

## Teaching English Pronunciation through Storytelling Approach: *The Case of the First Year EFL Students at Saida University*

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**Abstract:** To improve the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language, teachers can use myriads of pedagogical tools such as poems, idioms, proverbs, and stories to provide learners with the opportunity to build a cultural knowledge of the target language and gain fruitful results. Indeed, storytelling can be taken as a funny source of information for pupils in middle and secondary schools and even at the university level for EFL learners since giving much importance to the traditional teaching of pronunciation and grammar rules makes the learning process boring. At this stage, learners need to know more about the culture of the foreign language and how to develop their four linguistic skills, mainly speaking and listening. To this vein, the rationale of the current research paper is to explore teachers' and students' attitudes towards the use of storytelling approach in teaching the English language. Ultimately, another concern of this research paper is to promote an inkle eye on whether the use of storytelling is beneficial in creating an enjoyable atmosphere, improving the four linguistic skills, mainly pronunciation and developing the students' cultural awareness of the target language or not. To fulfil this claim, this research work gives an in-depth look on teaching by using a storytelling-based approach through approaching a systematic analysis based on a questionnaire, an interview and a test. The researcher selected 80 EFL students from the first-year level at Saida University. To this end, the findings revealed that both teachers and students believe that the introduction of storytelling in learning a foreign language may improve their vocabulary acquisition and understanding of the cultural dimensions between the target language and their own. The analysis showed that students have improved their pronunciation of some English vowels and consonants. The results also demonstrated that through practical sessions students enjoy learning English pronunciation.

**Keywords:** Storytelling based approach, Cultural dimensions, English pronunciation, First year EFL students, Phonetics, Saida University

### Introduction

Storytelling is seen as the oldest way of teaching children how to behave in real-life situations; for this reason, it is regarded as a suitable way for communication. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the use of storytelling technique helps the learners to develop their linguistic competences. More importantly, studies have shown that children who read stories are regarded as natural language learners (Krashen, 1981). Researchers tend to adopt the approach to teaching English for EFL learners. Among the scholars who employ this approach in language teaching, there is Hemenover (2003) who finds that this technique decreases the learners' stress and changes the learning/teaching environment where the students are more motivated and share positive attitudes towards group interaction.

In the light of this tight, the present study pursues to prove that storytelling technique can be adopted as an approach in teaching foreign languages, mainly in teaching English pronunciation. It also intends to show that this technique can create an appropriate atmosphere for learning foreign languages. Besides, it attempts to reveal that storytelling helps in developing

the speaking skills of EFL learners and reduce their pronunciation errors by checking the learners' ability to produce some vowels and consonants. In this regard, the following research questions sprang from the previous objectives:

1. Does storytelling approach help to improve EFL learners' English vocabulary knowledge?
2. Can storytelling approach make EFL learners more interested in learning English?
3. How can storytelling approach help the learners to develop their pronunciation?

To answer these research questions, the following research hypotheses are set as follows:

1. Storytelling improves the vocabulary knowledge of the learners.
2. It raises their participation, motivation, and language production.
3. Through listening and speaking, students can develop their pronunciation.

Hence, the researcher seeks to prove that storytelling is of eminent importance for EFL learners to develop not only the listening skill but also their pronunciation. Another motivating factor to conduct the study is that there is a lack of studies that explore the impact of storytelling on developing students' pronunciation i.e., these conducted studies did not mention which area of pronunciation is improved. Through this study, the researcher aimed to provide a roadmap for other studies to use storytelling in improving English pronunciation.

## I. Literature Review

### A. Storytelling and English Pronunciation

Storytelling approach is an old method which was employed for entertainment. The approach also attracts teachers to use as pedagogical support, mainly in teaching children. A bunch of scholarly investigation sheds light on the impact of the approach in the EFL context. Some scholars found that the approach is effective in vocabulary enhancement, while others showed its importance in developing writing and speaking skills. Few studies were interested in how to use the approach to improve pronunciation skills. In this vein, Atta-Alla (2012) highlighted that this approach motivates students to work funnily; henceforth, it may raise their interest in listening, reading, and speaking. Similarly, Norman (2011) observed that the approach is useful since it can develop the learners' speaking ability (pronunciation), vocabulary acquisition, and grammar. However, these studies did not dig deeper into the issue of how the approach can improve students' pronunciation. Hence, this literature gap will be addressed through this research paper.

Before shedding light on the use of storytelling in teaching English pronunciation, it is important to present some studies that explored its use to raise EFL learners' motivation and engagement since when people want to learn a language, the most difficult step is to develop the speaking skills (Kallinikou & Nicilaidou, 2019).

Researchers tend to use different types of stories in teaching foreign languages such as fables, folktales, and fairytales. In his part, Hsu (2010) conducted a study through which he found that the students not only benefit from listening to the stories and enhancing their listening but they also get the habit to retell the stories and use the vocabulary they acquire from these stories. A similar study was conducted by Zare-Behatash, Saed, and Sajidi (2016) on the use of storytelling to boost students' speaking skills. The study comes to the point that the use of

storytelling is better than the traditional mode of teaching. For this reason, most studies remain surface studies since they lack methodological consistency. They did not provide enough details about the tasks or the tests used to develop the speaking skills. Another study was conducted by Motallebi and Pourgharib (2013). The researchers tend to use audio-stories to improve the students' pronunciation. The results received from the study proved that students can improve their pronunciation by listening and repeating. The study also found that the approach motivates students to learn pronunciation.

### **B. Digital Storytelling and English Pronunciation**

Media tools play an important place in raising students' motivation and making the learning of pronunciation an enjoyable process. In comparison to storytelling, digital storytelling provides a more enjoyable and engaging atmosphere since it depends on visual aids. Scholars like Frazer (2010) averred that media provide repeatable sources that allow the student to repeat, listen, and practice. In his part, Hidayati (2016) maintained that the use of the audio-lingual method helps students to develop the listening and speaking skills and henceforth improving their pronunciation. Like the use of storytelling to teach pronunciation, digital storytelling proved its effectiveness in helping students to improve their pronunciation. The findings of these studies were also surface since they did not provide more detailed findings, techniques or even suggested activities that other researchers or teachers can use for further investigation.

### **C. Developing Listening Skills through Storytelling**

It is also important to present some studies about the impact of storytelling on developing students' listening skills since the two skills i.e., speaking and listening are intertwined. Unlike studies on developing speaking, mainly pronunciation, a bunch of scholarly investigations tackled how storytelling can develop listening skills. In their part, Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) investigated the effectiveness of digital storytelling in improving Spanish EFL learners' speaking skills (Agun, 2018). The results revealed that the use of storytelling is more effective than activities. Verdugo and Belmonte posited that the exposure of students to stories, mainly through digital storytelling approach helps in developing their listening skills. These results attract more scholars to investigate the issue. A more recent study was conducted by Skhela (2010) who claimed that the use of digital storytelling helps learners to develop their listening abilities since most of the students, who were involved in the experiment, were able to summarize the stories.

Many studies highlighted that students can benefit from the approach to improve their listening skills. Through listening to stories, students can create an image in their brain that helps them to imagine. Henceforth, this may encourage them to express what they have heard using the vocabulary which they have learnt. In line with this idea, Hamilton and Weiss (2005) maintained that:

When the listener listens to a story, their brains will be connected to operate, control, and access the information of every social experience and object in the form of a story. Therefore, students can develop their cognitive, social, and emotional by participating in the process of storytelling. (As cited in Agun, 2018, p. 24)

Exploring how storytelling can develop listening skills is not the focus of the paper. As the field of speaking, there are many conducted studies on how storytelling can be used to improve listening skills. However, these studies did not recommend any solutions or techniques on how to use the approach.

#### D. Teaching and Learning English Pronunciation in the Algerian Context

Learning English pronunciation in the English process is done through a phonetics module, which provides phonetic rules and practice to improve the student's speaking skills. However, Algerian EFL students, as many Arab EFL students, struggle in applying some rules, mainly those linked to the use of stress and intonation due to the huge differences between the use of Arabic and English stress and intonation. The impact of the mother tongue has also a part in the learning process. According to Carter and Nunan (2001), Arab EFL learners face difficulties in learning certain English vowels since they do not exist in their mother tongue, mainly /π/, /Ϟ/, /N/. Sharing the same view, O'Connor (1989) claimed that most EFL learners tend to search for sounds which are closer to those that exist in their mother tongue such as /τ/ instead of /T/ or /δ/ instead of /Δ/.

EFL learners also have difficulties in distinguishing English vowels. In his part, Power (2003) highlighted that EFL learners make 23 pronunciation problems. Some of these are linked to the difference between /I/ and /ι̇/ and /□/ and /□̇/ or /□/ and /↔Y/ or /Θ/ and /εI/ (Ghounane, 2018). In his part, Cruttenden (2008) observed that students are confused in using English vowels to the complex nature of the English vowel system and its consistency with pronunciation. In this regards, Hassan (2014) provided good examples of English pronunciation inconsistency as follows:

If we take for instance 'o' in some words like some, move, home, women, women, in each word it has different pronunciation of such words will also face difficulties. On the other hand words such as a book, butcher, could, wolf etc in all these words the letter oo, u, ou, o are all pronounced the same /υ̇/, so in the first example we have same letters with a different pronunciation, and in the other one we have different letters with the same pronunciation. (p. 35)

Ghounane (2018) reported in a study conducted to explore Algerian EFL students' difficulties in learning English pronunciation. She added that learning English pronunciation is also affected by the accent's use; for this reason, EFL learners find difficulties in learning how to pronounce consonants and vowels. Another important feature that the EFL learner finds it difficult to learn according to Ghounane (2018) is the recognition of silent letters.

Linking, elision and assimilation are also difficult to learn due to their rules. Ghounane (2018) highlighted that EFL learners find difficulties in learning and applying the rules of connected speech. Another important reason is that time allocated for learning English pronunciation is not enough for both theory and practice. Another important reason is that the teaching approaches used are old-fashioned and traditional. Teachers' resistance to change is the first reason since they always favour the same teaching approaches.

The current study endeavours to address the gap existing in the literature and studies related to investigating the use of storytelling in improving students' pronunciation. It also aims to shed light on the status of teaching English pronunciation in the Algerian context; henceforth addressing another literature gap concerning studies that explored the teaching approaches and difficulties as far as the teaching of English pronunciation in the Algerian EFL context is concerned.

## II. Methodology

This study aims to shed light on how storytelling can be used as an approach to improve EFL students' pronunciation of English. To reach this aim, the study followed quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Trying to apply the approach with young learners in learning a foreign language can be a hard task since the syllabus adopted to teach English phonetics is restricted to rules and applying them through practice. Another reason is limited to time constraints because the module is delivered through one session per week.

### A. Participants

To collect data, the researcher selected about 120 EFL learners (three groups) from the first-year level at Saida University to conduct a pre-test and a post-test during phonetic sessions. The learners were selected non-randomly since all students have a chance to participate in the experiment and improve their pronunciation. They showed positive attitudes and motivation to experiment. The same participants were chosen for the questionnaire, while the interview was conducted with ten teachers.

### B. Research Instruments

The researcher used a semi-structured questionnaire which is composed of three sections. The first one provided to test the students' familiarity with the use of storytelling approach. The second section was devoted to checking whether the students have improved their grammar accuracy and acquired a new vocabulary after being introduced to digital stories during phonetic sessions or not. The third and last section was devoted to pronunciation and what the students have acquired from the experiment.

The questionnaire was supported by a semi-structured interview which was conducted with ten teachers from the department of English language and literature at Saida University. The teachers have experience in teaching English pronunciation and listening comprehension.

A pretest and posttest were also conducted to test students' pronunciation before and after the experiment. Students received a pretest to test their pronunciation level since they are first-year students. Generally, pupils receive rules on how to pronounce English vowels and consonants in their middle school programmes.

### C. Research Procedures

The experiment took two months during the second semester. Students received the theoretical side of English pronunciation during the first semester. They were introduced to English consonants and vowels, their place and manner of articulation. Their practice was linked to some activities on transcription and vowels' and consonants' description. During the second semester, the researcher introduced the students to selected short stories. The researcher followed the audio-lingual method by focusing on listening and speaking skills. Students tend to listen to one short story every week for 10 minutes. The teacher repeated the process one time. The stories comprise a set of videos uploaded on YouTube. For this reason, the students have the chance to listen to them and practice at home since the timing is not enough in class.

After listening to the stories, the teacher starts asking students questions on grammar such as picking adjectives, adverbs, nouns, types of sentences, and tenses being used. This step helps them to revise grammar rules. Another purpose is to check their vocabulary acquisition by explaining new words for students who are not familiar with them. Through listening, the students were required to pick up the characters, the plot and the setting of each story. They were also asked to summarize the stories.

After students practised the stories at home, the teacher selected ten students randomly to record their readings for the stories. After recording the tenth students, they started listening to this recording. The students began to detect pronunciation errors. The process took place during a discussion session through which all students can recognize their pronunciation strength and problems. Through the process, they started learning how to pronounce certain vowels and consonants.

### III. Results and Discussion

#### A. Questionnaire

After the questionnaire was distributed, about 110 of the questionnaires were returned with full answers. Table 1 shows the number of responses with the participants:

**Table 1.** *Participants in the questionnaire*

Students	Number	Number of the Responses
First Year	60	60
Second Year	60	50
Total	120	110

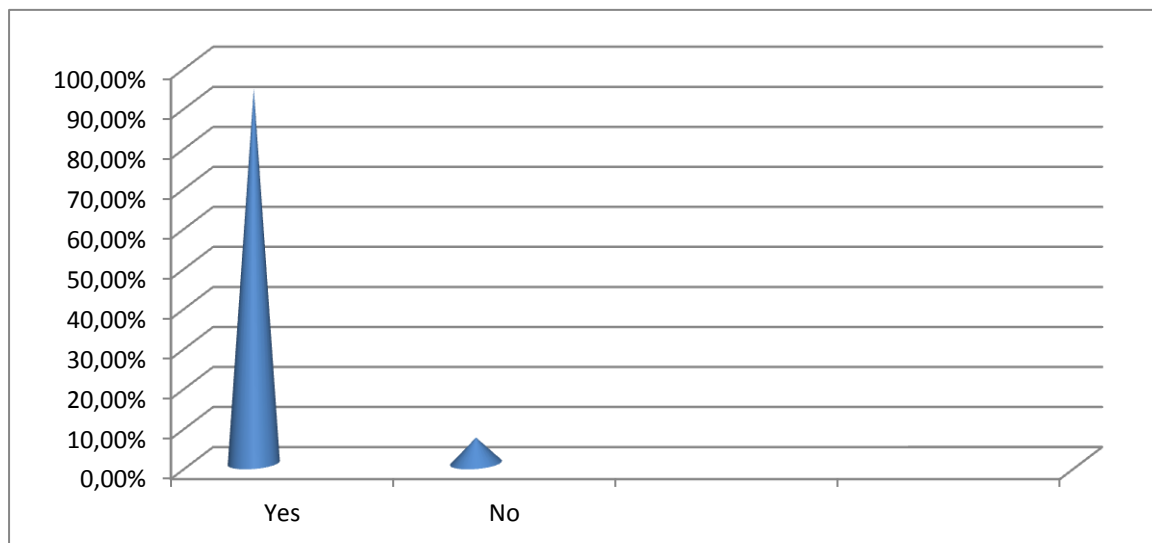
Data of the questionnaire were collected during the second semester after the experiment. The researcher selected the most important questions in relation to the research questions of the study.

**First Questions:** Do you think that storytelling technique introduces you to the foreign language's culture?

- Yes
- No

**Table 2.** *Storytelling as a means to introduce English culture*

Answer	Students	In Percentages
Yes	103	93.63%
No	07	6.36%



**Figure 1.** Storytelling as a means to introduce English culture

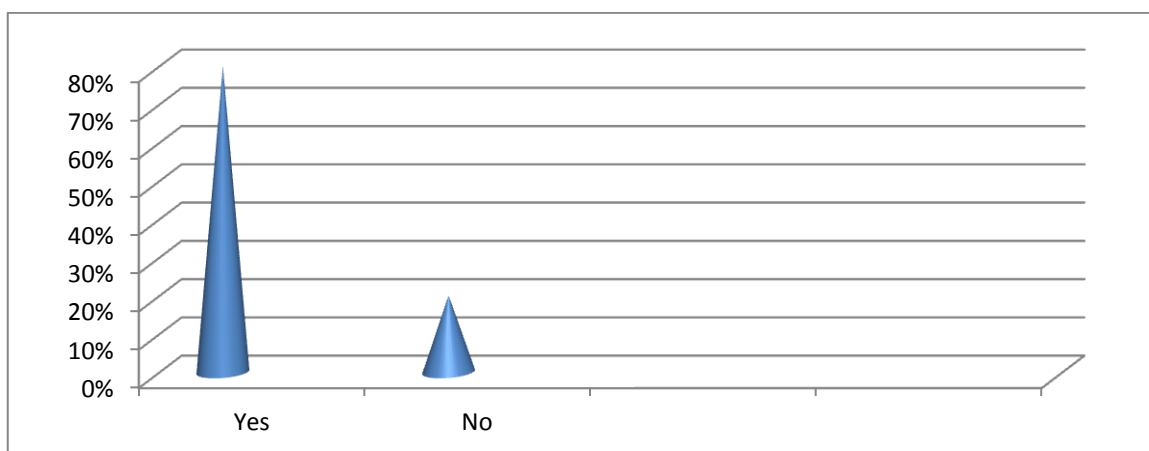
Table 2 and Figure 1 reveal that about 93.63% of the students from both levels agreed that after the integration of storytelling in the classroom, they felt that they are more introduced to English culture in comparison to the usual way of teaching, while 6.36% of the students answered negatively.

**Question two:** Do you think that your level has been improved in grammar through the use of storytelling?

- Yes
- No

**Table 3.** The use of storytelling technique in acquiring grammar accuracy

Answer	Students	Number in Percentages
Yes	88	80%
No	22	20%



**Figure 2.** The use of storytelling technique in acquiring grammar accuracy

Table 3 and Figure 2 show that the majority of the respondents maintained that they learnt new vocabulary and acquired grammar accuracy in the target language; in contrast, the remaining participants said that they did not acquire any grammar rules or vocabulary from this technique.

**Question Three:** Does the use of digital storytelling help you to improve your listening and speaking skills?

- Yes
- No

**Table 4.** *The use of storytelling technique to improve listening and speaking skills*

Answer	Students
Yes	91
No	19

Table 4 reveals that most students have improved their listening and speaking skills. They claimed that through digital storytelling they become more motivated to listen to the stories. They added that they feel very comfortable in using technology to develop their listening skills as the programmes of storytelling are designed to achieve this aim.

#### B. Pretest and Posttest

For the posttest, the researcher selected four short stories. The test took two weeks. The researcher employed Rosetta software to test their oral fluency and pronunciation. When speaking, the software scores their mistakes during their speech. These mistakes were linked to pronouncing vowels and consonants. Table 5 gives an overview of the mistakes made by the students in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

**Table 5.** *Mistakes committed by students during the pre-test and post-test*

Axes	Pre-test	Post-test
Pronunciation	77.31%	38.66%
Grammar	56.03%	21.33%
Syntax	32%	16%
Vocabulary	44%	25%

Table 5 demonstrates a significant difference between the pre- and posttests. The table also reveals the percentages of the students' errors before and after the experiment. The percentage of pronunciation errors was reduced to 38.66%. Students also started to reduce their grammatical errors mainly adjectives and adverbs use, types of nouns, the use of articles and simple tenses. When it comes to vocabulary, students acquired new vocabulary. The percentage of vocabulary errors is also reduced to 25%.

#### ***Results of the Posttest concerning Pronunciation***

A great deal of the posttest was devoted to pronunciation issues. The researcher focused on consonants and vowels pronunciation. The following table sheds light on the students' level of pronunciation of some vowels and consonants in both the pretest and posttest:



**Table 6.** *Students' level pronunciation during the pretest and posttest*

Consonants/ Vowels	Pretest	Posttest
/I/ /i/	63%	37%
/ð/ /Δ/	58%	22%
/τ/ /T/	51%	17%
/ðZ/ /Z/	66%	22%
/εα/ /α/	82%	44%

Table 6 demonstrates a great difference in both tests, mainly students' score of vowels. Most of the scores are more than 50% and are reduced during the posttest. The only problem that the students still have is the use of English diphthongs and triphthongs.

### C. The Interview Analysis

**Question One:** Do you think that storytelling technique is appropriate for EFL learners?

Six teachers out of ten shared the point that this approach is useful for EFL learners. They justified their answers claiming that stories attract the students' attention and raise their motivation.

**Question Two:** Can storytelling approach develop the four linguistic skills of EFL learners?

About 75% of the informants highlighted that this technique develops the four linguistic skills of the EFL learner. They added that this technique is useful to develop speaking and listening skills. They also maintained that there is a lack of scholarship on whether it is helpful in writing or not.

**Question Three:** What do you think about its implementation in teaching all modules?

About 83% of the informants stated that the technique is useful, but it cannot be applied to teach all modules due to time constraints. They also added that it can be used with some modules like oral expression, phonetics, and writing.

**Question Four:** Do you think that the implementation of digital storytelling is useful in teaching English pronunciation for first-year students?

85% of the teachers claimed that exposing students to media tools is important to learn the pronunciation of the target language. They added that it depends on the teacher to present effective activities and select the appropriate approaches to teach pronunciation. They further highlighted that they are familiar with the use of the storytelling approach, mainly in teaching oral production and listening expression. They also maintained that pronunciation can be developed by improving the students' perception and production abilities.

### D. Discussion

The findings proved that first year EFL students enjoyed the session and showed positive attitudes towards the approach. The results also revealed that the students were more motivated towards reading the stories and acquiring a new vocabulary, practising grammar rules, listening, speaking and recording their speech. Through recording their speech, students recognized their pronunciation mistakes, mainly the use of vowels. The analysis also demonstrated that the students got the opportunity to participate and picked up prepositions and tenses and expressed

their use as far as grammar is concerned. The findings also revealed that the approach turns the phonetics session from a dry environment into a warm one, full of students' comprehension, motivation, and participation.

The findings revealed that the use of storytelling activities prove their effectiveness more than the activities selected from textbooks. They can be used to support these activities since pronunciation needs to improve speaking and listening skills. Besides, the experiment also raised students' awareness towards how sounds are produced by native speakers and they can correct their pronunciation.

The findings showed that students were more exposed to the sounds and their production through media aids more than the traditional way of practising. This may show the difference between the results of the pretest and posttest. Students were allowed to practise by reading aloud and recording their speech. The use of Rosetta software helps students in recognizing their speech errors. It also helps them in scoring their speech through intelligibility scorer.

The study was limited to a small number of learners and was based on listening and speaking rather than reading. That is, the stories were taken from YouTube rather than printed. This fact allows students to be exposed to the culture of the target language. The study succeeded to address the research limitations of previous studies that provide a surface study of how pronunciation should be taught through the use of storytelling approach to improving students' listening skills on one hand and raising their awareness towards some pronunciation errors related to /ɪ̃/, /I/, /Θ/ and /ε↔/. The study was also limited to the use of the approach to improve students' pronunciation at the segmental level. It is hoped that further studies will be conducted at the supra-segmental level such as stress placement.

#### IV. Recommendations

As a summary to the aforementioned findings, the researcher recommends the following points:

- This technique can be applied in the teaching process by developing well-designed teaching materials that fit the students' needs and motivations.
- Teachers can be eclectic in terms of the time when they want to include stories in addition to what kind of stories they prefer to integrate.

#### Conclusion

Through the current study, the researcher aimed to explore the use of storytelling, mainly digital storytelling in teaching English pronunciation. The researcher felt the need to address the gap existing in literature as far as its use in teaching English pronunciation is concerned on one hand and to change the old-fashioned method of teaching phonetics at the Algerian context on the other hand. The approach proves its effectiveness in motivating students and raising their awareness towards the importance of developing both the speaking and listening skills which are intertwined in the learning process. Students also recognized that they should be exposed to the target culture through different stories and therefore they can acquire a good knowledge of cultural differences. The findings of the study also revealed that through the approach students can also benefit through developing their vocabulary acquisition and grammar in real situations.

In sum, storytelling approach is one of the methodologies employed by teachers to develop the linguistic skills of the EFL learners, although there is a lack of scholarship on how to implement the method, which stories can be selected and what kind of skills can be developed. Moreover, teachers can benefit from the introduction of this technique and make the learning process meaningful and competitive.

More importantly, storytelling approach proves its effectiveness in foreign language learning in many occasions; however, many teachers avoid implementing it in their classrooms because there is a literature gap in terms of scholarship in addition to time constraints and the long syllabi.

Another important point to raise the students' motivation towards the use of stories in class is allowing them to share their own stories in class, i.e., they can have a hand in selecting the stories depending on their needs and motivations. From that, they can learn even how to structure stories and how to draw conclusions or the endings of tales. Moreover, developing the imaginative side helps in language learning since it gives them the chance of writing and using their vocabulary.

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