tenses in real-life situations. Explicit explanations of different positive, negative, yes/no and Wh questions by focusing on the sentences written by the teacher on the board were also provided. The second, fifth, and eighth sessions of the first and second experimental groups received teacher’s storytelling accompanied by questions and answers in that special tenses on the part of the teacher and learners. By comparing the first experimental group with the second one, the only difference was related to the third, sixth, and ninth sessions of the first experimental group which lacked students’ storytelling.

And, at last, the control group including 15 participants went through three sessions of inductive and deductive grammatical instructions, each one followed by oral question and answer sessions without having exposure to any kind of storytelling aloud experiences by the teacher or the participants.

In all of the storytelling experiences, the whole features of an effective storytelling were taken into account, while in most of the previous research studies, the story was just read by the teacher to the students.

The characteristics of an effective storytelling based on National Storytelling Association (1997) are described in Table 2:
Table 2
Characteristics of an Effective Storytelling and How It Was Established

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Effective Storytelling</th>
<th>How It Was Established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story preparation</td>
<td>By reading the story so many times before telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story adaptation</td>
<td>By visualizing the story, taking the story close to learners, keeping the story simple and brief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning the story as a whole rather than in fragments</td>
<td>By simplifying the structure of the story and providing an outline of the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being equipped with all skills of storytelling</td>
<td>By making use of different voices for different characters, and creating atmosphere, making use of gestures and facial expressions, making use of suitable opening to begin a story like rituals, making use of repetition and exaggeration, making use of attraction keepers like making listener involved in the story by apparent change in the teller’s pace, or voice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After applying the treatment, all three groups went through a structured interview of 10 questions in three different English main tenses, and the results were recorded. To conduct a reliable and valid interview, the interviewer asked completely clear questions which were relevant to the research question. Since necessary information ought to be elicited from the participants, the interviewer avoided from putting interviewees under the pressure, for this reason, even the interviewers clarified unclear parts for the interviewees. Since the purpose of the interview was gathering information, the interviews were recorded to be accessible and retrieved again. The two interviewers rated students’ accuracy of grammatical structures of spoken language, so inter-rater reliability was calculated to remove subjectivity of the interview scores. Pretest results were shown in the form of descriptive statistics at first, and a one-way ANOVA was also carried out to show whether there were any significant differences between different groups’ performance or not. Posttest results went through the same descriptive and inferential statistics. In addition, a paired sample t-test was employed to show within group differences on the pretest and posttest results, and a multiple comparison to show better group performance.
It should be mentioned that while the students were randomly selected from the accessible population, the design was considered as an experimental design. The administration of a pretest before the treatment and also the presence of a control group made the experimental design of the current study as a pretest treatment posttest control group design.

4. Results

One of the important functions of inconsistency in test scores is due to ratings which are given by different raters. For this reason, prior to the discussion of specific statistical procedures used to answer the two research questions, the inter-rater reliability statistics including intra-class correlation coefficient was performed. Each participant’s recorded interview was rated by two different raters on the pretest and posttest to remove the subjectivity of the ratings and an intra-class reliability was performed. The results showed that there was a high positive significant correlation ($p = .001$) between the ratings of the two raters which was an indication of inter-rater reliability.

The group differences on the pretest and posttest were represented in two different parts: part one which gave the descriptive statistics and included the three groups’ standard deviation and mean scores, and part two which included one-way ANOVAs and presented whether differences were statistically significant or not. Table 3 shows the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 3
Mean and Standard Deviation of Different Groups on Pretest and Posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control group ($n = 15$)</td>
<td>11.6667</td>
<td>1.95180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher group ($n = 15$)</td>
<td>12.1333</td>
<td>2.72204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student group ($n = 15$)</td>
<td>11.9333</td>
<td>2.31352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the reported mean for the control, teacher, and teacher-student groups for pretest was close, while it was not the same I posttest which shows the homogeneity of the tree groups on the pretest before conducting treatment.

To present statistical differences, two one-way ANOVAs were carried out, one on the pretest and the other one on the posttest to show whether the
differences of the three groups on each one of the pretest and posttest results were significant or not. Table 4 represents the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control group (n = 15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher group (n = 15)</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student group (n = 15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 5 shows a significant difference (p < 0.05) was shown between the control, teacher, and teacher-student groups on the posttest while on the pretest the difference (p < 0.862) were not significant.

Table 6 presents multiple comparisons of the groups on the posttest results. By comparing each group’s mean with the two others on the posttest, the possibility of distinguishing the group which performed better in contrast to the others is possible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Posttest Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control group (n = 15)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher-student group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-2.13333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Teacher group (n = 15) | Control group |
|                        | Teacher-student group |
|                        | 2.13333        | -2.40000 |

| Teacher-student group (n = 15) | Control group | Teacher group |
|                              | 4.53333       | 2.40000      |

When the mean of the control group is compared with that of the teacher and teacher-student groups no improvement was observed in the performance of the participants of the control group on the posttest results. By comparing teacher group to the other groups on the posttest, it just performed better than control group. Teacher-student comparisons with control group and teacher group on the posttest showed better teacher-student performance.

Finally, to represent each group’s performance before performing treatment and after applying it a paired sample t-test was carried out by
which the within group differences on pretest and posttest are presented in Table 6:

Table 6
Paired Samples t Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>ArtStre-AVTPost</td>
<td>-4.53333</td>
<td>3.48193</td>
<td>.8903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>AvgTest-AVTPost</td>
<td>-1.93333</td>
<td>3.69421</td>
<td>.90220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>AvCrap-AVTPost</td>
<td>-2.66667</td>
<td>2.68506</td>
<td>.69328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The significant difference within teacher-student group on the pretest and posttest showed the highly difference (p > .000) within this group. For teacher’s group, the mean differences (p = .050) was an indicator of significant difference within group, and the difference within control group on the pretest and posttest showed no significant difference within group.

5. Discussion

The first research question of this study evaluated whether storytelling aloud improved learner’s accuracy of speaking or not. The results of the study showed that the difference between mean scores of experimental groups in the pretest and posttest was significant. The results also demonstrated that the students who received storytelling sessions as treatment outperformed compared to the control group. Based on the second research question regarding the comparison of effectiveness of the teacher and teacher-student groups, the results of the multiple comparisons showed more efficacy of teacher-student group.

These results are in line with the findings of Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lownance (2004) on the effectiveness of storytelling on the students’ reading comprehension. The results of the present study regarding the efficacy of storytelling as an instructional instrument are in agreement with the findings
of Huang (2006) emphasizing on the effective role of storytelling on language learners’ reading comprehension and word recall.

The results of this study are in line with Queini, Bahous, and Nabhani (2008) in improving learners’ usage of new vocabularies heard in the stories in their oral production and also in improving learners’ ability to discuss and analyze stories.

The results of the study conducted by Jusoh (2009) in which learners’ narrative writing improved by storytelling exposure confirmed the result of the present study aimed to investigate the role of teacher’s storytelling aloud on the preintermediate Iranian EFL learners’ accuracy of oral production. Basically, sufficient auditory input and oral language competence are basal requirements and crucial prerequisites for language learning. A great deal of auditory input is offered through storytelling. In sum, storytelling helps English speaking learners progress from oracy to literacy and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize the benefits of storytelling in their classrooms.

According to Abrahamson (1998), storytelling is found in all types of teaching and is viewed as the foundation of the teaching profession. By telling stories teachers expose learners to existing knowledge through which learners can learn, construct, and develop their own knowledge. Regarding the results of the current study, there are some implications for teachers, educators, material designers, and language learners. This finding suggests teachers that in ESL learning classrooms, students should not be pushed to rely too much on grammatical explanations to learn structures in the way that they can use them in their real-life situations to produce spontaneously correct sentences in speaking. So, one implication is referred to language educators and teachers who can use storytelling to (a) introduce units or concepts, (b) involve students in teaching, (c) instruct and entertain students, and (d) to explore various cultures. Another implication is for language material designers to organize language programs around stories which is useful and reasonable in language learning curriculum for all language learners at any level. In this way, a large amount of interesting, and comprehensible language is exposed to language learners; the result of which is language enhancement. Finally, storytelling can be used by learners as a learning strategy to develop their communicative skills to communicate oral language in an expressive way by using vocal and facial expressions, and gestures.

Because has been limited research on the efficacy of storytelling aloud in Iran, this study was offered to fill hopefully this void. The present study aimed at finding and providing new opportunities and recommendations for
language teachers and educators, material designers, and students in EFL to enhance teaching and learning. It is hoped that this study could open new avenues for further research and pave the way for educational improvement.

References


