

# Enhancing Speaking Skill through Storytelling: A Narrative Inquiry Study

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**Abstrak:** Speaking is a fundamental component of English language learning, yet many EFL learners continue to struggle with anxiety, lack of confidence, and limited opportunities for authentic communication. This narrative inquiry study explored how storytelling enhances students' speaking skills by examining the lived experiences of three high school students who participated in a storytelling competition at Universitas Muhammadiyah Lamongan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations of participants' performances during the competition, and reflective journals, and were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The findings reveal three major themes: (1) increased confidence and reduced speaking anxiety, (2) development of fluency and vocabulary use, and (3) storytelling as a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience. Storytelling was found to provide a supportive and engaging environment that encourages natural and meaningful communication. It allows learners to connect personal experiences with linguistic expression, fostering emotional engagement and intrinsic motivation. The study concludes that storytelling is a powerful pedagogical strategy for enhancing speaking skills in EFL contexts, promoting communicative fluency, confidence, and learner autonomy. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate storytelling to create authentic, reflective, and learner-centered speaking instruction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it enables learners to express their ideas, feelings, and opinions effectively in real communication. As stated by Brown (2015), speaking is a productive skill that involves not only linguistic competence but also interactional and sociocultural abilities. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), however, many students face significant challenges in developing their speaking proficiency. These difficulties often arise from limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and insufficient opportunities to practice speaking in authentic contexts (Arifatin et al., 2023).

The ability to communicate orally in English is increasingly important in today's globalized world. English has become a lingua franca for international communication, education, and business (Yustisia et al., 2022). English has a specific rule related to global market and international context. Therefore, improving students' speaking ability is not merely an academic goal but also a necessity for their future professional and social engagement. Yet, in many EFL classrooms, speaking instruction tends to focus on accuracy rather than fluency, and classroom interactions are often dominated by teacher talk, leaving little space for students to express themselves meaningfully (Kaet et al., 2023). This traditional, teacher-centered approach often limits students' motivation and engagement in learning to speak English (Lohing et al., 2022). Thus, there needs to be better development in the context of language learning that can motivate students to be more active in speaking. One way to do this is by telling stories in English.

Storytelling has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy to enhance students' speaking performance. Through storytelling, learners can organize their thoughts, use language creatively, and engage emotionally with the content they produce (Pratama et al., 2024). As a narrative form, storytelling promotes meaningful communication, allowing students to connect linguistic knowledge with personal experiences (Emeral & Farid, 2024). Moreover, storytelling provides a low-anxiety environment where learners can practice speaking naturally, which fosters self-expression and confidence. In EFL contexts, several studies have reported positive effects of storytelling on learners' fluency, vocabulary use, and overall communicative competence (Idayu et al., 2019). By telling stories, students not only learn how to use sentences in English, more than that, they also learn how to process tone and intonation as well as various types of vocabulary.

Given these advantages, the integration of storytelling in speaking instruction deserves further exploration, especially from the perspective of learners' lived experiences. While quantitative studies have frequently examined the effectiveness of storytelling techniques, fewer studies have adopted a qualitative approach to understand how learners experience, interpret, and construct meaning through storytelling activities. Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research design, is particularly suitable for exploring personal experiences and how they contribute to language learning development (Mazida, 2025). Through narrative inquiry, researchers can gain deeper insights into learners' reflections, emotions, and identity construction during the speaking process. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' experiences in enhancing their speaking skills through storytelling activities. By employing a narrative inquiry approach, the research seeks to uncover how storytelling contributes to learners' confidence, motivation, and communicative ability in speaking English. The findings are expected to offer pedagogical implications for English teachers in designing engaging and meaningful speaking activities that go beyond traditional drills and mechanical practice.

## METHOD

This study employed a narrative inquiry design to explore students' lived experiences in enhancing their speaking skills through a storytelling competition. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it allows researchers to examine personal stories, emotional engagement, and the meaning students construct from learning experiences (Clandinin, 2019; Sahan & Sahan, 2023). The study involved three high school students who were finalists in a storytelling competition organized by Universitas Muhammadiyah Lamongan. Participants were selected purposively based on their active engagement in storytelling and their willingness to share personal reflections.

Data were collected using:

1. Observations of participants' performances during the competition.
2. Semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences, challenges, and perceived speaking improvement.
3. Reflective journal entries written by participants after the competition.

All interview data were transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed in two stages: (1) constructing individual narrative accounts from interviews, journals, and observations; and (2) conducting thematic analysis to identify patterns across narratives. This approach enabled the researcher to capture both personal stories and emerging shared themes.

## RESULT and DISCUSSION

This narrative inquiry study explored students' experiences in improving their speaking skills through storytelling. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, and the stories of three respondents were reconstructed into narrative accounts. The findings reveal four major themes: (1) increased self-confidence, (2)

vocabulary and fluency development, (3) storytelling as an enjoyable learning experience, and (4) initial challenges related to anxiety and limited vocabulary. These themes are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1. Thematic matrix of narrative findings*

Theme	Evidence from Student Narratives	Illustrative Quotes
Increased Self-Confidence	Students became more willing to speak and present stories.	“Storytelling made me braver to speak in front of others.” (Respondent 3, Muzakki)
Vocabulary & Fluency Development	Students learned new words, improved sentence structure, and developed intonation skills.	“I learned new vocabularies and better intonation when speaking.” (Respondent 1, Khayra)
Storytelling as Enjoyable Learning	Storytelling made lessons more motivating and less monotonous.	“It became a mood booster and made learning fun.” (Respondent 3)
Initial Challenges	Students struggled with nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and limited vocabulary.	“I often feel afraid of pronouncing words wrongly.” (Respondent 2, Raira)

### Increased self confidence

All participants described *storytelling* as a learning activity that significantly increased their confidence in speaking English. Before storytelling, they commonly felt nervous, afraid of making mistakes, or unsure about their pronunciation. After several sessions, they reported higher willingness to speak and a reduction in anxiety.

*“I became more confident when speaking in front of others because storytelling makes me used to it.”* (Raira)

*“Storytelling is my mood booster. It makes me brave to talk in front of people.”* (Muzakki)

*“I feel more confident now because I know how to control the story when I speak.”* (Khayra)

This finding highlights a shift from fear and hesitation toward self-assurance, suggesting that storytelling acts as an affective scaffold in building speaking confidence. All respondents described a significant increase in self-confidence after participating in storytelling. For example, Respondent 3 explained that storytelling helped him “become less nervous and more confident to speak in public.” Respondent 2 similarly stated that storytelling “made me more confident because I got used to speaking in front of people.” These experiences indicate that repeated opportunities to perform storytelling provided a psychologically safe space where learners could gradually reduce their speaking anxiety.

### Vocabulary and Fluency Development

Participants noted that storytelling helped them acquire new vocabulary, improve sentence construction, and understand intonation. They expressed that storytelling pushed them to organize ideas more clearly and deliver them more fluently.

*“I found new vocabularies and I can understand intonation better when speaking.”* (Khayra)

*“After using storytelling, my confidence increases and I can speak more fluently.”* (Raira)

*“I can build sentences better because I know the story flow.”* (Muzakki)

Storytelling functioned as a cognitive tool that supported language processing, enabling participants to structure their speech more coherently. The respondents highlighted that storytelling enhanced their ability to use English meaningfully. Respondent 1 reported that she “learned new vocabularies and improved [her] intonation,” while others described gaining better sentence organization and flow. Storytelling appears to offer natural opportunities for linguistic development, as students must select words, organize ideas, and deliver narratives coherently.

### Storytelling as enjoyable, motivating activity

Two students described storytelling as a fun and motivating activity. They emphasized that storytelling not only improved their English but also contributed to a positive emotional learning environment.

*“Storytelling is my mood; it makes learning fun.”* (Muzakki)

*“I enjoy storytelling because it helps me express myself better.”* (Khayra)

This suggests that emotional engagement facilitated by storytelling can enhance students’ willingness to practice and experiment with the language. Two respondents emphasized storytelling as an engaging activity that improved their motivation. Respondent 3 described storytelling as a “mood booster,” suggesting that the method fosters an enjoyable classroom atmosphere. This positive emotional response is important, as motivation is known to influence language learning engagement and achievement.

### Initial Speaking Challenges

Despite the positive outcomes, participants consistently reported initial challenges such as fear, lack of vocabulary, difficulty arranging sentences, and nervousness when speaking publicly.

*“I was afraid of making mistakes when speaking.”* (Raira)

*“I felt nervous and had difficulty building sentences.”* (Muzakki)

*“I didn’t know the right words to use when talking.”* (Khayra)

These challenges served as the baseline from which improvements occurred through storytelling practice. Before participating in storytelling, all respondents experienced difficulties, including nervousness, fear of mispronunciation, and limited vocabulary. Respondent 2 stated, “I often feel afraid of pronouncing words wrongly,” indicating that anxiety was a major initial barrier. Respondent 3 added that he “felt nervous and found it difficult to arrange sentences,” showing that both linguistic and psychological factors influenced their early struggles.

Table 2. Thematic Matrix of Participants’ Narratives

Theme	Khayra	Raira	Muzakki
Increased confidence	✓	✓	✓
Reduced anxiety	✓	✓	✓
Vocabulary development	✓	—	✓
Improved speaking structure	✓	✓	✓
Enjoyable / motivating learning experience	✓	—	✓
Initial difficulties (fear, nervousness)	✓	✓	✓
Desire for future improvement	✓	✓	✓
Positive view of storytelling in class	✓	✓	✓

The findings of this narrative inquiry reveal that storytelling plays a significant role in enhancing students’ speaking skills. The discussion interprets these themes through theoretical and empirical lenses.

### Storytelling and the development of self-confidence

The improvement in students’ confidence aligns with the socio-constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the role of meaningful social interaction in language learning. Storytelling encourages students to perform, collaborate, and negotiate meaning, creating a supportive learning environment that reduces anxiety. Previous studies have also shown that storytelling helps build confidence by allowing repeated practice in a non-threatening context (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Al-Nour, 2020). In this study, students’ statements such as “storytelling made me braver” indicate that storytelling not only develops speaking ability but also enhances psychological readiness to communicate—an essential component of communicative competence. The increased confidence observed in participants reflects learning within

the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*—they were able to perform better through guided practice embedded in storytelling. This is consistent with studies showing that storytelling provides scaffolding for speaking development (Arifatin et al., 2023).

### **vocabulary and Fluency Gains through Meaningful Input and Output**

Storytelling requires students to construct narratives, choose appropriate vocabulary, and practice pronunciation and intonation. This reflects Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, which argues that learners develop language competence when they are pushed to produce meaningful output. Students' descriptions of learning new vocabulary and improving fluency support the idea that storytelling provides rich opportunities for lexical growth and syntactic development. Research also indicates that storytelling stimulates cognitive processing of language and improves narrative organization skills (Arifatin, 2023; Usmeldi & Amini, 2022). The current findings reinforce these claims, as students reported better sentence flow and clearer story structure.

### **Storytelling as an Engaging and Motivating Pedagogical Tool**

Learners' positive emotional responses—such as describing storytelling as “fun” or a “mood booster”—are important. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), lower anxiety and increased motivation improve language acquisition. Storytelling appears to lower the affective filter, enabling students to speak more freely and willingly. This aligns with recent studies showing that storytelling promotes enjoyment and intrinsic motivation in language learning (Arifatin, 2023).

### **Development of Speaking Micro-Skills**

Based on the Speaking Skill Framework (Brown, 2015), storytelling enhanced several micro-skills:

- Fluency: learners spoke with fewer pauses
- Vocabulary use: visible from new words acquired
- Pronunciation and intonation: noted by participants
- Discourse competence: improved ability to structure stories

Participant reflections confirm these aspects:

*“I can build sentences better because I know the story flow.”* (Muzakki)

### **Emotional Engagement Enhances Learning**

The positive emotions associated with storytelling (e.g., enjoyment, motivation) align with recent research emphasizing the role of emotion in language learning. Emotional engagement increases persistence, willingness to communicate, and overall performance. When a student states, *“Storytelling is my mood booster,”* it demonstrates how affective involvement enhances cognitive engagement.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings suggest that:

- Storytelling should be integrated regularly in speaking classes.
- Teachers should provide structured guidance (as suggested by participants).
- Emotional support is crucial for helping learners overcome speaking anxiety.
- A combination of narrative tasks, reflective journals, and performance tasks enriches speaking development.

The narrative inquiry shows that storytelling is a powerful method for enhancing speaking skills. It not only improves linguistic aspects such as vocabulary and fluency but also strengthens affective factors like confidence and motivation. The integration of theoretical perspectives—including Vygotsky's socio-constructivism, Swain's Output Hypothesis, and Krashen's Affective Filter—supports the conclusion that storytelling provides meaningful, supportive, and psychologically safe learning experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored students' lived experiences in enhancing their speaking skills through storytelling activities in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Using a narrative inquiry approach, the research revealed that storytelling serves not only as a

linguistic practice but also as a personal and emotional journey that empowers learners to use English more confidently and meaningfully. Three interrelated themes emerged from the participants' narratives: increased confidence and reduced anxiety, improvement in language fluency and vocabulary, and the development of self-expression and identity through storytelling. The findings indicate that storytelling provides a safe and engaging platform for students to practice speaking authentically. It shifts the classroom atmosphere from teacher-centered to learner-centered, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. As learners narrate stories drawn from their personal experiences, they connect emotionally with the language, thereby enhancing motivation and retention. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing the affective and communicative benefits of storytelling in EFL contexts.

From a pedagogical standpoint, storytelling offers several implications for English language teaching. First, teachers should integrate storytelling as a regular component of speaking instruction to promote both fluency and confidence. Second, educators are encouraged to design storytelling tasks that are culturally and personally relevant to learners, allowing them to use English as a medium of self-expression. Third, storytelling can be used as an assessment tool to evaluate not only linguistic competence but also creativity, coherence, and communicative effectiveness. Such an approach aligns with communicative language teaching principles that emphasize meaningful use of language over mechanical accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Furthermore, the narrative inquiry design of this study underscores the importance of understanding students' voices in language learning. Learners' stories offer valuable insights into their emotional struggles, learning strategies, and identity formation. Future research could extend this study by including a larger participant group or exploring digital storytelling as a medium for developing speaking skills in blended or online learning environments.

In conclusion, storytelling emerges as a powerful pedagogical strategy that bridges linguistic, affective, and identity dimensions of language learning. It enables students to move beyond memorizing words and structures toward expressing themselves as confident communicators. As the participants' stories demonstrate, when learners are given the opportunity to tell their stories, they not only improve their speaking ability but also discover their own voice in the target language—a crucial step toward becoming competent and empowered users of English.

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