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Storytelling y repetición en inglés como lengua extranjera en educación infantil: un estudio de aula

Storytelling and repetition in early childhood EFL: a classroom study

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Resumen
Este estudio se sitúa en el contexto del aprendizaje temprano de lenguas extranjeras en entornos educativos multilingües. El objetivo del trabajo es examinar cómo la exposición repetida al lenguaje a través de la narración influye en la participación, la comprensión y la producción oral en alumnado de cinco años. La investigación adoptó un enfoque cualitativo de investigación-acción y se desarrolló en un aula en Luxemburgo. La intervención consistió en sesiones diarias de storytelling durante ocho semanas utilizando cuentos repetitivos apoyados con recursos visuales e interactivos. Los resultados muestran una mejora significativa en la implicación del alumnado, una mayor comprensión del lenguaje y un aumento en la producción oral espontánea. Se concluye que el storytelling, combinado con la repetición significativa, constituye una estrategia pedagógica eficaz y adecuada para el aprendizaje temprano del inglés.

Palabras clave: Educación infantil, storytelling, repetición, inglés como lengua extranjera, adquisición del lenguaje.

Abstract
This study is situated within the context of early foreign language learning in multilingual educational environments. The aim of the study is to examine how repeated exposure to language through storytelling influences learner engagement, comprehension and oral production among five-year-old pupils. The research adopted a qualitative action-research design and was conducted in a classroom in Luxembourg. The intervention consisted of daily storytelling sessions over an eight-week period using repetitive and predictable narratives supported by visual and interactive resources. The findings indicate increased learner engagement, improved comprehension and a noticeable development in spontaneous oral production. It is concluded that storytelling, combined with meaningful repetition, constitutes an effective and developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategy for early EFL learning.

Keywords: Early childhood education, storytelling, repetition, English as a foreign language, language acquisition.

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Theoretical framework

Early foreign language learning has become a central focus in contemporary educational research, particularly within multilingual societies where children are exposed to several languages from a very early age. In such contexts, early language acquisition is associated with important cognitive, linguistic and social benefits, including increased cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness and intercultural competence (Cenoz, 2013; Nikolov, 2020). Recent research has also highlighted the growing importance of assessment and evidence-based approaches in young learner language education, reinforcing the need for pedagogical practices that are adapted to the developmental characteristics of children (Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021).

However, the effectiveness of early foreign language learning largely depends on the pedagogical approaches implemented in the classroom. Research on language teaching methodologies has consistently highlighted the importance of selecting approaches that align with learners' developmental characteristics and learning needs (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Unlike adolescent or adult learners, young children acquire language primarily through implicit processes based on meaningful exposure, interaction and play (Cameron, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Therefore, teaching strategies in early childhood education must be developmentally appropriate and designed to promote engagement, comprehension and active participation. Current research also highlights the importance of adopting communicative and learner-centred approaches specifically adapted to young language learners (Garton & Copland, 2021; Pinter, 2021; AlShareef, 2024). Furthermore, emotional engagement has been identified as a key factor influencing language learning and classroom participation (Richards, 2022).

Among these strategies, storytelling has gained increasing attention as an effective pedagogical tool in early language education. Storytelling provides a meaningful narrative context in which language is naturally embedded, allowing learners to understand vocabulary and sentence structures through visual support, gestures and contextual cues. Furthermore, stories foster emotional engagement, which plays a crucial role in maintaining attention and enhancing motivation in young learners (Wright, 2004; Bland, 2019). Recent studies have also highlighted the positive impact of storytelling on young learners' engagement, comprehension and motivation in EFL classrooms. Storytelling can also foster cultural understanding, empathy

and meaningful communication through authentic language experiences (Bland, 2022; Nguyen & Phillips, 2025; Harashchuk, 2025; Shi & Cheung, 2024).

In addition to storytelling, repetition constitutes a key mechanism in language acquisition. Young learners require repeated exposure to linguistic input in order to internalise vocabulary and grammatical structures (Nation, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017). Importantly, repetition is most effective when it occurs in meaningful and contextualised situations. Storytelling offers an ideal environment for such meaningful repetition, as many children's stories are characterised by predictable patterns and recurring phrases that facilitate comprehension and encourage participation.

From a theoretical perspective, this approach is supported by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which emphasises the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition, as well as by contemporary perspectives on instructed second language acquisition (Ellis, 2020) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which highlight the role of interaction, scaffolding and meaningful exposure in language learning processes. Within this framework, the teacher acts as a mediator who supports learners' participation and guides their language development through structured interaction.

Despite the growing recognition of storytelling in early language education, there is still a need for classroom-based research examining its impact in real educational contexts, particularly in multilingual settings such as Luxembourg. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing the effects of a storytelling-based intervention combined with repetition in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

Storytelling is widely recognised as a powerful educational tool in language education. Stories provide a structured narrative framework in which language is embedded, allowing learners to understand linguistic elements through context and visual support. In language education, storytelling has been shown to support vocabulary development, listening comprehension and narrative skills (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Mourão, 2016; Hepburn et al., 2010).

Another important aspect of storytelling is its multimodal nature. Stories often combine visual, auditory and kinaesthetic elements, which cater to different learning styles. This multimodality facilitates comprehension and supports language acquisition among young

learners (Bland, 2019). Recent studies also emphasise the pedagogical value of picturebooks and multimodal resources in supporting comprehension and learner engagement in early EFL classrooms (Bland, 2022; Laliena et al., 2023).

Storytelling also encourages interaction in the classroom. Teachers can pause during the story to ask questions, encourage predictions or invite pupils to repeat key phrases. These interactions create opportunities for learners to engage actively with the language and participate in the learning process. Recent research has also shown that teacher-led storytelling can enrich language input and support the development of children's narrative and literacy skills (Melzi et al., 2022).

Repetition is widely recognised as a fundamental mechanism in language acquisition. In order to retain vocabulary and grammatical structures, learners need to encounter language multiple times in different contexts (Nation, 2013). For young learners, repetition is particularly important because it supports memory and facilitates the internalisation of linguistic patterns.

However, repetition must be meaningful in order to be effective. Mechanical repetition that lacks context or purpose may fail to engage learners and therefore does not always lead to effective learning. In contrast, repetition embedded in meaningful activities allows learners to encounter language naturally and repeatedly.

Storytelling provides an ideal context for meaningful repetition. Many children's stories are characterised by repetitive structures and predictable patterns, which allow learners to anticipate language and participate actively in the narrative. This predictability supports comprehension and encourages learners to reproduce the language used in the story.

Research has also highlighted the importance of frequency in vocabulary learning. Webb and Nation (2017) suggest that learners need multiple encounters with a word before they can fully acquire its meaning and use. Repetition within storytelling activities therefore provides valuable opportunities for learners to encounter language in a meaningful context. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of meaning-focused input for vocabulary acquisition (Webb, 2016). More recent studies have also confirmed the benefits of storytelling-based approaches for young language learners (Gao et al., 2023; Khudaverdiyeva, 2024).

Social interaction plays a central role in language learning. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), learning occurs through interaction with others and through the

support provided by more knowledgeable individuals. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance.

In the context of language learning, teachers play an important role in providing scaffolding. Scaffolding refers to the support provided by teachers to help learners progress beyond their current level of competence. This support may include modelling language, asking guiding questions or providing feedback.

Storytelling activities naturally create opportunities for interaction and scaffolding. During storytelling sessions, teachers can encourage learners to repeat phrases, predict what will happen next or describe characters and events. These interactions allow learners to practise language in a supportive environment.

Through repeated storytelling sessions, learners gradually become more confident in using the language. As they become familiar with the structure of the story, they begin to participate more actively and produce language independently. Within this framework, storytelling combined with repetition emerges as a promising pedagogical approach that warrants further investigation in real classroom contexts.

The aim of this study is to analyse the impact of storytelling and repetition on learner engagement, comprehension and oral production among five-year-old pupils learning English as a Foreign Language.

The research question guiding this study is: To what extent do storytelling and repetition support language acquisition, participation and oral production in early childhood EFL learners in a multilingual educational context?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative action-research design aimed at analysing the impact of storytelling and repetition on the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in early childhood education. Action research is particularly suitable in educational contexts as it enables teachers to systematically reflect on and improve their pedagogical practices while implementing innovative teaching strategies (Cohen et al., 2018). The research followed a cyclical process of planning, implementation, observation and reflection, allowing the teacher-

researcher to monitor pupils' responses to the storytelling intervention and adjust practices accordingly.

A qualitative approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of the study, focusing on understanding learning processes, behaviours and classroom interactions rather than measuring outcomes through standardised quantitative instruments. The study was conducted in a multilingual early childhood education classroom in Luxembourg, a context characterised by the coexistence of several languages, including Luxembourgish, German and French, with English introduced as a foreign language.

The participants were 20 pupils aged five years old enrolled in the final year of early childhood education. The group was linguistically diverse, reflecting the multicultural nature of the Luxembourgish school system. Pupils presented varying levels of exposure to English outside the classroom, ranging from no prior exposure to occasional contact through media or family environments. The classroom environment promoted play-based and interactive learning, creating favourable conditions for the implementation of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy.

In line with the qualitative research design, the study focused on four key variables: learner engagement, defined as the level of attention and participation during storytelling sessions; comprehension, understood as the ability to follow the story and respond to questions; oral language production, referring to the use of English words and phrases; and confidence in language use, related to pupils' willingness to participate and communicate in English. These variables were selected due to their relevance to early language acquisition and their alignment with the objectives of the study.

The materials used in the intervention consisted primarily of illustrated storybooks specifically designed for young learners of English. These stories were selected based on their use of simple and accessible vocabulary, repetitive and predictable sentence structures, and strong visual support to facilitate comprehension. The selection of materials was guided by principles of language materials development that emphasise learner engagement, meaningful input and age-appropriate content (Tomlinson, 2018).

The intervention was carried out over a period of eight weeks and consisted of 32 storytelling sessions, conducted four times per week, each lasting approximately 20 minutes.

Each session followed a structured three-phase sequence. In the pre-story phase, the teacher introduced key vocabulary using flashcards, gestures and visual support, encouraging pupils to repeat new words and make predictions based on images. During the storytelling phase, the story was narrated using expressive intonation, gestures and visual cues, with particular emphasis on repetitive structures. Pupils were actively encouraged to repeat key phrases and participate in the narration. In the post-story phase, follow-up activities were implemented to reinforce comprehension and language production, including answering simple questions, repeating key expressions, engaging in role-play using puppets, and participating in songs related to the story. The same stories were repeated across multiple sessions to ensure repeated exposure to language structures.

Data were collected through systematic classroom observation conducted by the teacher-researcher during each storytelling session. The observation focused on pupils' level of participation, comprehension of the story, use of English vocabulary and phrases, spontaneous oral production, and confidence when using English. Field notes were recorded immediately after each session in order to ensure accuracy and capture relevant behaviours and interactions, providing qualitative data for subsequent analysis.

The collected data were analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach. This process involved reviewing all field notes collected during the intervention, identifying recurring patterns in pupil behaviour, and categorising the data into themes related to engagement, comprehension, oral production and confidence. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to examine how pupils' behaviour evolved over time and to assess the impact of storytelling and repetition on language learning.

The study was conducted in accordance with general ethical principles for educational research. The research took place within normal classroom practice, and no personal data identifying pupils were collected or disclosed. Observations focused exclusively on learning behaviours, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants were fully respected throughout the study.

Results

The analysis of the observational data revealed several significant patterns related to pupil engagement, comprehension and oral language production during the storytelling

sessions. Overall, the findings indicate that the integration of storytelling and repetition had a positive impact on pupils' participation and early language development.

Repeated exposure to the stories appeared to play a key role in facilitating comprehension and encouraging active participation. As pupils became increasingly familiar with the narrative structure and recurring phrases, they demonstrated greater confidence in using English during the sessions. By the final stages of the intervention, several pupils were able to spontaneously reproduce expressions such as *"What do you see?"* and *"I see a blue bird"* without teacher prompting. This suggests that the repetitive structure of the stories supported the internalisation of simple sentence patterns and enabled learners to reproduce them independently.

One of the most notable findings was the high level of engagement observed throughout the storytelling sessions. From the initial sessions, pupils showed clear interest and curiosity, particularly due to the use of visual support, gestures and expressive narration. As the intervention progressed, their level of involvement increased considerably. Many pupils began to anticipate recurring phrases and actively participated by repeating them, indicating that predictable narrative structures contributed to both engagement and confidence in language use. In comparison with other classroom activities, storytelling sessions appeared to sustain pupils' attention for longer periods, suggesting that the narrative format provided a coherent and motivating learning experience.

The results also indicate a gradual improvement in pupils' comprehension of English. At the beginning of the intervention, pupils relied heavily on visual cues and gestures to understand the stories. However, repeated exposure to the same linguistic structures enabled them to recognise familiar words and phrases more easily. By the midpoint of the intervention, several pupils were able to respond appropriately to simple questions related to the stories, using either gestures or short verbal responses. This progression suggests that repetition played a crucial role in supporting comprehension by allowing learners to encounter the same language multiple times in meaningful contexts.

In addition, a clear development in oral language production was observed over time. Initially, pupils tended to repeat isolated words following the teacher's model. As they became more familiar with the stories, many began to reproduce longer phrases and short expressions.

By the end of the intervention, several pupils were able to produce complete sentences derived from the stories without direct prompting. This progression from word-level repetition to phrase-level production reflects the gradual development of linguistic competence and highlights the role of storytelling in providing accessible language patterns that learners can internalise and reproduce.

Finally, the intervention appeared to have a positive impact on pupils' confidence when using English. At the beginning of the study, some pupils were reluctant to speak and preferred to rely on gestures or their first language. Over time, however, their willingness to participate increased noticeably. Even those pupils who initially demonstrated low levels of participation began to engage more actively by repeating words and phrases during the storytelling sessions. The predictable structure of the activities and the supportive classroom environment contributed to reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of security, which in turn encouraged pupils to experiment with the language more freely.

Discussion

The findings indicate that storytelling may constitute an effective pedagogical strategy in early childhood English language education. This finding is consistent with recent empirical research demonstrating the positive effects of storytelling interventions on emergent literacy, vocabulary acquisition and language development in EFL settings (Alkilani & Zhang, 2024; Gao et al., 2023).

One of the most significant outcomes observed was the high level of learner engagement during the storytelling sessions. This finding aligns with Wright (2004), who argues that stories naturally capture children's attention due to their narrative structure and emotional appeal. Similarly, Bland (2019) highlights that storytelling promotes motivation and sustained attention by providing meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. In the present study, the use of visual support, gestures and expressive narration contributed to maintaining pupils' interest throughout the sessions, reinforcing the idea that multimodal input plays a key role in early language learning.

In terms of comprehension, the results demonstrate that repeated exposure to stories facilitated pupils' understanding of English. This finding supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which emphasises the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. By

presenting language within meaningful and contextualised narratives supported by visual cues, storytelling enabled learners to infer meaning even when they were not familiar with all lexical items.

Repetition emerged as a key factor in the learning process. The findings confirm earlier research by Nation (2013) and Webb and Nation (2017), which emphasises that repeated exposure to vocabulary and linguistic structures is essential for language acquisition. Recent studies with young EFL learners have similarly reported significant gains in vocabulary development when storytelling-based approaches are used to provide repeated and meaningful exposure to language (Brilianti & Sugirin, 2024).

The development of pupils' oral production observed in this study is also consistent with existing literature. According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), language learners often rely on formulaic expressions before developing more complex linguistic structures. In the present research, pupils initially repeated isolated words but gradually progressed towards producing complete phrases such as *"What do you see?"* and *"I see a blue bird"*. This progression suggests that storytelling provides learners with accessible linguistic chunks that can be internalised and later reproduced in meaningful contexts.

Furthermore, the increase in pupils' confidence when using English can be explained through affective factors. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) suggests that learners acquire language more effectively in low-anxiety environments. The storytelling sessions created a predictable and supportive learning context, which reduced anxiety and encouraged participation. These findings are consistent with more recent research (García Mayo, 2021), which highlights the importance of positive emotional environments in promoting active language use among young learners. However, unlike previous studies conducted in more controlled instructional settings, the present intervention was implemented within an authentic classroom environment, suggesting that storytelling may be effective under everyday educational conditions. From a sociocultural perspective, the results also support Vygotsky's theory (1978), which emphasises the role of social interaction in learning. The interactive nature of the storytelling sessions, including repetition, questioning and guided participation, created opportunities for scaffolding and collaborative learning. Through interaction with the teacher, pupils were able to progressively develop their language skills within their Zone of Proximal

Development. These findings therefore contribute to the growing body of classroom-based evidence supporting storytelling as a pedagogically valuable strategy in early EFL education. More specifically, the study contributes to the limited body of classroom-based research examining storytelling interventions in multilingual early childhood EFL settings. Nevertheless, caution is required when interpreting the results, as the improvements observed may also have been influenced by factors such as increased familiarity with classroom routines and repeated exposure to English over time.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that storytelling combined with meaningful repetition constitutes an effective and developmentally appropriate approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language in early childhood education. The integration of narrative, repetition and interaction creates a rich learning environment that supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of language acquisition.

These findings highlight the pedagogical relevance of integrating storytelling and repetition in early EFL contexts.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to examine the impact of storytelling and repetition on the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among five-year-old pupils in an early childhood education context. The findings demonstrate that these pedagogical strategies significantly support learner engagement, comprehension and oral language production.

One of the main contributions of this study is the confirmation that storytelling provides a meaningful and motivating learning environment for young learners. Through narrative contexts supported by visual and interactive elements, pupils were able to understand language more effectively and participate actively in classroom activities. Repetition, when embedded within these meaningful contexts, facilitated the internalisation of vocabulary and sentence structures, contributing to the gradual development of oral production.

The results also highlight the importance of affective factors in early language learning. The storytelling sessions created a supportive and low-anxiety environment in which pupils felt confident using English, which led to increased participation and more frequent spontaneous language production. This finding reinforces the relevance of creating emotionally positive learning environments in early childhood education.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study suggests that integrating storytelling and repetition into regular classroom practice constitutes an effective and developmentally appropriate approach to teaching English in early childhood education. These strategies allow teachers to introduce language in a natural, engaging and interactive way, which is particularly suited to the needs of young learners in multilingual contexts (Shin & Crandall, 2022).

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research supporting innovative and context-sensitive approaches to early foreign language education, highlighting the value of storytelling and repetition as key tools for promoting meaningful language learning. The findings suggest that storytelling, when combined with meaningful repetition, may represent a practical and sustainable pedagogical strategy for fostering language development in multilingual early childhood classrooms.

Limitations of the study and future research

Despite the positive findings, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was conducted with a relatively small sample of pupils within a specific educational context in Luxembourg. As a result, the findings may not be generalisable to other educational settings, age groups or linguistic environments. Although the findings cannot be generalised statistically, they may offer insights that are transferable to similar multilingual early childhood educational contexts.

Secondly, the study relied primarily on qualitative observational data collected by the teacher-researcher. While this approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of classroom dynamics and learning processes, it may also involve a degree of subjectivity. Future research could strengthen the reliability of the findings by incorporating additional data collection methods, such as audio or video recordings, structured assessment tools or external observations conducted by independent researchers. In addition, the absence of a comparison or control group prevents establishing causal relationships between the storytelling intervention and the observed improvements in language development. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive.

Furthermore, the duration of the intervention was limited to eight weeks. Although the results indicate clear improvements in engagement, comprehension and oral production, longer-

term studies would be necessary to examine the sustainability of these effects over time and to determine whether the observed gains lead to more advanced language development.

Future research could also explore the application of storytelling and repetition in different educational contexts, including older learners or diverse linguistic environments. In addition, comparative studies analysing the effectiveness of storytelling in relation to other pedagogical approaches could provide further insights into its relative impact on early foreign language learning.

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