THE IMPACT OF STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES THROUGH VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION ON ENGLISH STUDENTS' SPEAKING ABILITY

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of storytelling through the use of Telegram on oral language of English foreign language (EFL) students. To this end, thirty English students aged 18 to 21 took part in the research. Before the treatment, they were interviewed by two instructors and were graded as low-proficient speakers of English. The selected participants were assigned randomly into two homogeneous groups of control (n=15) and experimental (n=15). The instructor taught four stories to both groups through the online class. The participants of the experimental group were supposed to summarize the retold stories while the participants of the control group answered the comprehension questions of the stories. All the participants were to record their voices and share them in their groups and their peers were supposed to listen to the speaker and post their comments. After the treatment, two instructors interviewed all the participants. The results of the comparison of the first and the second interview confirmed the positive effect of storytelling and answering the questions on the Telegram. The findings of this study may help the learners to enhance their English speaking skills.

Keywords: oral language; storytelling; summarizing; social networks; virtual instruction

1. Introduction

Storytelling is defined as the art of telling stories through the use of words and actions (Soleimani & Akbari, 2013) in order to engage an audience. In other words, it differs from reading a story as it narrates a tale from memory (Dujmović, 2006). Storytelling is one of the best ways to help students learn the four skills in their first and second language because of the numerous benefits embedded in stories. It also enhances learners' communication skills (Mokhtar, Kamarulzaman, & Syed, 2011). According to Sanchez (2014), storytelling is the best way to help the students learn the second language in the same way as their mother tongue. They present parts of speech such as grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context (Amer, 2003). It also increases learner' writing skills and their visual memory (Sarıca, & Usluel, 2016). According to Miller and Pennycuff (2008), telling stories can be used as an

effective instructional strategy to increase learners' abilities in all learning areas. It is a useful teaching technique for language development and exploring meanings of experiences (Woodhouse, 2007). It also improves students' general knowledge (Alsumait, Al-Musawi, 2013). Storytelling also increases the accuracy of learners' speaking (Chalak, & Hajian, 2013).

Using storytelling as a teaching tool for improving language learners' speaking skills in virtual classes, especially with the Telegram messaging app, has not yet been researched. Thus, it is hoped that using storytelling in the Telegram class will help students improve their speaking abilities. This study is going to address the following questions:

1. Does telling stories in Telegram have any effect on the participants' speaking abilities?
2. Are there any significant differences between speaking skills of the experimental participants who retell the stories and the participants of the control group who do not?

2. Background to the study

2.1. Review of literature on storytelling

The past studies show that the use of storytelling in classrooms can contribute significantly to early literacy development. For example, Rivera Pinzón (2016) showed that storytelling and reading stories can improve both students' reading comprehension and their writing. Mello's (2001) research also demonstrated that storytelling can improve the fluency and vocabulary acquisition of children. Similarly, Mallan (1992) showed that storytelling helps students learn to listen and to participate in their everyday communication.

The effects of storytelling on learners' first language literacy were extended to second language learning too, and some researchers and teachers tried to use story telling techniques in teaching speaking and oral skills. For example, Trousdale's (1990) study showed that storytelling improves learners' English speaking abilities. Brice (2004) believes that storytelling is a great technique which can be used to increase EFL learners' oral skills. In a similar vein, Sepahvand (2014) states that storytelling is a great strategy to improve the oral speaking abilities of students as they draw students' focus on meaning rather than form. Parallel to this, Ebrahiminejad, Azizifar, Gowhary, and Jamalinesari (2014) advocate that short stories help learners improve their speaking skills and enhance their independent English language learning. The storytelling technique is believed to be one of the most enjoyable techniques which can develop students' English language (Samantaray, 2014), and Abdolmanafi-Rokni and Qarajeh (2014) believe that digital storytelling can improve students'

speaking skills much more than the traditional way of storytelling. Marzuki, Prayogo and Wahyudi (2016) showed that the implementation of interactive storytelling strategy increased the EFL learners' speaking ability and their classroom activities. At the same time, Hemmati, Gholamrezapour and Hessamy (2015) demonstrated that reading story aloud and teachers' storytelling affects students' listening comprehension.

Storytelling also develops other language skills such as vocabulary and grammar knowledge, reading and writing. For example, Mokhtar, Abdul Halim and Kamarulzaman (2010) show that storytelling improves learners' reading skills and helps them develop their vocabulary. In a similar study, Soleimani and Akbari (2013) also confirmed that storytelling increases learners' English vocabulary. This is also corroborated by Kalantari and Hashemian (2015), who showed that storytelling increases the vocabulary knowledge of Iranian English students and also boosts their motivation. Soleimani and Khandan (2013) revealed that using storytelling also helps students learn grammatical rules easily. Moreover, storytelling encourages less willing EFL learners to participate more in the classroom activities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing (Juraid, & Ibrahim, 2016).

Other studies show that the use of stories has positive effect in the classroom. For example, Samantaray (2014) believes that storytelling technique changes the environment of a tedious classroom into an exciting one. Dujmović and Bančić (2014) conclude that animated storytelling can be used as a powerful tool in the classrooms. Among these, Hemenover (2003) showed that storytelling can improve the competence of EFL learners and decrease their stress. Kalantari and Hashemian's (2016) and Martinez's (2007) studies demonstrated an increase in EFL students' motivation toward and interest in learning through telling stories. Similarly, Miller and Pennycuff (2008) observed that reluctant students tend to be motivated by engaging in storytelling activities. In addition, Cortazzi and Jin (2007) also confirmed EFL learners' improvement in their skills. Finally, storytelling provides an interacting bond between teachers and students for learning language (Hsu, 2015).

With regard to the role of storytelling in developing language learning, first of all most studies have primarily investigated using storytelling in developing language proficiency rather than in an exploratory research project employing a quantitative method together with storytelling in virtual classes. Particularly, using storytelling through Telegram has not yet, to our knowledge, been researched. Considering the importance of issue and also the literature gap on it, this study intends to investigate the role of storytelling in enhancing the speaking abilities of EFL students in virtual classes.

2.2. Previous research into teaching with mobile phones

Relatively few studies have been carried on the topic of instruction via mobile phones. Among them, Begum (2011) revealed that mobile phones have a great capacity as teaching tools. Similarly, the positive effects of teaching vocabulary through the use of SMS have been confirmed by Motallebzadeh, Beh-Afarin, and Daliry Rad (2011). In a similar study, Oberg and Daniels (2013) stated that teaching with mobile phones affects language acquisition in a positive way. Besides, Begum (2011) concluded that the learners have very positive attitudes towards learning with mobile devices. Chen (2013) suggested that for their effective usage it is necessary to guide students properly, both technologically and methodologically. In line with the abovementioned studies, Khrisat and Mahmoud (2013) contended that the participants were eager to be taught through mobile phones. Dashtestani (2016) stated that students had positive attitudes toward learning English via mobile devices. Also, Yeboah and Ewur (2014) showed the positive effects of teaching through mobile devices and concluded that mobile learning enhances students' performance.

Based on the above-mentioned studies, it can be understood that there are no studies teaching language skills primarily speaking through mobile phones and also the above-cited studies did not address the issue of language acquisition; rather, they focused on attitudes towards methods of m-learning. To put it more clearly, there are few studies which focus on teaching speaking through storytelling through the use of mobile phones in general, and with the Telegram application in particular. So, this study attempts to shed light on this issue and to contribute to this field of research.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a quasi-experimental design with one experimental and one control group. The general purpose of this study is to determine the effect of storytelling on EFL students' oral abilities via social networks.

3.1. Participants

In order to research the effect of retelling stories on oral abilities of students in the Telegram group, 30 English students were selected out of 78 male and female students of Iranian TEFL freshmen at BA level in Payame Noor University. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24. Having administered a test of homogeneity (TOEFL test), the researcher selected 30 (12 males and 18 females) learners for the purpose of this study. The participants were divided into two groups, each consisting of 15 subjects.

3.2. Instruments

Two parallel tests based on Test of Speaking English (TSE) were designed. One of them was used as a pre-test and the other one was used at the end of the treatment as a post-test. The primary purpose of the tests was to measure the speaking ability of the subjects before and after the treatment. There were twelve questions in each questionnaire and the participants were asked to talk about their educational and proficiency level, describe an object, narrate a given picture, give and support an opinion, compare and contrast two things, give directions and instructions, hypothesize, imagine and define something.

In order to examine inter-rater reliability, the researcher worked with another university professor. The interviews were scored independently by the researcher and the colleague rater. The participants were scored on their use of correct grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and their ability to be fluent. The computed Pearson correlation coefficients for scoring the interviews (.91) showed a high positive relationship between the scores.

In this study, four English stories were prepared by the researcher and their PowerPoint was made along with their visual pictures.

3.3. The procedure

Before the treatment, all the participants took part in the pre-test. The participants of this study were thirteen EFL students who were homogenous in the speaking skill based on the TSE interview. The pretest took 15 to 20 minutes for each participant to complete and after getting the scores the means of their scores were calculated. Based on their results from their pre-test oral interview test, they were divided into two homogeneous groups of control and experimental. At the end of the treatment two groups were interviewed based on TSE once more.

The treatment started from 25 of July 2016 and lasted for 8 sessions successively till second of June 2016. Each session lasted almost two hours.

3.3.1. The experimental group

During the first session, the experimental group's participants were added to the Telegram group and the rules of the class were explained to them. The class time was set and all of them were to be online according to the agreed class time. In each session the researcher presented one story which was recorded beforehand in simple language along with the PowerPoint. The experimental group's participants had to listen to the recorded story and for the next session, each of them had to make the oral summary of the story and share it in the group while all the

other participants were assigned to listen to their group's story and give their feedback. The treatment of the experimental group was as follows:

1. Teaching the new words and phrases with pictures before telling the story
2. Checking the participants' comprehension of the new words
3. Sharing the PowerPoint
4. Asking the participants some general questions about the characters in the slides
5. Asking them to guess the story
6. Telling the story by sending separate slides along with sound
7. Asking the participants some detailed questions from the story
8. Asking them to listen to the story once more and send their retold stories to the group for the following session
9. Asking each participant to evaluate their peers' recorded stories

3.3.2. The control group

There were fifteen participants in the control group. Like the experimental group, the participants of the control group were taught the English stories through *Telegram*. All the procedures of story presentation by the researcher were the same in both groups except that the control group participants did not retell the stories. They just answered the comprehension questions asked by the researcher and recorded their answers and shared them in their group. The questions were as follows:

- Who were the main characters of the story? Mention their names one by one.
- Where did the story happen?
- How many characters were there in the story?
- Was there a problem in the story? What was it?
- What happened first, next, and last?
- How did the characters of the story solve the problem?
- How did the story end?

3.4. Results and findings

In order to determine whether using retelling stories has any effect on the subjects' speaking ability, after obtaining the scores of the pre-test and post-test, the mean and standard deviation of the scores were calculated. Then, in order to find out whether the differences between the groups were statistically significant, t-test analysis of the tests was run.

In order to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' scores in the control group, a paired-samples t-test was used. As Table 1 shows (Appendix), the participants' scores increased from pre-test to post-test.

A paired-samples t-test was used to examine the effect of the intervention on students' scores in the experimental group. According to Table 2 (Appendix), the participants' scores increased from pre-test (M = 287.50, SD = 52.30) to post-test (M = 425.00, SD = 81.94), t (7) = -4.88, $p < .00$ (two-tailed). Their mean score was -137.50 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -204.04 to -70.95.

In order to compare all participants' scores on pre-tests, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. As Table 3 (Appendix) shows, there was no significant difference in scores for the control group (M = 320.00, SD = 94.51) and the experimental group (M = 287.50, SD = 52.30), t (13) = .83, p = .41 (two-tailed). The differences of the means (mean *difference* = 32.50, 95% CI: -51.14 to 116.14) was small (*eta squared* = .05).

In order to answer the second research question of the study and to examine the significant differences between speaking skills of the experimental participants who retold the stories and the participants of the control group who did not, an independent-sample t-test was executed to compare all participants' scores on post-tests. According to Table 4 (Appendix), there was no statistically significant difference in scores for the control group (M = 431.42, SD = 92.27) and the experimental group (M = 525.00, SD = 81.94), t (13) = .14, p = .88 (two-tailed). The differences of the means were very small.

4. Discussion

This study examined the effect of telling stories through the use of *Telegram* and its impact on the improvement of the oral ability of EFL students. Before the treatment, the results of TSE interviews showed that the participants of both groups were homogeneous in terms of speaking competence. The findings of the post-test revealed that telling stories through virtual environment improved the speaking abilities of both experimental and control groups. Whether the participants retold the stories or just answered the comprehension question did not make any difference. This finding supports the idea of Schank (1990), who states that storytelling has positive, significant and demonstrable value in teaching.

As regaards the effect of oral retelling on the speaking ability of the students, these findings are consistent with researchers who state the effectiveness of storytelling in improving the speaking ability of language learners such as Trousdale (1990), Brice (2004),

Sepahvand (2014), Ebrahiminejad et al. (2014), Samantaray (2014), and Marzuki et al. (2016).

With reference to the instruction via mobile phones, the results of the present study are in agreement with findings of Begum (2011), Motallebzadeh et al. (2011), Oberg and Daniels (2013), and Dashtestani (2016), who revealed that mobile phones have great potential as an instructional tool.

Since speaking a language is equivalent to knowing that language (Khalaf, 2012), and the learner's ability to perform well in a second language is determined in terms of speaking skills (Sepahvand, 2014), it should be taught to language learners (Chastain, 1988). As telling stories has been considered as the original form of teaching (Pedersen, 1995), it can be profitably utilized in teaching speaking skills of non-speakers of Persian.

5. Final conclusions and implications for the future

The results illustrate the strong support for the use of oral speaking through the use of social networks, *Telegram*. One of the special characteristics of social networks is that all the members of the group can share their responses with their peers in the group and interact with one another very easily. Teaching through virtual environment responds to students' desire to talk and interact with others. Both retelling the stories and answering the questions have been effective in improving the participants' speaking ability so the results demonstrate the use of telling stories as an effective pedagogical tool in both virtual classes.

The results of the present study do offer some implications for methodologists, teachers, and learners. The results indicate the positive effect of the use of *Telegram* in EFL classes so proper procedures and techniques for developing language learners' speaking skills can be developed through social networks. As regards the way of presenting the treatment program, the findings revealed better performance of both groups who received the intended treatment through *Telegram*. The findings can help both teachers and learners to use the benefits of technology in the teaching-learning process.

The participants in this study were low-proficiency speakers of English. Some other studies can be done with intermediate participants. In this study, the focus was on improving speaking skills of non-native speakers of English, other studies can be done in the areas of writing and grammar. This study just took place in a virtual environment, while further research can compare the effectiveness of storytelling between two groups of language learners; one in a traditional classroom and the other in a virtual one.

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Appendix

Table 1. Control group: Paired-samples t-test

Control group		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre-test	320.0000	15	94.51631	35.72381
	post-test	431.4286	15	92.27289	34.87587

Control group		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pre-test - post-test	-111.42857	67.18843	25.39484	-173.56751	-49.28963	-4.388	6	.005

Table 2. Experimental group: Paired-samples t-test

Experimental group		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre-test	287.50000	15	52.30406	18.49228
	post-test	425.00000	15	81.94075	28.97043

Experimental group		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pre-test - post-test	-137.50000	79.59720	28.14186	-204.04492	-70.95508	-4.886	7	.002

Table 3. Comparing pre-tests of the control group and experimental group: Independent-samples t-test

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pre-tests	control	15	320.0000	94.51631	35.72381
	experimental	15	287.5000	52.30406	18.49228

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
pre-tests	Equal variances assumed	.989	.338	.839	13	.416	32.50000	38.71653	-51.14198	116.14198
	Equal variances not assumed			.808	9.087	.440	32.50000	40.22629	-58.36551	123.36551

Table 4. Comparing post-tests of the control group and experimental group: Independent-samples t-test

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
post-tests	control	15	431.4286	92.27289	34.87587
	experimental	15	425.0000	81.94075	28.97043

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
post-tests	Equal variances assumed	.057	.815	.14300	13	.888	6.42857	44.95550	-90.69188	103.54902
	Equal variances not assumed			.14179	12.170	.890	6.42857	45.33886	-92.20331	105.06045