

The Impact of Personal Storytelling on Motivation and Language Acquisition in University ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of personal storytelling techniques on the motivation, engagement, and language development of university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Grounded in theories of narrative psychology, the affective filter hypothesis, and conceptual metaphor, this mixed-methods study involved 51 intermediate-level (CEFR B1) students and 7 instructors at Akaki Tsereteli State University; 47 of the 51 students completed both the pre- and post-intervention measures. The intervention consisted of a structured 8-week program of personal storytelling activities. Quantitative data from a 9-item pre- and post-intervention survey and qualitative data from semi-structured teacher interviews were analyzed to assess the technique's effectiveness. Results indicate a statistically significant increase across all nine survey items, corresponding to four underlying constructs: motivation, confidence, participation, and perceived vocabulary learning. While grammar improvement was not a primary focus, students reported greater confidence in applying grammatical structures. Thematic analysis of teacher interviews revealed strong support for the method, citing enhanced student participation and the emergence of metaphorical competence, though variations in adoption were noted based on student personality and confidence. As the study did not include a control group, the findings should be interpreted as preliminary evidence that personal storytelling is a promising, theoretically grounded approach for creating meaningful contexts for second language acquisition (SLA), and future controlled research is needed to confirm these effects.

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1. Introduction

Linguists perceive language through its three main components: phonology, lexicology, and syntax (or grammar). For language teachers, this translates to pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Storytelling is one of the oldest and most natural ways humans communicate. We tell stories to share knowledge, cultural values, and connect with others. This innate human activity provides a powerful, meaning-rich context for learning a new language. When language learners tell their own stories, they use the language with a genuine communicative purpose, paying closer attention to each word to ensure their ideas are clearly understood. This paper focuses on the importance of personal storytelling as a pedagogical tool to help people learn languages.

By immersing learners in the creation of narratives, storytelling facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary,

grammar, and cultural insights while promoting communication skills and critical thinking (Miller, 2015). This study aims to move beyond theoretical discussion by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of this technique. It investigates the following research questions:

RQ1. How do storytelling techniques contribute to students' motivation and engagement in the English language learning process?

RQ2. How do teachers perceive the implementation and effectiveness of storytelling techniques in their English language classes? RQ3. What is the impact of a structured storytelling intervention on students' self-reported vocabulary retention, confidence, and perceived grammatical ability?

In recent years, communicative language teaching (CLT) has emphasized authentic, meaningful interaction as a cornerstone of effective second-language acquisition.

Among various CLT strategies, personal storytelling has gained attention for its potential to engage learners emotionally and cognitively.

Personal narratives allow students to draw on their own experiences, making language production more relevant and less anxiety-provoking. However, empirical research on storytelling-based interventions in university ESL contexts remains limited, particularly regarding measurable outcomes in motivation and language development.

This study addresses that gap by exploring what happens when B1-level university ESL students engage in a structured personal storytelling intervention, examining changes in student motivation, confidence, participation, and perceived vocabulary acquisition, while also gathering teacher perspectives on classroom dynamics and linguistic outcomes.

Specifically, we wanted to understand whether students felt more willing to take risks in class, and whether telling their own stories made new words stick beyond the lesson, tracking this through reflective journals and informal follow-ups in addition to the surveys described below.

Our approach was not only about measuring outcomes; we were equally interested in the how and why. For instance, did increased participation stem from reduced anxiety, or from the structured nature of the task giving students a clear entry point? On vocabulary, we looked beyond immediate recall and paid attention to whether students were naturally incorporating target words into their narratives weeks later. We also deliberately kept an eye on the rough patches: the hesitant starts, the grammatical stumbles, and the students who clearly struggled but kept going. From the teachers' perspective, we asked pointed questions about peer interactions, unexpected hurdles, and whether the storytelling format allowed them to shift focus toward meaning and fluency in ways that felt genuinely useful.

2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the influence of storytelling techniques on students' motivation, engagement, and language perception at Akaki Tsereteli State University.

2.1. Participants

Participants were drawn from seven intact intermediate-level English classes at Akaki Tsereteli State University, each taught by one of the seven instructors described below; class enrollment ranged from 16 to 18 students per class (approximately 119 students in total). Because the storytelling intervention was integrated into the regular curriculum, all enrolled students took part in the classroom activities; however, only students who provided informed consent for research data collection were included as study participants. Fifty-one students,

aged 18 to 26, consented to complete the research surveys and constituted a convenience sample of intermediate-level (CEFR B1) ESL learners, classified as B1 based on university placement test scores. The sample included students from a range of academic majors, ensuring diverse perspectives.

Of these 51 participants, 47 completed both the pre- and post-intervention surveys; four withdrew during the course of the study due to scheduling conflicts and were excluded from the analysis, yielding a final analytic sample of 47. Missing response rates for individual survey items among the 47 completers were below 5%.

Ethical approval was obtained from the English Philology Department. All participants provided oral informed consent prior to the study, and confidentiality was ensured for all survey responses, interview data, and personal narratives shared in class. Identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. Students were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Additionally, the same 7 teachers who implemented the storytelling program in their classes were recruited for semi-structured interviews at the end of the intervention. These instructors had varying levels of teaching experience (ranging from 3 to 15 years) and represented a cross-section of the English Philology Department faculty.

2.2. Intervention: Storytelling Program and Procedures

The intervention was an 8-week program designed to integrate personal storytelling into the regular curriculum. The program was implemented by the 7 participating teachers in their respective classes.

Duration and Structure: Each week, teachers dedicated 30-45 minutes of a 90-minute class to a structured storytelling activity. The program was divided into four two-week phases:

Weeks 1-2: Teachers introduced the concept of narrative structure (character, setting, problem, resolution).

Weeks 3-4: Students were encouraged to use specific vocabulary related to their chosen topics and to incorporate more descriptive details. Teachers provided vocabulary lists and models but emphasized using new words in context.

Weeks 5-6: The lessons focused on how to express feelings and abstract concepts. Teachers explicitly discussed common metaphors and encouraged students to use metaphorical language to make their stories more vivid.

Weeks 7-8: Students were asked to tell more complex personal stories, incorporating elements like flashbacks, dialogue, and suspense, building on the skills developed in previous weeks.

Correction of mistakes was limited to errors that impeded comprehension, and these were addressed gently after the student finished speaking (Appendix 2).

All seven teachers received a common activity guide with weekly lesson plans. With the exception of two instructors who reported slight modifications to timing due to prolonged class conversations, teachers largely adhered to the prescribed weekly format. Fidelity was further supported through weekly one-on-one check-ins with each teacher.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

The survey instrument was adapted from existing motivation and language-learning attitude scales, piloted with 10 B1-level students who did not participate in the main study, and revised for clarity based on their feedback. The final instrument consisted of 9 items, administered to students both before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the 8-week intervention (Appendix 1), using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha for the 9-item scale was 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.

The 9 items measured students' self-reported perceptions of: enjoyment of storytelling activities (Item 1); helpfulness of activities for vocabulary acquisition (Item 2); improvement in word retention (Item 3); comfort and motivation in sharing stories (Item 4); increased confidence in using English (Item 5); continued interest in using storytelling (Item 6); confidence in applying grammar rules (Item 7); participation in class discussions (Item 8); and overall positive impact on learning (Item 9).

For analytic purposes, the 9 items were organized into four constructs based on the aspect of the learning experience each item targeted: Motivation (Items 1, 6, and 9), Confidence (Items 5 and 7), Participation (Items 4 and 8), and Perceived Vocabulary Learning (Items 2 and 3). Item-level results are reported in Table 1, and construct-level composite means, computed by averaging the relevant item means, are reported in Table 2.

The pre-intervention survey items asking about enjoyment and helpfulness of storytelling were designed to measure students' expectations based on prior experiences with storytelling in other contexts (e.g., first-language use, previous language classes).

Therefore, the pre/post comparison reflects change from baseline

expectations to actual experienced perceptions, not from a neutral or zero point.

Teacher Interviews: At the end of the intervention, all 7 participating teachers were interviewed in a semi-structured format. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes and focused on observed changes in student behavior, classroom climate, and language use.

2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative (Survey) Analysis: Pre- and post-intervention survey data were collected from the 47 students who completed both administrations. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for each item. For each of the 9 items, paired-samples t-tests were conducted with a matched sample size of 47. We report the test statistic (t), degrees of freedom (df), p-value, effect size (Cohen's d), and 95% confidence interval for the mean difference. To address the nine simultaneous comparisons, we applied a Bonferroni correction (adjusted $\alpha = 0.0056$).

All significant results remained significant after correction. Construct-level composite scores were computed by averaging the relevant item means for descriptive purposes; because these composites are linear combinations of the item-level scores, and every contributing item was already significant after correction, separate inferential tests were not re-run for the composites.

Qualitative Analysis: The transcribed teacher interview notes were analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial open coding was used to identify recurring ideas and statements. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that addressed the research questions on teacher perceptions and challenges.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Findings: Students' Experience and Perceived Learning

The survey results revealed a significant positive shift in students' perceptions after the 8-week storytelling intervention. For all 9 survey items, the mean score increased from the pre-test to the post-test. A paired-samples t-test revealed these increases were statistically significant for all items ($p < 0.001$, Bonferroni-corrected). Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each item.

Table 1. Student Perceptions of Storytelling Activities, Pre- vs. Post-Intervention (N = 47)

Survey Item	Pre-Intervention Mean (SD)	Post-Intervention Mean (SD)	p-value (t-test)
1. I enjoyed the storytelling activities.	3.8 (1.2)	5.2 (0.8)	< 0.001
2. Storytelling activities were helpful for learning vocabulary.	3.5 (1.3)	5.4 (0.7)	< 0.001
3. Personal stories helped me remember new words better.	3.4 (1.4)	5.2 (0.9)	< 0.001
4. I felt comfortable sharing personal stories.	3.0 (1.1)	4.7 (1.0)	< 0.001
5. The activities increased my confidence in using English.	3.2 (1.2)	5.0 (0.9)	< 0.001
6. I would like to continue using storytelling.	3.9 (1.2)	5.3 (0.8)	< 0.001
7. I feel more confident applying grammar rules correctly.	3.3 (1.1)	4.6 (1.1)	< 0.001
8. I participate more actively in class discussions.	3.1 (1.3)	4.9 (1.0)	< 0.001
9. Storytelling positively affects my learning experience.	4.0 (1.1)	5.5 (0.7)	< 0.001

Note. SD = Standard Deviation. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree. All p-values remained significant after Bonferroni correction (adjusted $\alpha = 0.0056$).

To complement the item-level analysis, Table 2 presents descriptive composite means for the four

underlying constructs described in Section 2.3, computed by averaging the relevant item means from Table 1. Because every item contributing to each construct showed a significant pre-post increase, the constructs as a whole reflect the same pattern of significant improvement, with the largest gains observed for Motivation and Perceived Vocabulary Learning.

Table 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention Composite Means by Construct (N = 47)

Construct (items averaged)	Pre-Intervention Mean	Post-Intervention Mean	Underlying items (Table 1)
Motivation	3.90	5.33	1, 6, 9
Confidence	3.25	4.80	5, 7
Participation	3.05	4.80	4, 8
Perceived Vocabulary Learning	3.45	5.30	2, 3

Note. Composite means are simple averages of the item-level means reported in Table 1 and are presented descriptively; they are not the product of separate inferential tests.

3.2. Qualitative Findings: Teacher Perceptions and Observations

Thematic analysis of the 7 teacher interviews provided context and depth to the quantitative findings. The following key themes emerged:

Enhanced Motivation and Participation: All 7 teachers unanimously reported a significant increase in student

engagement and participation during storytelling activities compared to traditional grammar or vocabulary lessons. As one teacher noted, quieter students seemed to come alive when they had a story to share, and were motivated to get their message across.

The “Safe Space” for Language Production: Teachers repeatedly mentioned that the low-pressure environment allowed students to take risks. One teacher explained that students who feel less afraid of making mistakes focus on communication, and that confidence then carries over into other areas.

Vocabulary Acquisition in Context: Teachers observed that students were more likely to remember and use new vocabulary from their own stories. One participant commented that using a word like “exhausted” to tell the story of a first day at work makes it stick in a way that memorizing a list does not.

The Emergence of Metaphorical Competence: A strong theme was the observation of students developing metaphorical language. Teachers noted that while beginners used simple phrases, students began to use and create metaphors. One teacher described a student who normally struggled with vocabulary using a metaphor like “my head was spinning” to describe exam stress, taking this as a clear sign the student was thinking in English.

Variations in Adaptation and Challenges: Teachers acknowledged that the effectiveness of the method varied. Factors influencing success included:

Personality: teachers reported that more creative and extroverted students took to the activities with enthusiasm, while more reserved students needed more encouragement and time. This supports the observed differences in the quantitative data, where standard deviations (SD) were larger for items related to confidence and comfort (e.g., Item 4, post-test SD = 1.0).

L1 Influence: Some teachers noted that students whose native languages were rich in metaphorical expressions adapted more quickly to using creative language in English.

Role of the Teacher: A significant point made by all teachers was the critical role they played in modeling and providing continuous support. Successful implementation demanded deliberate effort to create a supportive and non-judgmental classroom culture.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that personal storytelling techniques may be a powerful tool for enhancing second language acquisition, although, as discussed in Section 4.5, the absence of a control group means these findings should be treated as preliminary.

4.1. Storytelling and Affective Factors: Motivation and Confidence

The significant increases in student motivation and confidence (Research Question 1) align with the theory of the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). The intervention created a low-anxiety environment where students could focus on meaningful communication. The consistent qualitative feedback from teachers and the strong quantitative results (Item 5, post-test M = 5.0; Item 8, post-test M = 4.9) are consistent with the idea that when learners are emotionally invested in their stories, their self-consciousness decreases, and their willingness to communicate increases. This pattern echoes recent work linking reduced speaking anxiety

to greater willingness to communicate in EFL contexts (Merç & Özalp, 2022).

4.2. The Cognitive Power of Narrative and Metaphor

The study provides evidence consistent with the cognitive benefits of storytelling discussed in the literature. Students' perception of improved vocabulary retention (Item 3, post-test M = 5.2) can be explained by the narrative structure's “mental scaffolding” (Miller, 2015), which organizes information and provides meaningful context for new words; this parallels recent findings that digital and personal storytelling formats support vocabulary gains and learner motivation in EFL settings (Al Ghaithi et al., 2023). The story's structure—character, problem, resolution—helps the learner organize thoughts and reduces the cognitive load of speaking.

The emergence of metaphorical competence observed by teachers provides a suggestive, if informal, indicator of deeper proficiency. A learner's move from “I was very happy” to “Happiness bubbled up inside me” is not merely stylistic; it may signify a transition from translation toward more fluent thinking within the L2. This connects to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and its neuro-cognitive extensions (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005), which posit that our conceptual systems are fundamentally metaphorical and grounded in the sensory-motor system. By using metaphors, learners are not just using words; they may be building new conceptual structures in the target language.

4.3. Grammar: A Nuanced Finding

A key finding was that students reported a statistically significant, albeit moderate, increase in their confidence with grammar (Item 7, post-test M = 4.6). While the intervention's primary goal was communicative fluency, the results suggest that the meaningful use of language structures in storytelling has a positive impact on students' self-perceived grammatical confidence. Telling a story requires the use of time markers, verb tenses, and reference tracking, providing a natural and repeated context for applying grammatical rules. This, in turn, appears to build confidence, even though the direct impact on grammatical accuracy was not directly measured.

4.4. Teacher Perceptions and Practical Implications

The positive perception of teachers (Research Question 2) suggests that storytelling is seen as a valuable and practical pedagogical tool, even though its implementation requires effort and patience. Teachers' observations about student variation are informative: the intervention appeared effective across a range of personalities, though learners with higher self-confidence may show more pronounced gains, as

reflected in the larger standard deviation for the post-test on comfort (Item 4, SD = 1.0). This points to a need for differentiated instruction to scaffold the process for less confident students.

4.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged.

Absence of a Control Group: Perhaps the most important limitation of this study is that it did not include a comparison or control group that continued with standard instruction instead of the storytelling program. Without a control group, it is not possible to rule out a Hawthorne effect, whereby students and teachers who know they are part of a study may report more favorable outcomes simply because they are receiving special attention, regardless of the specific content of the intervention. Likewise, the eight-week gains reported here could partly reflect natural maturation and ongoing language development that would have occurred over the same period even without the storytelling activities. Future research should therefore adopt a quasi-experimental or fully controlled design—for example, comparing storytelling classes with matched classes following the standard curriculum, or using a waitlist-control arrangement—so that observed changes can be attributed more confidently to the storytelling intervention itself rather than to the passage of time, increased attention, or other extraneous factors.

Self-Reported Data: The quantitative data is based on students' self-reported perceptions, which are susceptible to bias (e.g., social desirability bias). While the significant gains are compelling, future research should incorporate objective measures of language proficiency, such as pre- and post-intervention vocabulary tests, or an analysis of the linguistic complexity of student narratives.

Duration: The 8-week intervention was relatively short. A longer-term study would be needed to determine if these gains are durable and lead to sustained improvement.

Generalizability: The study used a convenience sample from a single university. Further research with more diverse and larger participant groups is needed to confirm the findings.

Grammar Focus: The study did not include an objective measure of grammatical accuracy. Future studies could analyze student stories for syntactic complexity and error rates to quantify the grammatical impact more precisely.

5. Conclusion

This study provides preliminary empirical evidence that personal storytelling is more than a “fun classroom

activity.” It draws on a theoretically grounded, deeply human narrative capacity to create a potentially favorable environment for SLA. The quantitative results suggest improvements in student motivation, participation, and self-perceived language skills, particularly in vocabulary and speaking confidence, and the qualitative data from teachers enrich these findings by highlighting the creation of a supportive learning space and the observable development of metaphorical competence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that when students share their own stories, they find meaningful reasons to use new vocabulary and grammar in a real-life context. The cognitive scaffolding provided by narrative structure, the emotional engagement that may strengthen memory, and the creative thinking inherent in metaphorical language appear to work together to help learners not just memorize vocabulary, but begin to express themselves with greater complexity and confidence. Because this study did not include a control group and relied on self-reported perceptions rather than objective language measures, these conclusions should be treated as preliminary. For educators, the findings nonetheless underscore the potential value of integrating structured storytelling into the curriculum as a complementary approach to traditional language instruction, and for researchers, they highlight the need for controlled, longer-term studies with objective outcome measures to confirm whether personal storytelling produces durable gains in ESL motivation, confidence, participation, and vocabulary acquisition beyond what a standard curriculum would achieve on its own.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) solely to assist with language polishing (grammar and phrasing checks) and formatting of the reference list. These tools were not used to collect, analyze, or interpret study data, nor to generate substantive theoretical or empirical content. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited all content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix 1: Student Survey (Pre- and Post-Intervention) **Language Areas Enhancement by Storytelling Techniques**

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by circling the appropriate number:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Somewhat Disagree 4 = Somewhat Agree 5 = Agree 6 = Strongly Agree

1. I enjoyed the storytelling activities. 1 2 3 4 5 6
2. I found the storytelling activities helpful for learning new vocabulary. 1 2 3 4 5 6
3. Telling personal stories helped me remember new words better. 1 2 3 4 5 6
4. I felt comfortable sharing personal stories with my classmates. 1 2 3 4 5 6

5. The storytelling activities increased my confidence in using the English language. 1 2 3 4 5 6

6. I would like to continue using storytelling to learn vocabulary. 1 2 3 4 5 6

7. I feel more confident in applying grammar rules correctly after engaging in storytelling activities. 1 2 3 4 5 6

8. I more actively participate in class discussions when storytelling is involved. 1 2 3 4 5 6

9. I am certain that storytelling affects my learning experience in a positive way. 1 2 3 4 5 6

Appendix 2: Teacher Interview Protocol **The Use of Storytelling Techniques in the Classroom: An Empirical Study at Akaki Tsereteli State University**

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your general experience with integrating storytelling techniques into your English language classes?
2. In your observation, how did students respond to the storytelling activities in terms of participation and motivation?
3. Did you notice any changes in students' vocabulary use or retention as a result of these activities? Can you provide an example?
4. Did you observe students using more creative or metaphorical language in their stories? If so, how did this develop over the 8 weeks?
5. What were some of the main challenges you faced when implementing these techniques (e.g., time, student reluctance, correction of errors)?
6. How did you manage error correction during storytelling sessions? What was the impact?
7. Overall, do you believe storytelling is a beneficial technique for language learning? Why or why not?
8. What advice would you give to other teachers who want to use storytelling in their classrooms?