Elementary students reading engagement: the impact of story-telling in EFL reading comprehension

Ida Yulianawati¹, *Kardi Nurhadi², Aresta Dian Mayasari³

¹²³English Education Department, Faculty of Teachers Training and Education Science, Universitas Wiralodra, Indonesia, Indramayu Jawa Barat

ABSTRACT

This study is aimed to report elementary students' engagement and perception of the use of storytelling in reading comprehension. The use of storytelling as one of the oldest ways of human communication is already known. It is also one of the pedagogical tools to develop language skills in first, second, and foreign languages regardless of students' age, gender, and ethnicity. Storytelling proved to be more effective in language teaching than traditional teaching material because it is fun, engaging, and raises students' interest in listening to the stories as well as retelling them. Meanwhile, reading is a crucial aspect of life, improving brain performance, increasing knowledge, and sharpening memory. This research employed a case study with a qualitative approach. The participants of the study were 31 elementary school students. The data were derived from classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews. The results showed that the students engaged in the activity in storytelling class. The questionnaire and observational data indicated that the children responded positively to storytelling activity and engage the students to the reading class, motivating students' behavior and attitudes in EFL reading activity. Drawing on the findings, pedagogically, this study implied storytelling can be adopted as the scaffolding to engage students in reading comprehension situated in elementary school context.

Keywords: language skills, reading comprehension, storytelling, young learners

Kata kunci: keterampilan bahasa, pemahaman membaca, mendongeng
INTRODUCTION

Literacy has become a crucial position in Indonesia as it is a way to develop education through developing the culture of reading and writing (Satriani, 2019). However, it is unfortunate that the level of interest in reading in Indonesia is relatively low. Based on a Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, Indonesia's literacy rate is ranked 62 out of 70 countries. It means that Indonesia's position is still in the lowest group of several countries that also participated in the survey (OECD, 2018).

The environment plays a role in shaping children's interest in reading. This is illustrated through the habits of parents who tell stories to foster children's interest in reading. Furthermore, the school environment or in this case the library is also able to have a significant influence on children's reading interest. Pinter (2006) said that children tend to care more about themselves so that they have their own imagination to have fun. This affects children's interest in reading which needs to be formed with a pleasant encouragement. There are two factors that cause the formation of interest in reading, the first is internal factors, including traits/talents, gender, education level, health condition, and mental state; the second is external factors (Soeatminah, 1991).

Children can start to grow their interest in reading through an interest in books, for example, various types of books include textbooks, story books, and fairy tale books; the content and design of the book is full of pictures and colors. Along with the growth of interest in reading, the concentration of the child will also be formed, for example, when a child is given an interesting book, he will focus on reading it.

This concentration of reading activities will become a habit so that it can have a positive effect on school life and daily life. It is also necessary to consider the needs of the books that children will read. This is done inseparable from the substance of reading as a gate of information and competence, so the suitability of the content will also affect children's interest in reading.

Hsu (2010) report that to connect a tale with the audience, storyteller uses gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and interaction. It makes storytelling interesting for the students. In the classroom, the teacher uses his/her gestures and voice to tell a story. The students physically engage to the activity by either smiling, staring, giving the teacher questions and answer on how storytelling is being understood and received. This study implied that story telling enable students to engage in learning. Groeber (2007) found that, in using the storytelling, the teacher focuses on the message(s) of the story, and is free to use vocalization, language improvisation, creativity, and mimetic to convey a story message to his/her audience. This study suggests that story telling can be adopted as the scaffolding to improve language learning.

Some previous researches have focused on whether storytelling plays a role in developing specific sets of skills in foreign language, such as speaking and reading. In 2010, Hsu conducted a study on the use of storytelling technique to develop students' speaking skill. The study was lasted for ten weeks with 50 native Taiwanese speakers' students from grade four and five. The result showed that although there were no significant differences on students score were found between two groups during the pre-test, the result the post-test in storytelling group was higher than the other group. Hsu (2010) explained that this happened because in storytelling class, the students did not only read and listen to the story passively, but they also had the opportunity to read and retell the stories in front of their friends. They practice the new sentence structures, and vocabulary introduced by the teacher to them.

Kim (2010) and Atta-Alla (2012) showed that storytelling is important to promote the development of productive and receptive language skills. It is because storytelling provides the students with the opportunity to work actively to engage to the activity and use language skills in fun
and enjoyable situation. Storytelling is an activity to share the information from person to person and from one generation to the next generation, and has been used widely and thoroughly in education (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). The use of storytelling in reading class is simple and practical. The stories are easily obtained from various sources (Wajnryb, 2003). Storytelling has been used as a teaching technique the areas of early childhood education, higher education, teacher education, and nursing education. The use of storytelling gives some benefits for both teacher and students in English classroom. It can motivate students (Wright, 2008), help children in memorizing words learned (Satriani, 2019), improve their vocabulary mastery (Widiastika, 2011), encourage children to learn English (Slattery & Willis, 2001), increase their moral value (Rusdi, 2006), provide inexpensive media in teaching rich language experience (Wright, 2008), and enhance students’ interest in reading (Slattery & Willis, 2001). Moreover, storytelling is categorized as one of the teaching techniques that enable Asian EFL students in enhancing their reading ability. Storytelling in elementary level has a positive impact on reading comprehension and that the curriculum can build around stories to gain more interest and comprehensible input to children (Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011). Moon and Maeng (2012) claim that children in storytelling group improve their reading comprehension. The data showed that the students in storytelling class developed a more positive attitude towards the lessons and motivation. It is in line with Safdarian and Ghyasi (2013) who found that storytelling has a positive influence in school achievement.

Most previous studies focus on the effect of storytelling. However, there has been little discussion about the students’ engagement and perception of storytelling in teaching reading, especially to teach elementary school students in Indonesia. Storytelling is a common choice for Bahasa Indonesia lesson, but it is widely used in foreign language class. This study tries to fill the gap by implementing storytelling in teaching reading comprehension for children at an elementary school in Indramayu. Drawing on the existing evidence in the literature, this research will address the following questions: How is the students’ engagement of the use of storytelling in reading comprehension? To what extent students engage in EFL reading comprehension via storytelling?

During the past decades, numerous scholars have defined engagement in reading from a wide range of perspective which is considered multifaceted construct (Lee, Jang, and Conradi Smith 2021; Unrau and Quirk 2014). Following this, reading engagement can be sum up within four aspects. The aspects are: (1) behavioural engagement, such as time, frequency and effort in reading (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You 2012), (2) cognitive engagement such as willingness to exert effort and to persevere with reading (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You 2012, 3) affective engagement which concerns the feelings and emotions (such as enjoyment or improved mood) that determine whether a child engages positively with reading or not (Cook et al. 2020), and (4) social engagement which includes shared reading experiences and discussions, classroom ethos and social behaviours (Lutz, Guthrie, and Davis 2006).

As the reading skill are not the focus of this study and were not tested, reading engagement is a crucial predecessor to enhance reading competency (Afflerbach and Harrison 2017; Gambrell 2011; Finn and Zimmer 2012). For example, if children read more frequently, exert more effort, experience improved emotions associated with reading and engage positively in social reading and learning activities in a classroom, it is logical that reading competency will improve over time (Baker and Wigfield 1999)

**METHODOLOGY**

Grounded in qualitative research with case study design, this study report how elementary students engage in reading comprehension via story telling. Data were derived from Classroom observation, questionnaires and interview provided qualitative data. Permission to conduct the study was approved by the head of the school at the research site.
Research Participants

31 students aged ten to twelve were recruited to take part in this study from the two classes at an elementary school in Indramayu, West Java, on the basis of purposive sampling. This included students in the first shift from 7.00 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. on Saturday mornings. Following ethical protocols, before research commenced, the authors conducted a meeting with the participants explaining the research purposes and the benefits for the participants. After study briefing, they agree to participate in this study voluntarily. We also convinced to the participants that their data would be kept confidentially only for the research purposes.

Research Procedure

The study was conducted in four weeks in 2022. Two English teachers in charge at two classes of an elementary school in Indramayu were given training in storytelling techniques and took the role of storyteller for all sessions. The pictures, puppets, hand-outs, and sign necessary for storytelling sessions were prepared by the researchers. After being exposed to storytelling for four weeks, the researcher delivered the questionnaires and explained clearly what students were expected to do. Students looked through the questionnaires (Bahasa Indonesia version) to see if they had any questions. Then they were asked to complete the questionnaires in about thirty minutes. After that, six students were chosen purposively to do an interview.

Data Analysis

Classroom observations were employed to answer research question number one. Each observation session recorded students' behaviors and researchers' comments in three stages: before the storytelling, while storytelling and after storytelling. The purpose of the observation sessions is to find out how engaged and interactive students are during the storytelling sessions. Questionnaires and interviews were used to answer research question number two about students' perception on the use of storytelling in reading class. Table 1 provides a sample of the observation notes. In total, eight sheets of observation notes were collected.

Table 1. A Sample of Classroom Observation Field Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Students' Participation</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Story-telling</td>
<td>- Students looked at a picture of an animal and guessed the name of the animal</td>
<td>- Most students did not know rabbit and tortoise in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students learned the vocabulary items related to the story: rabbit, tortoise, slow, fast, proud.</td>
<td>- Students gave a different story while looking at the illustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students predicted the story while the teacher show the illustration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During Story-telling</td>
<td>- Students listened to the story attentively</td>
<td>- Students predicted the next verse correctly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students followed the sequences</td>
<td>- Students were able to follow the teacher's story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students mimed as if they were running when the teacher mimed the action of the rabbit and tortoise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Story-telling</td>
<td>- Students worked in pairs to tell a story</td>
<td>- Students were noisy when they practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students presented their stories to the whole class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
This research aimed at explaining the students' perception of the use of storytelling for teaching reading comprehension. To answer the question about students' engagement, classroom observation was used. The data of students' perceptions taken from students' questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The students' engagement with the use of storytelling for teaching reading comprehension

Before Storytelling

Before the teacher tell the story, she showed the students a series of pictures to arouse the students' attention. When the teacher asked the students to look at the pictures and predict the stories, they were excited. They were eager to answer the questions about what is going on with the stories. The teacher asked the students to list the words they do not understand. The students felt engaged and ready to listen to the story. Showing pictures to children motivated them to predict and practice the language.

During Storytelling

Students follow the teacher instruction in question-and-answer sessions. The teacher asked the students to respond the story-lines. After that, the teacher asked them to work with their partners to guess the nest part of the story. This activity increased the students' attention. Next activity related with switching the roles. It makes the students interested to tell the stories. The teacher moves around the class to help the students. The students read the story and practice the language. This activity improved students' awareness of the story and affect their comprehension.

After Storytelling

The students retold and asked questions. The teacher asked the students to summarize the information to make sure that they understood the stories. The students expressed their likes and dislikes of the stories.

The students' perception of the use of storytelling for teaching reading comprehension

The questionnaire consists of eight items. Each statement responds with five rating scales, namely Strongly Agree (SA) rates 5 Agree (A) rates 4; Neural (N) rates 3; Disagree (D) rates 2, and Strongly Disagree (SD) rates 1. The researcher calculates the score of each statement from students' responses. Then, she found the mean by dividing the total score by the number of students.

The table of the score percentage can be seen as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reading skill is important I like the implementation of storytelling in reading class</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>My reading skill has improved Storytelling activity has helped me to recognize my strength and weakness in reading</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Storytelling helps me learn new sentences Storytelling trains me to enrich my vocabulary in English The feedback from the teacher in the storytelling activity motivates me to learn</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Storytelling activities are very interesting</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shows the result of the questionnaire consisting of eight items given to the students. Statement number one related to students' responses
about the importance of reading skills. The mean score lies in the interval 3.40-4.19. It can be interpreted that the students "Agree" that reading skill is important. Statement number two related to whether or not they like the implementation of storytelling in reading class. There were seven students who answer Strongly Agree (SA), 20 students answer Agree (A), and four students answer Neutral (N). None of the students answer Disagree (D) nor Strongly Disagree (SD). The total score of statement 1 is 127, and the mean score is 4.09. The mean score lies in the interval 3.40-4.19. It can be interpreted that the students "Agree" that reading skill is important. Statement number two related to whether or not they like the implementation of storytelling in reading class. There were seven students who answer Strongly Agree (SA), 20 students answer Agree (A), and four students answer Neutral (N). None of the students answer Disagree (D) nor Strongly Disagree (SD). The total score of statement 1 is 127, and the mean score is 4.09. The mean score lies in the interval 3.40-4.19. It can be interpreted that the students "Agree" that reading skill is important.

In statement number four, the total score of statement 9 is 127, and the mean score is 4.09. The mean score lies in the interval 3.40-4.19. It can be interpreted that the students "Agree" that storytelling has helped them to recognize their strengths and weakness. Statement number five shows seven students who answer Strongly Agree (SA), 24 students answer Agree (A) and eight students answer Neutral (N). None of the students answer Disagree (D) nor Strongly Disagree (SD). The total score of statement 10 is 131, and the mean score is 4.22. The mean score lies in the interval 4.20-5.00. It can be interpreted that the students "Totally Agree" that the storytelling helped them to solve their problems or learning difficulties.

Statement number six shows nine students who answer Strongly Agree (SA), 21 students answer Agree (A), and one student answered Neutral (N). None of the students answer Disagree (D) nor Strongly Disagree (SD). The total score of statement 13 is 132, and the mean score is 4.25. The mean score lies in the interval 4.20-5.00. It can be interpreted that the students "Totally Agree" that the storytelling helped them to enrich their vocabulary. Statement number seven shows five students who answer Strongly Agree (SA), 23 students answer Agree (A), and three students answer Neutral (N). None of the students answer Disagree (D) nor Strongly Disagree (SD). The total score of statement 14 is 126, and the mean score is 4.06. The mean score lies in the interval 3.40-4.19. It can be interpreted that the students "Agree" that the feedback from the lecturer in the storytelling motivates them to learn.

To summarize, a large population of children's responses was for Agree, which means children responded positively to the impact of storytelling on their reading comprehension. Based on the findings of this part, it can be assumed that storytelling supported the children's reading comprehension and motivated them to participate in storytelling activities and express their interests in stories.

The students' perception of storytelling activity based on semi-structured interview

The interviews with students were conducted after they finished their reading class using storytelling. There were five topics are asked to the students. They are: (1) The effectiveness of storytelling; (2) the advantages of storytelling; (3) Students' motivation in the storytelling activities; (4) Emerging problems throughout the implementation of storytelling activity; and (5) the roles of the teacher in reading class.

The effectiveness of storytelling

Drawing on the interview result, storytelling could help them improve their reading skill, as stated in the response below.
R: Tell me your experience in using storytelling in reading class so far.
S1: I like it. It is like you tell the story of what you read to your friends.
R: How do you perceive the effectiveness of storytelling for your reading improvement?
S1: Storytelling helps me improve my reading ability because we need to read more than once and practice before we tell the story.
R: Did storytelling help you to have a better understanding of the learning reading tasks?
S1: storytelling makes me write and read more. It helps me to overcome my writing difficulty. The lecturer is showing us our mistakes and gave us comments that encourage us to read and practice more.

The advantages of storytelling in reading class

From the interview result, the students said that storytelling could help them improve their reading skills, as stated in the response below.

S6: Storytelling helps me to improve my confidence in reading because have to understand what we read, discussed it with our friends and teacher about the story, and practice it. Reading is not something boring anymore.

Students' motivation in storytelling activities

Drawing on the interview result, the students said that storytelling could help them improve their motivation in reading, as stated in the response below.

S5: Storytelling makes my class interesting. I love to read and retell the story to the class.
S5: Storytelling motivates me to read more.

The perceived problems in storytelling activity in reading class

Based on the interview result, the students said that problems in storytelling class are often caused by limited time, students' self-confidence, and length of text as stated in the response below.

R: Did you find any difficulties in the implementation of storytelling?
S2: Sometimes, I did not know what to say because I am too shy.
S3: I think the time is too short. I need more time to practice.
S4: It is more difficult to understand if the text is too long.

3.2.5 The roles of the teacher in storytelling activities

Based on the interview result, the students said that the role of the teacher in storytelling class is essential, as stated in the response below.

S1: I like the way my teacher tells the story.
S2: The way the teacher tells the story motivates me to read because I want to tell my own story.
S3: The teacher gives us an example of how to read and tell what we read.

The findings showed that the use of storytelling in reading class helps the students to understand, remember, and use the vocabulary of a certain topic and a specific grammatical structure, in a given story. Storytelling contributes in improving students' reading-comprehension of separate sentences. Time and continued language exposure played an important role in students' progress of decoding a gapped paragraph and filling in the gaps with appropriate words, no matter what teaching methods were used.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed at answering two research questions. The first goal was to explain students' engagement in implementing storytelling in reading class. The field-note observation data showed that storytelling improves students' motivation in reading English stories. They were eager to follow the steps given by the teacher. The activity included showing the students pictures about the story. Since the activity include retelling the story, the interaction between students and teacher are high. The students asked questions to the teacher about the words that they
did not understand, and how to pronounce difficult words. Group activities were also made students excited. They discussed about the stories with their friends with the help from the teacher. The result provides evidence about the students' engagement in storytelling class. The finding is in line with previous studies that can be found in the work of Vu et al. (2020) about students' engagement and participation.

The second research question is to explain the students' perception about the use of storytelling in reading class. Findings from questionnaires and interview confirm that values of storytelling are powerful to transfer belief and attitudes. The result of the questionnaires showed that most students response Agree for the statements related with the use of storytelling in reading class, which means children responded positively to the impact of storytelling on their reading comprehension. Based on the findings of this part, it can be assumed that storytelling supported the children's reading comprehension and motivated them to participate in storytelling activities and express their interests in stories.

The result of the analysis of the student's perception of the effectiveness of storytelling shows that there is two perceived effectiveness of storytelling in reading class. They are improving their reading skills and overcoming reading difficulties. This finding supports the earlier study done by Ngoc Vu et al. (2020) who found that students' reading skills in storytelling class outperformed the other class. It is also found that students responded positively to the storytelling activities. Lucarevschi (2016), and Wajnryb (2003) also explained that storytelling is considered to be an effective instrument to improve students' motivation to learn language.

Based on the interview result, the students said that storytelling could help them improve their reading skills. Reading the stories that the students like hopefully can make the students to love do the right things because it captures students' attention and support. The content and meaning of stories are powerful enough to engage students in the learning process, and to improve their reading skills (Wajnryb, 2003). The same result also found by Yang and Wu (2012) who found that students in storytelling class performed better that other class in four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), and their motivation is improved after being taught using storytelling.

The next finding showed that storytelling could help the students improve their motivation in reading. When the students enjoyed to read and retell the stories to their friends, they develop feelings of relaxation, develop active interaction, verbal skills and understanding as well (Ngoc Vu et al., 2020). Through storytelling, students can enjoy the beauty of courage, love, kindness, and the like. This finding is in line with Wajnryb (2003) also explained that storytelling is considered to be an effective instrument to improve students' motivation to learn the language.

There were some problems faced by the students in storytelling class. The students said that problems in storytelling class are often caused by limited time and students' self-confidence. Another problem is related with the length of text. It is in line with Satriani (2019) who found that some challenges found in implementing storytelling are students' proficiency and length of texts.

The last finding revealed that the role of the teacher in storytelling class is essential for the students to enjoy and follow the activity. The teacher helps the students to stay focused and overall assists students' learning. For the teacher, preparing the storytelling in English class may take a lot of time and effort. However, when the teacher is familiar with the storytelling, it will be joyful for both teacher and students.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the practical implications of this case study, the findings on the students' engagement and their perception of the use of storytelling in improving students' reading comprehension have important implications for second and foreign English teachers, especially for the ones teaching English to young learners. Storytelling activities in reading class help enhance the students’ performance. Young learners need activities that less stressful and can develop their
reading and verbal skills in friendly atmosphere. Due to the fact that elementary students need time to understand and analyze and use the language without thinking much about the rules, the use of storytelling provides learners with language exposure. Storytelling creates a greater impact for young learners because they will remember the vocabulary and meaning in the text. It provides elementary students with language exposure in friendly atmosphere to acquire language. Therefore, storytelling enriches students’ vocabulary, as well as form some habits for foreign language learners. This nurtures learners’ graduation to automaticity in using language and develops their reading comprehension.

Since the study is only focused on reading comprehension, it is recommended that further studies can be extended to other language skills and areas. Another limitation of this research is the small number of participants. It is necessary to conduct the research with more participants in different levels of education.

REFERENCES


