Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool in Thai Higher Education: An Ethnomethodological Study of Lecturers' Practices

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This qualitative study explores how English language lecturers (ELLs) in a Thai university employ storytelling as a pedagogical tool in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. While prior research supports the benefits of storytelling in language learning, a notable gap remains concerning its application and underlying pedagogical principles in higher education EFL settings.

Method. Framed within an ethnomethodological perspective, the study addressed two key questions: (a) What are the storytelling practices of ELLs in a Thai university? and (b) What pedagogical principles underlie such practices? Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations, and the qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Results. Findings revealed recurring storytelling practices, including unlocking vocabulary, using visuals to facilitate comprehension, facilitating dialogic questioning for comprehension and critical engagement, using roleplays for practice, and employing activities that enhance creativity and critical thinking skills.

Conclusions. These practices appeared rooted in pedagogical principles such as vocabulary learning as comprehensible input, images and visuals as optimal input, promoting communicative competence through interaction, roleplays as socially constructive tools for language learning, and fostering creativity and critical thinking through constructivist pedagogy. The study's implications for the strategic and culturally responsive use of storytelling in tertiary EFL instruction is also discussed.
Keywords: storytelling, Thai higher education, ethnomethodology, English as a foreign language (EFL), language teaching strategy

Introduction

Storytelling has long been recognised as a valuable pedagogical tool in language education. Its capacity to enhance learner engagement and provide contextualised language exposure makes it a powerful resource for educators (Mokhtar et al., 2011). In recent years, research has increasingly highlighted the effectiveness of storytelling not only in primary and secondary education but also within various higher education contexts for improving learning outcomes across disciplines (Clarke & Adam, 2012; Sheafer, 2017). The success of storytelling, however, hinges significantly on the educator's ability to facilitate meaningful experiences, underscoring the importance of understanding teachers' specific strategies and perspectives (Alterio & McDrury, 2003).

In Thailand, storytelling has been part of the cultural fabric for generations, with a rich tradition of oral narratives, such as folktales in local dialects (Tossa & Saihong, 2021). Yet, the systematic integration of storytelling into tertiary language instruction remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how language instructors perceive and integrate storytelling into their teaching practices, particularly in the context of Thai higher education. Understanding how English language lecturers (ELLs) view and implement storytelling in their teaching practices can offer valuable insights into the cultural adaptation and effectiveness of this approach in a specific educational context. While much of the existing literature focuses on learner outcomes, there remains a need to understand educators' nuanced pedagogical practices and beliefs, particularly in non-Western EFL settings like Thailand.

By focusing on the day-to-day teaching practices of these educators, this research aims to provide a context-specific understanding of how storytelling is enacted and adapted, as well as the pedagogical principles that guide its implementation. In doing so, this study contributes to the broader conversation on culturally responsive teaching strategies in global English-language education, particularly in Southeast Asian tertiary contexts.

As educational systems evolve in response to technological advancements, shifting societal expectations, and the increasing commodification of languages like English, the pedagogical relevance of storytelling persists across time and context. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how this enduring teaching strategy is adapted in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, especially within higher education institutions where instructional demands are constantly changing. Guided by these considerations, this ethnomethodological study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the storytelling practices of ELLs in a Thai university?
- What pedagogical principles underlie such practices?

By investigating these questions, the study seeks to offer a grounded account of storytelling as perceived and practised by ELLs, thereby illuminating how a time-tested educational approach can be optimised for contemporary language teaching in Thailand's higher education landscape.

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool in Language Learning

The existing literature highlights that traditional and digital storytelling offer numerous benefits for language learners, including improved vocabulary acquisition; enhanced listening, speaking, and writing skills; increased motivation; and cultural understanding (Lucarevschi, 2016; Nair & Yunus, 2021; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022). However, most of these studies have been conducted with young learners or in primary and secondary education settings, leaving a gap in understanding how storytelling is perceived and practised by university-level ELLs. This review also explores educators' perspectives on implementing storytelling in their teaching practices, though further insights are needed to uncover how such pedagogical decisions are made and enacted in tertiary-level classrooms.

The Benefits of Storytelling

Storytelling is seen to be effective in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Studies involving young learners of German (Kirsch, 2016) and English (Kalantari & Hashemian, 2016) as a foreign language found that storytelling activities improve their vocabulary acquisition and the ability to use new words contextually. These studies emphasise the importance of repeated exposure to vocabulary and engagement with terms through a combination of audio and visual materials. Nevertheless, an experiment by Ya-Ling Gao, Fei-yu Wang, and Sy-ying Lee (2023) on the effectiveness of three storytelling approaches showed that vocabulary acquisition through word focus and follow-up activities may fade over time.

The interactive nature of storytelling encourages active participation in language production, fostering a more engaging learning environment. Thus, storytelling is found to enhance students' communicative skills, particularly fluency and confidence in speaking (Mokhtar et al., 2011). Moreover, it improves listening comprehension skills, as shown among Iranian EFL learners exposed to teacher-led storytelling in the study of Fatemeh Hemmati, Zeinab Gholamrezapour, and Gholamreza Hessamy (2015). These studies underscore the crucial role teachers play in providing opportunities for learners to develop these language skills and supporting, especially the less confident and proficient ones (see Domingo, 2021).

Digital storytelling, in which digital tools are used to allow multimedia elements such as video and audio recordings to be added to the narrative, offers additional advantages by incorporating multimodal elements that make learning more interactive and enjoyable. Studies by Amelia Chiew Har Leong, Mohamad Jafre Zainol Abidin, and Jamalsafri Saibon (2019) and Tareq Murad, Jamal Assadi, and Hia Badarni (2023) revealed that digital storytelling significantly enhances vocabulary retention, learner engagement, and speaking skills. The combination of visual, auditory, and textual elements increases motivation and interest in language learning. These findings align with systematic reviews by Claudio Rezende Lucarevschi (2016) and Viknesh Nair and Melor Md Yunus (2021), which consistently report storytelling's positive impact on listening and speaking skills, promoting active listening, improved comprehension, and opportunities for meaningful language production.

Research also shows that digital storytelling improves writing skills. Minoo Alemi, Samira Salmani Givi, and Atefeh Rezanejad (2022) found evidence of improved writing skills and positive attitudes towards writing among young EFL learners after a 10-week digital storytelling course. Similar studies among secondary school students in Malaysia by Mohd Azmi Zakaria and Azlina Abdul Aziz (2019) and Pei Rong Lim and Norah Md Noor (2019) reported the same results. Additionally, digital storytelling has been found to improve sentence organisation in paragraph writing (Syam, 2022) and creative skills (Nassim, 2018).

Digital storytelling not only enhances language skills but also significantly increases learners' motivation and engagement. Studies by Emily Kallinikou and Iolie Nicolaidou (2019) involving adult Russian learners of Greek and Kuo-Ping Liu, Shu-Ju Diana Tai, and Chen-Chung Liu (2018) with Taiwanese elementary students demonstrated the positive impacts of digital storytelling on motivation due to its interactive and creative aspects. A similar project with elementary pupils in extracurricular English lessons showed increased intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement (Abderrahim & Navarro González, 2020).

Finally, storytelling is recognised as an effective tool for promoting cultural understanding and developing intercultural competence (Castro, 2002; Ribeiro, 2016). Kellie Brownlee (2021) emphasised that storytelling not only improves language acquisition but also enhances cultural knowledge, advocating for storytelling workshops

in language classrooms. Learners, such as those studying Chinese as a foreign language (Nguyen et al., 2014), believe storytelling promotes multicultural understanding. However, a study in Turkish classrooms found that culture-themed stories had no significant effect on cultural awareness, suggesting a need to focus more on promoting intercultural awareness through both literary and non-literary texts (Tural & Çubukçu, 2021).

Teachers' Challenges

Despite these benefits, the successful implementation of storytelling in language classrooms depends on how educators perceive and manage the practical realities of this pedagogical approach. Recent research has identified a number of challenges that teachers face in using storytelling effectively. Time constraints and curriculum pressures are often cited as major obstacles, as teachers may struggle to balance storytelling's time-intensive nature with the need to meet syllabus demands (Tsou et al., 2006). Teachers may also lack the training or confidence required to integrate storytelling into their instruction, especially when adapting materials for digital formats (Sauro et al., 2020). Inadequate preparation in teacher education programmes has also been reported among Indonesian pre-service teachers (Ramdayanti et al., 2023). These findings emphasise the necessity for professional development opportunities that build teachers' storytelling competencies.

Story selection poses another difficulty, particularly in multicultural and multilingual contexts. As Sandie Mourao (2009) points out, stories must be both linguistically accessible and cognitively stimulating. Alma Rodriguez (2014) further stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity in selecting content for diverse student populations, including those in Southeast Asia. Technological barriers, such as limited access to digital tools and a lack of technical support, also hinder the integration of digital storytelling in under-resourced settings (Smeda et al., 2014).

Taken together, these findings suggest that while storytelling offers considerable pedagogical value, its implementation is mediated by contextual factors such as teacher training, curriculum structure, technological access, and cultural appropriateness — all of which are critical to understand in specific settings like Thai higher education.

While the reviewed studies offer valuable insights into the benefits of storytelling across various contexts and age groups, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on higher education settings, particularly within EFL contexts such as Thailand. Most existing work centres on young or elementary learners, with limited attention to university-level students and the specific pedagogical dynamics involved in tertiary language instruction. This gap highlights the need for studies that examine how storytelling strategies are effectively adapted and applied in Thai higher education institutions to support EFL learners' language and communication development.

Method

This investigation employed a qualitative design to explore how the participants utilise storytelling as a pedagogical tool in their English classrooms. Framed within ethnomethodology, the study focused on understanding the views and classroom practices of university-level ELLs in Thailand, particularly how they implement storytelling in an EFL context. Ethnomethodology provides a lens for examining how individuals make sense of their social world by analysing routine actions and interactions within their specific institutional settings (Linstead, 2006).

Participants

Three ELLs were purposively invited to participate in in-depth interviews. They were selected based on the following criteria: currently teaching English courses at a Thai university, incorporating storytelling in their classes, and being willing to participate in both interviews and classroom observations. All three participants were actively teaching during the semester in which data collection occurred, enabling them to provide detailed and contextually relevant insights into their storytelling practices. Their ongoing engagement with Thai higher education allowed them to reflect directly on their classroom experiences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection.

Data Collection

One of the two data sources for this study was the interviews with the participants. These interviews aimed to explore how ELLs used storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Each participant took part in a recorded English language one-on-one Zoom interview with the first author, lasting between forty and fifty minutes. After the interviews, the third author transcribed the recordings, and the transcripts were returned to the participants for accuracy verification. To ensure data completeness and accuracy, the second author cross-checked the interview transcripts against the video recordings.

The second source of data was classroom observation. Three English classes conducted by the interviewed ELLs were visited, observed, and video-recorded by the first and third authors. Each class lasted approximately ninety minutes. The second author later reviewed the video recordings and validated the observation notes taken by the first and third authors during the sessions. In line with the study's ethnomethodological framework, the classroom observations aimed to provide insight into how storytelling was enacted in authentic teaching environments. These observations also served to corroborate the practices described by the participants during their interviews.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the host university's Ethics Committee [with Approval number: WUEC-24-365-01]. The data from the interviews and the classroom observations were examined for thematic analysis.

Analysis

The analysis was guided by ethnomethodology, which was described as an approach to understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday actions and behaviour (Hancock et al., 2016). Data from interviews and observations, in the forms of verbatim transcriptions and notes respectively, were analysed thematically following the six-phase framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006).

To familiarise themselves with the data, the authors read and reread the transcripts and observation notes. Initial coding focused on identifying significant features related to the research questions. As patterns began to emerge, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Relevant excerpts from the interviews and classroom observations were also selected to illustrate these categories. The coded data was then reviewed to identify recurring themes and meaningful patterns. Connections, contrasts, and overlaps across the data sets were analysed to deepen thematic interpretation. Themes were developed to capture the central ideas represented in the data and were refined to ensure alignment with the study's aims. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions, and the findings' implications were discussed. Throughout the process, the anonymity of participants was strictly maintained.

ELLs' Storytelling Practices

The thematic analysis of interview data and classroom observations revealed five prominent categories of storytelling practices employed by the participating ELLs. These practices are: unlocking vocabulary, using visuals to facilitate comprehension, facilitating discussion through questions, utilising roleplays, and employing activities to enhance creativity and critical thinking skills.

Unlocking Vocabulary

The most common practice ELLs employ in storytelling-based English classes is the presentation of relevant concepts and vocabulary in the story, including their pronunciation. As part of the warm-up activities, introducing difficult words is a scaffolding technique that prepares learners for the story. For example, ELL3 said his classes begin with

the "unlocking of difficulties" by making students pronounce the words and defining them using simpler terms for easier understanding.

> I do vocabulary-building activities. I start with the vocabulary: we read the story, then highlight some words displayed on the projector. From there, we can practice those words and their pronunciation. I give synonyms or antonyms of the words they've highlighted to ensure that they understand them.

Beyond defining and pronouncing words, ELLs also emphasise using them appropriately in context. This is typically done by asking students to use the words in sentences. ELL1 said this about the initial stages of his classes: "For the first session, I let them write sentences using the new vocabulary and speak them aloud. They need to listen to me, talk to me, and then write".

The focus on vocabulary presentation and mastery was evident in the classes observed. For instance, ELL3's class began with the introduction of target words via a projected screen. Students were engaged in pronunciation practice and definitions using simple language, and were asked to find the dictionary meanings of the words.

> The teacher introduced words from the text through PowerPoint slides. He asked students to repeat pronouncing the words. He explained their meanings by connecting them to students' prior knowledge and gave them five minutes to find their meaning using their devices. (Notes from Class Observation 3)

Presenting and defining the words do not always occur before storytelling; it can also happen during the storytelling process. For example, ELL2 read the story aloud using projected slides and paused to discuss target vocabulary. He supported their understanding by using gestures and providing Thai translations when necessary.

> The teacher read each line while projecting pictures and paused to highlight target vocabulary, asking students to pronounce the word. For example, he asked them to say "hungry" and asked, "What is hungry?" He continued reading and used gestures, such as cupping his ear when the word 'heard' came up. He also switched to Thai to explain difficult words. (Notes from Class Observation 2)

Analysis shows that ELLs tend to present vocabulary and conduct pronunciation drills either before or during the storytelling process. The data suggests that incorporating vocabulary activities into storytelling-based lessons ensures that students are well-prepared to engage with the story, comprehend it more effectively, and apply new words in practical ways.

Using Visuals to Facilitate Comprehension

The participants emphasised that using visuals, such as images, pictures, and drawings, help facilitate vocabulary and narrative comprehension. Presented either before

or during storytelling, visuals play an important role in keeping students attentive and interested. ELL1, who uses pictures to support vocabulary teaching, described his practice: "For 'altar,' I show them pictures of the Latin American altar in the story and altars in [Country X] so the students can compare".

Moreover, ELL1 utilises pictures on a projected presentation during the reading of the story. Coupled with facial expressions and gestures, visuals keep students engaged and improve comprehension. ELL1 continued:

> For example, in the story "The Boy and the Apple Tree", I told the students, "This is a trunk; this is an apple. The boy was sad," and I showed a sad face. "The tree was happy", so I showed a happy face.

ELL3 employs the same technique and ensures that his approach and the visuals are appropriate for the students, highlighting the need to constantly adapt instructional materials to the learners' needs and background. He said:

> We use pictures for them to easily understand the story. The way I teach the students would also vary depending on their level because some classes have higher levels of English proficiency. So, the way I deliver the story to them would really vary.

Allowing students to draw pictures related to words learned or story is another activity ELLs employ. For ELL2, this task creates a connection between students and the story being discussed. He explained:

> Drawing their own pictures helps create a connection with the story, the vocabulary, or the sentence, which encourages retention. Once students know a word or concept like climbing an apple tree, I ask them to draw a boy climbing an apple tree. The words "boy", "climb", "apple", and "tree" are mostly retained here because they draw them from their own imagination. This connection creates retention as they just make those words theirs by creating their visualised version of them.

Evidently, the ELLs used visuals, including students' clothing, in the classes observed, reflecting the practices they had described in the interviews. Adequate time was allotted for this part of the lesson to ensure students' comprehension. The teacher asked students to go to the front of the room and asked others to describe their clothing using target vocabulary, such as "simple", "plain", and "striped". (Notes from Class Observation 1). The ELL used projected pictures representing the target vocabulary (e.g., mountains, barrel, etc.) and asked students about them. (Notes from Class Observation 3)

The lecturers' narratives and classes suggest that utilising visuals and having students draw pictures prior to and during storytelling enhances its educational impact by promoting cognitive and emotional growth. It also makes the learning process more memorable, inclusive, and engaging. This strategy supports the idea that "a picture is truly worth a thousand words for students who struggle with reading comprehension" (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003, p. 758).

Facilitating Dialogic Questioning for Comprehension and Critical Engagement

Another common practice the ELLs perform during and after telling a story is asking comprehension questions. These questions are directed at either individual students or the class as a whole. Throughout the reading of a story, students are asked inference questions to keep them engaged and curious. ELL3 uses such questions to enhance students' understanding of the story:

> I ask follow-up questions, like 'One day this boy went to the market. Oh where did the boy go?' I keep asking questions, but I don't individually ask the students — I ask them as a whole so that they still feel comfortable. But I also answer them myself. Asking questions…enhances their comprehension.

Similarly, ELL1 asks inference questions throughout the storytelling process. He also encourages students to provide endings to open-ended stories. Additionally, he asks evaluative questions to promote critical thinking and reflection on values. ELL1 said: "I do ask comprehension questions regarding the story and other possibilities. Some of the stories do not have an ending, so I ask, 'How would you like this story to end?' or 'What do you think about this character?'"

Another type of question asked after storytelling involves identifying the moral. Teachers may directly ask students what values they learned or guide them through leading and follow-up questions. ELL2 shared that he focuses on the story's moral: "I ask questions for them to identify the moral of the story. If they can identify it, then I can say that they have an idea of what the story is about."

During classroom observations, the ELLs consistently asked various questions before, during, and after storytelling and kept students engaged. In particular, ELL3's class began with a review of the previous story through questions and guided responses: "The teacher reviewed the previous story by asking students questions and letting them finish his sentences. The summary ended with a recall of the story's moral." (Notes from Class Observation 3)

After the review session, ELL3 introduced a new story and target vocabulary using a PowerPoint presentation with pictures and asked students questions about the words. He then presented questions to be answered after reading. Inference and comprehension questions were asked throughout and after the reading session. The students remained participative and attentive, even though the lecturer answered most of the questions himself:

> The teacher read the story from projected slides and kept asking questions. Students were participative, and the lecturer was active and entertaining, often taking breaks to crack a joke, modifying his voice, and acting out events. After reading, he asked what they learned, but he discussed it himself. Then, he went over the comprehension questions but answered most of them. (Notes from Class Observation 3)

Asking comprehension questions allowed the ELLs to generate ideas from the students. This practice gives the latter more opportunities to use the target language in the classroom.

Using Roleplays for Practice

Roleplaying is a common technique ELLs employ after storytelling. This activity serves multiple purposes and allows for deeper engagement with the story. One notable objective of roleplay is to assess students' understanding. For instance, ELL3 mentioned that roleplaying allows him to measure how well the students understand the story on their own, a strategy he considers more beneficial than simply presenting it. "Roleplay is a kind of assessment to show if they really understand the story... It's better than just listening to me teach the class. With roleplay, it keeps them active and gives them the chance to practice the language more."

More than checking comprehension, it is clear that roleplaying activities are a fun opportunity for students to use English. Using the roleplaying technique, ELL2 said that students are required to use English not only during the presentation but also during planning. For him, students communicating in English is "the most rewarding part."

> The point of roleplay is to make sure the students are active while learning. Students negotiate with their groupmates who will play which role, what to change, and what to keep. All negotiations are in English. These are all important because it is not really about the final presentation, but rather the journey leading up to it. So, for them to be active and use English is the most rewarding part.

Besides using as a form of assessment and an avenue to use English, roleplays also encourage student participation and develop skills like time management, creativity, and confidence. To illustrate, ELL1 had this to say about how valuable roleplaying is as a post-storytelling activity: "I realised that roleplay makes them very active and more engaged. First, they need to present in class using English. So that is already a challenge…They make the dialogues and perform…Sometimes they need to improvise."

In a class observed, the ELL, after presenting the story, instructed the class to work in groups and prepare for a roleplaying activity. Notably, he asked them to present not the plot of the story but a personal experience related to its theme. Throughout the activity, the ELL was guiding the class by giving an example and walking around to assist.

> The teacher asked students to work in groups of 2 or 3 to write a story about a time they completed something with other people. They were asked to do a roleplay on this topic. As an example, he told a story about the time he helped his friends study English, and then they all got good marks. The groups started discussing while the teacher walked around asking questions to assist students. (Notes from Class Observation 2)

Subsequently, each group presented their plan in class, with the ELL repeating their statements for the class to hear and asking probing questions. When all the groups finished sharing, he presented the details of the video-recorded roleplaying project.

> The teacher asked each group to share their story. He listened attentively, repeated what each student said for the entire class, and asked questions. After all groups finished, the teacher discussed the mechanics of the roleplaying project. He encouraged them to narrate their stories clearly by pronouncing words correctly and using appropriate diction. (Notes from Class Observation 2)

Roleplay activities are viewed as an important element in storytelling-based English lessons. The narratives and practices of the participants above show how this strategy makes students' experiences in the classroom setting more interactive and meaningful, and allows them to develop their confidence, linguistic, and organisational skills.

Employing Activities That Enhance Creativity and Critical Thinking Skills

Finally, the participants described various post-storytelling activities that develop creativity and critical thinking. One such activity is asking evaluative questions to elicit reflections and realisations. A question that effectively captures this purpose focuses on making analogies between themselves and the characters in the story. ELL3 said he would ask a question which students must answer in order to leave the classroom:

> I love to incorporate a little bit of creativity and critical thinking in my class. It's very important. For critical thinking, I ask simple questions that could help them think a bit and share their opinion, realisations, or compare themselves with the characters. They can share it with their friends and in class. Sometimes, I use these activities as exit tickets for them.

To bring out students' creativity, ELL3 asks them to visualise and immerse themselves in the story. Through this, ELL3 claimed the story is made more memorable. Likewise, ELL2 makes students modify the story's outcome and add their own "cultural twist," allowing them to activate their prior knowledge and experiences. Doing so is said to improve retention and motivation to "make it their own." ELL2 shared:

> By changing the outcome, they are adding their own cultural twist to the story using their own experience. This creates retention because they modify the story to fit their own narrative. It becomes more relatable to the students even if some stories are very Western. I believe most stories in the book we use are foreign. It would be nice if there was a Thai or Southeast Asian story in there. Students add local characters to their own stories such as farmers, mythical snakes, or Thai ghosts. This becomes one of the best parts of storytelling because now there is motivation to make it their own.

For open-ended stories, a similar activity in which students come up with their personal take on how a story ends is said to capture their imagination and critical thinking. ELL1 recounted an instance when a story discussed did not have a clear ending, so he asked his students to write their version of its ending using English. "'Without a Tie' didn't have a proper ending, so I let the students imagine their own ending and write it down in their own words".

In one of the observed classes, the ELL employed this technique as a post-storytelling task. After giving instructions, he helped students and encouraged them to think critically without relying on their mobile devices.

> The teacher asked students to "finish the story," discouraging them from using their mobile phones. He went around assisting students who had questions, asked leading questions and encouraged them to "use your imagination." The teacher gave plenty of time for the students to finish the story. (Notes from Class Observation 1)

At the end of the lesson, the ELL discussed the plans for the succeeding lesson. He instructed the class to prepare a presentation of their versions of the story's ending using digital applications like Canva. Moreover, the students were reminded not to use a translator to complete the task. The ELLs' use of activities that encourage creativity and critical thinking skills allows students to question, infer, and interpret underlying themes and messages in stories. The current study suggests that allowing these skills to be developed through the activities discussed above enriches the learning experience and prepares students for effective communication.

Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the storytelling practices of ELLs in a Thai university and the pedagogical principles underpinning these practices. The findings reveal a multifaceted approach to using storytelling, moving beyond mere narrative delivery to encompass a range of interactive and cognitively engaging techniques. The results also indicate that ELLs employ a consistent set of five core practices.

The first practice is unlocking vocabulary that involves pre-teaching or contextual clarification of key lexical items to ensure comprehension. This aligns with previous studies that emphasise vocabulary development through storytelling (Kirsch, 2016; Kalantari & Hashemian, 2016). Second, the participants utilised visuals such as images, gestures, and student drawings to aid understanding and engagement, supporting Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson's (2003) assertion about the power of visuals in comprehension. The practice of students drawing their own visuals (ELL2) suggests a deeper, more personalised engagement. Third, the participants facilitated discussion through questions. Varied questioning techniques were used before, during, and after storytelling to check comprehension, stimulate inference, and encour-

age critical reflection, reflecting the interactive nature of effective language pedagogy (Richards, 2006).

The fourth practice, on the other hand, involves the use of roleplay, which served as a tool for comprehension assessment and, importantly, as an opportunity for authentic language use during preparation and performance (Mokhtar et al., 2011), with ELL2 highlighting the value of student negotiation in English. And lastly, the participants employed activities that enhance creativity and critical thinking skills. Tasks such as modifying story endings or adding cultural elements (as in ELL2's "cultural twist") aimed to develop higher-order thinking skills, allowing students to personalise content and connect it to their own cultural context (Nassim, 2018; Tossa & Saihong, 2021). These practices demonstrate that storytelling in this context is an active, learner-involved process.

Pedagogical Principles Underlying Storytelling Practices

The observed and reported practices suggest an adherence to several key pedagogical principles, even if not always explicitly articulated by the lecturers.

Vocabulary Learning as Comprehensible Input

Stephen D. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis serves as a foundational pedagogical principle in the way lecturers incorporate vocabulary learning and drills as warm-up activities before introducing a story. These preliminary exercises are designed to familiarise students with key vocabulary, thereby increasing their ability to understand the story content. This approach aligns closely with the Input Hypothesis, which asserts that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to input that is comprehensible to them. As one participant described, these activities often involve practising correct pronunciation, as well as exploring synonyms and antonyms to deepen understanding and ease the processing of new vocabulary.

This focus on vocabulary enhancement as a means to facilitate comprehension is further supported by Krashen et al. (2018), who introduced the concept of Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS). CAs involves the intentional selection and clarification of challenging vocabulary words during storytelling, enabling learners to better grasp the content in real time. This method emphasises the importance of scaffolding language input to match learners' current proficiency levels, thereby maximising their engagement and comprehension.

Moreover, the significance of vocabulary instruction through storytelling is echoed by Michael D. Coyne et al. (2004), who argue that storybook reading offers a rich context for language and vocabulary development. Storybooks not only present opportunities for interactive discussion using decontextualised language, a factor high-

lighted by Catherine E. Snow (1991), but also expose learners to a wider and more sophisticated range of vocabulary than typical spoken language, as noted by Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich (1998). These findings collectively underscore the pedagogical value of storytelling and vocabulary-focused activities in supporting language learners' development.

Images and Visuals as Optimal Input

The use of images and visuals emerged as a key strategy among ELLs to facilitate student comprehension during storytelling activities. For instance, one participant (ELL2) highlighted that encouraging students to draw pictures helps them connect more deeply with the story, thereby enhancing their engagement and understanding. This pedagogical approach reflects the principles of Krashen and Beniko Mason's (2020) Optimal Input Hypothesis (OIH), which posits that language acquisition is most effective when learners are exposed to input that is not only comprehensible but also compelling and rich in meaning.

Krashen and Mason (2020) argue that mere comprehensibility is insufficient; optimal input must support subconscious language acquisition and be tailored to the learner's proficiency level. According to the hypothesis, language is acquired through input rather than output, emphasising the value of meaningful exposure over forced production. The incorporation of visuals, such as illustrations, drawings, and images, serves this function by making abstract language more accessible and aiding learners in constructing meaning from the context. This is especially beneficial for learners with lower proficiency, as visuals help bridge gaps in understanding and provide concrete representations of new vocabulary and concepts (Krashen et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of visual aids in enhancing comprehension is further supported by Anne Nielsen Hibbing and Joan L. Rankin-Erickson (2003), who assert that images assist in processing and retaining information by offering contextual clues to the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. The current findings from participant reflections align with these theoretical insights, suggesting that the strategic use of visuals plays a significant role in promoting natural language acquisition in adult learners. Reinforcing understanding through multimodal input, visuals not only complement oral storytelling but also fulfil the criteria for optimal input outlined in contemporary second language acquisition research.

Asking Questions for Communicative Engagement

The strategic use of questions before, during, and after storytelling emerged as a recurring instructional practice among ELLs. One participant, ELL1, emphasised integrating thought-provoking questions to encourage students to think creatively and critically. This approach aligns with Jack C. Richards' (2006) core assumptions

of *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT), which emphasise the importance of classroom interaction and meaningful communication in second language acquisition.

Comprehension and inferencing questioning serve multiple pedagogical functions, particularly in fostering learner-centred environments. As Richards (2006) noted, second language development is significantly enhanced when learners actively engage in interactive and communicative tasks. Through the use of questions, ELLs facilitate meaningful discussion, promote negotiation of meaning, and create opportunities for authentic language use--principles central to the CLT framework.

The practice is further supported by Rod Ellis (1999), who describes CLT as promoting learner autonomy and responsibility in language learning. By encouraging students to engage with content through questioning, educators empower learners to participate actively in constructing their understanding. Similarly, William Thomas Littlewood (2018) underscores the critical role of student engagement in successful language instruction, stating that the level of student involvement can determine the success of even the most well-planned lesson.

In this context, questions function not only as assessment tools but also as catalysts for communicative interaction. They encourage learners to notice linguistic forms, expand vocabulary, and practice constructing meaningful sentences, all of which contribute to the development of communicative competence. The findings of this study affirm that such practices are instrumental in creating dynamic, interaction-rich classrooms, consistent with the aims of communicative pedagogy.

Roleplays as Socially Constructive Tools for Language Learning

The findings of the study indicate that roleplays were strategically employed to assess students' comprehension of narrative content. For example, ELL3 assigned roleplay tasks to his students to evaluate how effectively they understood the stories presented in class. This method proved particularly beneficial in EFL settings, as it fosters an immersive and interactive learning environment where students engage in meaningful language use.

The pedagogical value of roleplays is strongly supported by Lev Semonovich Vygotsky's (1978) *Sociocultural Theory* (SCT), which emphasises learning as a fundamentally social process. Within this framework, language is viewed as a mediational tool that facilitates interaction and cognitive development. Roleplays align with SCT by encouraging student collaboration and active engagement through dialogue, thereby creating opportunities for scaffolding or temporary support structures that guide learners toward greater independence. In this way, roleplays transform the classroom into a socially constructed learning space where students practice language in authentic, communicative scenarios.

Kristian Tylén et al. (2010) also reinforce this view, asserting that language functions as a flexible tool for coordinating social interaction across various everyday contexts.

In the EFL classroom, roleplays operationalise this perspective by promoting real-time language use and collaborative meaning-making. As students enact assigned characters and scenarios, they are not only practising speaking skills but are also engaging in deeper cognitive and social processes central to language acquisition.

Furthermore, the implementation of scaffolding within roleplays was evident in the participants' instructional strategies. Initially, students received guidance through modelling, prompts, or questioning — techniques described by C. Addison Stone (1993) as core components of effective scaffolding. As learners gained confidence and competence, these supports were gradually withdrawn, aligning with Vygotskian principles that advocate for the gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner.

Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking Through Constructivist Pedagogy

The findings of the study demonstrate that ELL1 effectively integrated classroom activities designed to foster creativity and critical thinking, encouraging students to question, infer, and actively engage with the lesson content. These practices enrich the learning experience and equip students with problem-solving and communication skills, aligning closely with the principles of *Constructivist Learning Theory* (ConLT).

Constructivism emphasises that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge through personal experiences and reflection. Szufang Chuang (2021) explains that constructivist learning is naturally cumulative and experiential, promoting hands-on activities that enhance learner engagement and retention. This approach positions students as self-directed participants in the learning process, while the instructor serves as a facilitator or mentor. Linda V. Coupal (2004) adds that activities involving judgment, synthesis, and meaning-making enable learners to actively participate in identifying and solving problems, thus deepening their engagement and cognitive involvement.

This pedagogical perspective is further evidenced in ELL2's classroom practices. To deepen student immersion and understanding of story content, ELL2 employed a creativity-eliciting task that allowed both him and his students to visualise and emotionally connect with the narrative. By posing thought-provoking questions, ELL2 encouraged learners to think beyond conventional responses and construct original characters, settings, and plots. Such practices not only activated creative expression but also strengthened students' interpretative and analytical skills.

Moreover, ELL3's use of reflective and analogical questioning, such as prompting students to draw parallels between themselves and fictional characters, served as a catalyst for critical thinking. This strategy aligns with Chuang's (2021) view that constructivist learning involves constructing and acquiring knowledge through lived experiences. It also resonates with Richard A. Swanson and Elwood F. Holton's (2009)

assertion that learning is an internal process in which individuals actively build and reshape their perception of reality based on prior knowledge.

The lecturers' practices, therefore, are not isolated techniques but are interwoven with established theories of language acquisition and learning. The emphasis on making input comprehensible and engaging (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Mason, 2020), fostering interaction (Richards, 2006), enabling social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978), and promoting active, reflective learning (Chuang, 2021) are all evident. The adaptation of stories with local cultural elements (ELL2) also points towards culturally responsive teaching (Tossa & Saihong, 2021), making learning more relevant.

Conclusions

This study examined the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool by English lecturers in a Thai university, addressing a significant gap in the literature regarding how storytelling is conceptualised and implemented in higher education EFL contexts. While much existing research centres on storytelling's benefits for young or early-stage learners, this study contributes to a growing body of work that affirms its pedagogical value at the post-secondary level, particularly when adapted thoughtfully by instructors and paired with purposeful instructional strategies.

Guided by ethnomethodology and drawing on data from interviews and classroom observations, the analysis revealed that participants employed storytelling in varied and intentional ways, including vocabulary scaffolding, integrating visuals, using comprehension and evaluative questioning, roleplaying, and creativity-focused tasks. These are all grounded in pedagogical principles such as experiential learning and social interaction.

The findings underscore that storytelling, when properly executed and paired with carefully selected and culturally resonant texts, can be a highly effective instructional strategy in higher education. It moves beyond its commonly perceived role as a tool for young learners and instead serves as a powerful method for engaging adult EFL students in authentic communication, critical thinking, and reflective learning. Within the Thai university context, storytelling not only enhanced language acquisition but also encouraged active participation, motivation, and personalised expression. This addresses common challenges such as passive learning and language anxiety.

Implications

Implications for language teaching in higher education settings are significant. Storytelling offers a flexible, culturally adaptable framework that can be tailored to learners' specific needs and backgrounds. In Thai classrooms, it enabled instruc-

tors to bridge the gap between prescribed curricula and meaningful, learner-centred instruction. This approach can be replicated in similar EFL contexts where traditional, lecture-driven models still dominate, particularly in Southeast Asia and other multilingual environments. By training educators to use storytelling intentionally through appropriate text selection, scaffolding strategies, and context-aware adaptations, institutions can foster deeper engagement, linguistic competence, and academic confidence among adult language learners.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As a qualitative investigation, the findings are based on the narratives and classroom observations of the selected ELLs as participants, which aimed at understanding the meaning behind their practices. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to all ELLs in Thailand or other contexts. The study relied on self-reported data from interviews and researcher observations, and lecturer perspectives on their underlying principles were largely inferred from their practices rather than explicitly stated theoretical commitments. Future research with larger, more diverse samples and potentially incorporating methods like stimulated recall interviews could provide further validation and deeper insights into lecturers' pedagogical reasoning.

In sum, storytelling should not be seen as a pedagogical strategy reserved for early education, but rather as a dynamic, research-backed approach that enriches language instruction at the university level. As global education systems continue to seek more inclusive, communicative, and culturally responsive teaching methods, storytelling presents a compelling model: one that transforms the classroom into a space for language development, critical inquiry, and personal connection.

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