

How storytelling can work as a pedagogy to facilitate children's English as a foreign language learning

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ltr**Thao Thi Phuong Nguyen** 

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Abstract

Storytelling has a long tradition in education including language learning and teaching because of its extensive benefits in language development. In second and foreign language education, stories and storytelling have been integrated into school curricula to enhance language development; however, there is scarce empirical evidence about how storytelling facilitates children's English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and its potential as a holistic pedagogy. This article explores a living educational theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) of how storytelling works as a pedagogy in storytelling workshops with an English class at a private tuition centre in Vietnam to facilitate children's EFL learning. Key pedagogical elements identified through the living theory methodology included storytelling as: a responsive strategy; multimodal scaffolding; mutual inspiration; and a linguistic model. Each of these elements is explained with illustrative examples from the storytelling workshops.

Keywords

EFL young children, meaning making, multimodalities, scaffolding, storytelling

1 Introduction

When the children first walked into the classroom, they immediately stared at the posters and props together with the storybook *The Gingerbread Man*¹ on the floor, talking and

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pointing at the teaching aids with a lot of excitement. The classroom teacher and the practitioner-researcher welcomed each child. The children quickly sat down on the floor and started to wonder as the first author started to tell the story:

Once upon a time, many years ago, a little old woman and a little old man lived on a farm. And they were kind people, very nice, nice people. It made them sad, very sad. Sad? (expressing a sad face) . . .

The first author told the story by playing different roles, conveying the feelings of each character to the children through her facial expressions, varying her voice with emotions and acting out the story through gestures. The classroom teacher and the first author told stories that were held in their mind, using words and gestures to make the stories alive with the listeners (Phillips & T.T.P. Nguyen, 2021). Storytelling in this study is congruous with the storytelling defined by the authors as ‘the oral art form where a teller performs a story with a live audience’ (p. 2), which is different from reading aloud stories to children.

Stories and oral performative² storytelling permeate through and into children’s language education, possibly without an official claim as a pedagogy yet with wide acceptance. They can be used at any stage of a lesson to provoke thinking, demonstrate or illustrate ideas and concepts, or purely for enjoyment with people of all ages. Abrahamson (1998) proposed that ‘storytelling is an important technique in the process of learning and understanding’ and ‘storytelling can clearly be viewed as the foundation of the teaching profession’ (pp. 440–441). Egan (1986, 2005) explained that storytelling provides an approach to teach the content with engagement and focus on meaning in learning. Storytelling has a clear place in developing language and literacy in a child’s first language (Peck, 1989; Quintero, 2010), supporting the comprehension of children with English as an additional language (Boyle, 1998; Daniel, 2012). From an educational point of view, Jackson (1995) argues that stories ‘transform us, alter us as individuals’ (p. 9). This may sound like a grand claim for English as a foreign language teaching to some; however, the transformation can happen, as stories provoke us to understand what it means to be human (Nussbaum, 2010). Previous empirical studies for first and second language learning have indicated positive educative results for storytelling in different teaching and learning contexts, including developing language learning (Colon-Vila, 1997; Phillips, 1999; Speaker, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004), aiding critical thinking (Roche, 2014), and building an understanding of humanity with social and cultural knowledge (Greene, 2000; Nussbaum, 1997; Phillips, 2012; Tossa, 2012). Further, the use of storytelling and picture books for English as a foreign language (EFL) with children has become increasingly popular (Dujmović, 2006; G. Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Mourão, 2013, 2016). However, there has been little discussion about how children aged 8–10 years learn English through live oral storytelling in Vietnam and similar contexts in Asia.

This article discusses an inquiry into storytelling as pedagogy situated in children’s EFL learning developed from the doctoral thesis (Nguyen, T.T.P., 2019) led by the first author as the practitioner-researcher and advised by the second author. To understand how storytelling can work as a pedagogy, we set out to investigate meaning making of English as a foreign oral language in terms of lexis, syntactic structures, text organization

and story content, using classroom utterances by children during teacher-led storytelling and associated activities. Teacher language use for instruction, children's utterances, body language, interactions between teacher–learner and learner–learner, the material use of stories and the storytelling process were examined.

We use the term 'storytelling as pedagogy' to refer to the emphasis of the study on understanding how storytelling works as a pedagogy that embraces an education value of holistic learning in teaching English to young learners (TEYL). Researchers in the field of second / foreign language teaching / research and TESOL often use specific terms such as approach, method, technique, procedure, design, principle, aspects of learning and teaching to discuss methodology. For this study, we are using the term pedagogy, which is defined through a lens of sociocultural theory as follows.

L2 pedagogy encompasses any form of educational activity designed to promote the internalization of, and control over, the language that learners are studying, whether or not a human mediator (e.g. a teacher) is physically present and overtly teaching, as in a teacher-fronted classroom or a tutoring session . . . Other forms of mediation can certainly be intentionally introduced for pedagogical purposes. (van Compernelle & Williams, 2013, p. 279)

We use the word 'pedagogy' as it is more all-encompassing for an EFL approach in English language teaching which is 'often thought of only in an instrumental way' (Crookes, 2016, p. 64). The focus of this research has been on improving pedagogical practice through an authentic commitment to values from educational perspectives on English language teaching (Crookes, 2016). To explore how storytelling as pedagogy works, elements of the storytelling were investigated. By 'element' we mean the dimensions of teacher telling behaviour to refer to what it was about storytelling that enabled children's English language learning.

The research process distinctly varied from conventional TESOL applied linguistics research (e.g. experimental method or descriptive statistics research methods) by focusing on practitioners through a living theory approach to practitioner research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The study focused on researcher/teacher reflections about storytelling pedagogy with a class of children for EFL learning. A living educational theory approach enabled a practice-based way of investigating evidence of children's language learning informed by a sociocultural understanding of second language acquisition.

II Pedagogical practice in Vietnam

Recent research on TEYL methodology in Vietnam has demonstrated that English instruction for children mainly deploys a grammar-based methodology (Hoang, 2018; T.M.H. Nguyen, 2011; Q.T. Nguyen & T.M.H. Nguyen, 2007). A communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was adopted and adapted for young learners (T.M.H. Nguyen, 2011); however, there is a mismatch between the textbooks, the learners, and the approach. It is a failure to correspond to the CLT approach as claimed by teachers who strive to use CLT but are perplexed to adjust the approach in their practice. Rather, the grammar-based methodology is frequently used by the teachers while the textbooks

are claimed to deploy the CLT approach. Children are passive receivers of grammatical features instead of units of language of functional and communicative meaning. In a study of primary English language education policy in Vietnam, Hoa Nguyen (2011) reported that there was almost no storytelling activity in primary classrooms. Also, the first author's observations as a teacher educator confirm that storytelling practice is mostly avoided by Vietnamese TEYL teachers. A possible reason for the avoidance is the continual modification of textbooks and the limited English language competence and methodology knowledge of the TEYL teachers as reported in the Decision no 1400 QĐ/TTg on National project of foreign languages 2020 (The Prime Minister, Vietnam, 2008). Though stories are included in the national English textbooks (i.e. English 3, 4, and 5), they are not accurately described as following a recount genre. This means they do not follow a story genre of setting the scene, introducing a problem and working towards a resolution, but rather are in the simplest recounts of events or actions.

Storytelling may be a technique that most TEYL teachers find impossible to use in a language classroom possibly because teachers see that storytelling requires specific skills and demands a lot of effort (Cameron, 2001). In the innovative method workshops of Project 2020 in which the first author worked as a teacher trainer, many teachers shared that to complete language lesson plans, they had to work in a very controlling way because of the requirements of the local department of education. They were afraid that children could not learn through creative opportunities. This perspective tends to underestimate children's abilities. We believe that the enormous benefits of storytelling with children outweigh these concerns, especially if classroom research can offer further insights into storytelling practice.

III Benefits of storytelling in language education

Identified benefits of stories and storytelling as pedagogy in first language development include developing language literacy (Koehnecke, 2000), aiding critical thinking (Roche, 2014), and building an understanding of humanity with social and cultural knowledge (Greene, 2000; Nussbaum, 1997; Tossa, 2012). Storytelling enriches expressive language in speech and written composition because of its authentic and refined lexis and dramatic features (Phillips, 1999). Children can creatively use language based on their existing knowledge. Storytelling can foster children's creativity by cultivating children's imagination, and in turn nurture children's linguistic competence (Phillips, 2000). Linguistic knowledge is embedded in oral stories and it gradually increases when children become engaged in storytelling and share the content with their teacher and classmates. Chambers (1970) explained this by arguing that stories offer children opportunities 'to experience living language, language that communicates at a level above or beyond that of everyday usage' (p. 38). Additionally, causal connections can be examined during storytelling in relation to basic language skills (Brown, Lile, & Burns, 2011; Nelson, 1989). In short, storytelling in a first language can enhance language literacy, linguistic skills, and build more linguistic knowledge for children (Koehnecke, 2000; Phillips, 1999, 2000).

Stories are told to learners to mainly teach vocabulary knowledge and language skills as an activity or a small part of the teaching pedagogies rather than being used as pedagogy in many second/foreign language classrooms (see Colon-Vila, 1997; C.D. Nguyen,

2016, 2018; Speaker et al., 2004; Uchiyama, 2011). Telling stories in EFL and English as a second language (ESL) is also used for other purposes as can be seen in the literature. For example, children can gain cognitive growth (e.g. understanding the relationship between events, objects, and actions), empathic intelligence, by making sense of experiences through storytelling scaffolding, and understanding of story structure (Pennington, 2009). Mourão (2016) explored the authentic responses of primary EFL learners through picture books which ‘promote [the children’s] affective, sociocultural, aesthetic and cognitive development as well as develop language and literary’ (p. 39). As for older EFL learners at the age of 16–18 years, Mourão (2013) also described how storied picture books have an effective influence on their EFL literacy learning including meaning making of semiotic mode and interpretation skills. Although these benefits of storytelling including reading aloud stories in ESL/EFL have been discussed significantly, they have been conducted in broad contexts and discussed generally with mostly adult learners or from the perspectives of teachers only (see C.D. Nguyen, 2018). There is scarce empirical evidence for the age group of 8–10 years and in the Vietnamese context.

Storytelling as pedagogy was chosen as the specific research focus because children are attuned to stories at home and school from a very young age, as a means of making sense of spoken and written language (see, for example, Paley, 1981, 1997). The motivating point is that ‘telling a story is a way of establishing meaning’ (Egan, 1986, p. 37) by speaking words accompanied with aligning gestures, vocal and body expression, and visual aids broadening the clues to enhance meaning making (comprehension). In the context of Vietnam, thus far storytelling has not been widely deployed in the mainstream foreign language education as a pedagogy that has the potential to draw together children as agentic learners and their EFL learning. TEYL in Vietnam typically involves the repetitive practice of grammar and vocabulary (T.M.H. Nguyen, 2011). Recently, as a matter of the national project of foreign languages 2020, there has been a small body of research in TEYL revealing that primary English language teachers are more aware of creating meaningful learning activities for children through games, songs and telling stories (C.D. Nguyen, 2018). In response to such studies from teachers’ perspectives only, storytelling in this study was designed to engage with learners’ perspectives and explore how children experience such language learning through storytelling as a highly engaging and motivating process.

This article explains how a teacher (Nga³) and practitioner-researcher (the first author) deploy and develop storytelling as a pedagogy to facilitate children’s English learning. Specifically, the following questions are addressed.

1. What elements of storytelling work as a pedagogy to facilitate children’s English learning?
2. What evidence of learning can be observed through storytelling?

IV Theoretical framework

A sociocultural view of stories and storytelling was adopted because it focuses on communication and meaning rather than language structures (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The sociocultural theory (SCT) concepts of mediation and scaffolding were employed to understand how the children made meaning in storytelling.

In SCT, the mediation of understanding occurs through the interaction of artefacts and activities. In second language learning, mediating artefacts can be a system of symbols such as a language and a set of gestures, in interaction with an animated source of such symbols or interaction with another person (Gibbons, 2003). This mediation transforms learning acts into higher mental functions such as memory, attention, and second language learning strategies without being imposed by others.

The term scaffolding was firstly used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) as a process where adult intervention in an activity supports children to complete the task. Storytelling, together with paralinguistic support such as gestures, facial expressions, tones, or pitch of voice provide additional scaffolding of the language through prompts and reaches toward children's zones of proximal development⁴ (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), where they might be able to comprehend the language of stories. This is applicable to language learning as well as other subjects or areas of knowledge. However, in second language learning, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been interpreted differently as 'collaborative dialogue', a form of interaction (Swain, 2000; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2015) or as a process called 'collective scaffolding' (Donato, 1994). By using the term 'collective scaffolding', Donato was referring to peer collaboration to build up a scaffold for a shared understanding during learning processes. Across storytelling, collective scaffolding can be seen in mutual engagement for sharing and extending meaning through a combination of modalities employed by the teacher and children.

While it is recognized that in foreign language learning there is less reinforcement and less opportunity to practise language both inside and outside classroom, storytelling as pedagogy may follow the same principles of collaborative dialogue and collective scaffolding which engage children in the story language and sequential activities so that children are not alone in learning (Dewey, 1906). Accordingly, collaborative dialogue may occur with their peers and teacher to enhance learning because their body, soul and mind are involved. This is very important in children's language development through the lens of sociocultural theory.

V Research design

1 A living educational theory to practitioner research

A living educational theory approach to practitioner research is a type of action research. Action research is considered an ideal research methodology for practitioner research in that the dual roles of practitioner and researcher can be performed (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The application of the living educational theory approach to the workshops of storytelling as pedagogy was initiated from the 'why' and 'how' of the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) to form a methodological framework⁵ for the study. The 'why' in 'why I do the project' and 'how' in 'how I do the project' are in a complementary relationship to inform how living educational theory is emergent from practitioner research. It is in the process of learning and teaching through real-life practice that the theoretical assumptions of storytelling as pedagogy are manifested for promoting children's English learning. Application of a living educational theory approach to practitioner research involved generating explanations of educational influences in learning

from practice in storytelling as pedagogy facilitating children's English learning. Learning was understood as a process of evolving and creating, not as an outcome.

a Participants. The first author monitored storytelling as a pedagogical practice with one EFL class of 16 children aged 9–10 years during eight workshops with their classroom teacher, Nga. Both Nga and the first author took turns telling the stories in these workshops. Pseudonyms were used for all participants during data collection and in the data analysis to protect the anonymity of the informants.

Nga had been teaching the children for two years, so she had developed insights into the children's interests and language levels. The first author worked with Nga as a co-teacher whereas Nga collaborated in planning the workshops and offering her professional insights in interpreting the interactions during the storytelling workshops.

Before planning the workshops, the first author observed the young learner participants in their regular English classes and discussed their levels of English with Nga. Most of these participants finished Grade 4 and would be at Grade 5 in the next school year, except for Sam who was in Grade 3. All of them had had one or two years of learning English as beginners and started learning English at Grade 3. At primary school, all of them had studied English 3 and English 4 textbooks in one 35-minute lesson a week. The textbooks were options within the textbook series in the new English curriculum at primary level mandated by the Ministry of Education and Training and published by the Vietnam Education Publishing House and Macmillan Publishers.

b Workshops: Stories and class activities. The storytelling and follow-up class activities were called storytelling workshops. They were designed to investigate what is possible in storytelling as pedagogy for English language learning. There were eight workshops, coded as WS 1 to WS 8 and three stories: *The Gingerbread Man* (Sims, 2011), *Friends*⁶ (K. Lewis, 1999), and *Slop*⁷ (MacDonald, 1997). *The Gingerbread Man* was told three times in three workshops (WS 1, 2 and 3) because it was more interactive for the children to familiarize themselves with storytelling which they had not experienced elsewhere in their EFL learning. The other two stories were repeated twice in WS 4–5 and WS 6–7. Workshop 8 was a consolidating and reflective workshop. The research phase was conducted during an English summer course over eight weeks. Children were enrolled in the course for two consecutive days a week on Saturday and Sunday for two hours each day. There were eight workshops conducted almost once a week, except for Workshop 3 and Workshop 4 in one week but with two different stories (i.e. *The Gingerbread Man* and *Friends*) due to the rescheduled timetable of the summer program.

The materials used in the workshops consisted of the three stories which incorporated the teaching aids of carefully selected images and gestures to co-communicate meaning with spoken words. The qualities of the stories were carefully considered in terms of content, language use and discourse organization (Cameron, 2001; Halliwell, 1992). The three stories addressed themes of family, friends, and animals as a basis for children to develop a sense of everyday activities, which is consistent with the Vietnamese syllabus at the primary school level. The stories were selected based on key principles developed and informed by literature on storytelling in EFL contexts: (1) a new story plot with child related themes, (2) rich and contextualized language use in stories, (3) thematic and

temporal organization (McEwan & Egan, 1995). The choice of stories was based on factors including a balance of familiar and unfamiliar content to support English language learning, the complexity length to match English level, the curriculum, the first author's experience of teaching EFL, and discussions with the classroom teacher.

More importantly, these stories have their own nuanced features involving actions, emotions, and thoughts, whose meanings are interpreted by the listener or reader (Egan, 1986). Each story comprised both familiar and new events in already learned and not yet learned language for discovery. The first author did not select popular or adapted stories because they are well known in Europe, the U.S. or other countries, which are translated into many languages including Vietnamese and which children may have listened to before. Adapted stories for EFL seemed advantageous to young learners as well because the language is controlled to make it easier for them to understand. Also, if the stories are well known, there will be a chance that children may have already heard the stories. Consequently, children may not have the need for language learning to decode the stories' meaning and this can affect the evidence of meaning making.

We had difficulties with the learning space. The classrooms at this centre were not ideal for storytelling practice and were typical of most primary schools in Vietnam with attached tables and chairs in rows and little space for children to sit on the floor. Having discussed facilities of the centre prior to the research design, we accepted the available conditions because a specialized classroom space was not a prerequisite condition for it. We rearranged chairs and tables in a U-shape to allow for more room for storytelling. This was a condition to which we had to adjust and adapt so that storytelling as pedagogy could be workable in an EFL classroom in any condition in the Vietnamese context.

2 Data collection and analysis

The practitioner research of storytelling as pedagogy was examined through a process of monitoring practice (action) and gathering data, then interpreting the data and generating evidence (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) (see Figure 1).

a Action monitoring and data gathering. The action involves conducting a collective inquiry (McNiff, 2013) of self-reflection through reflective writing in an action – dialogic – reflection cycle for consistent evidence and quality insurance (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Two sets of data were gathered: (1) the lived experiences of both the practitioner-researcher and classroom teacher in using storytelling as pedagogy over eight workshops and (2) the lived experiences of the children's EFL learning through storytelling. These lived experiences were monitored and gathered through classroom observations, document collections, conversations with the children and classroom teacher, and reflective journals.

Both the first author and Nga monitored their teaching and kept a journal to document reflection on teaching. These reflective notes became the source of dialogue between them. The reflective conversations were conducted mainly in Vietnamese and occasionally in English because it was clearer for some of the pedagogical terms. Nga communicated in both Vietnamese and English.

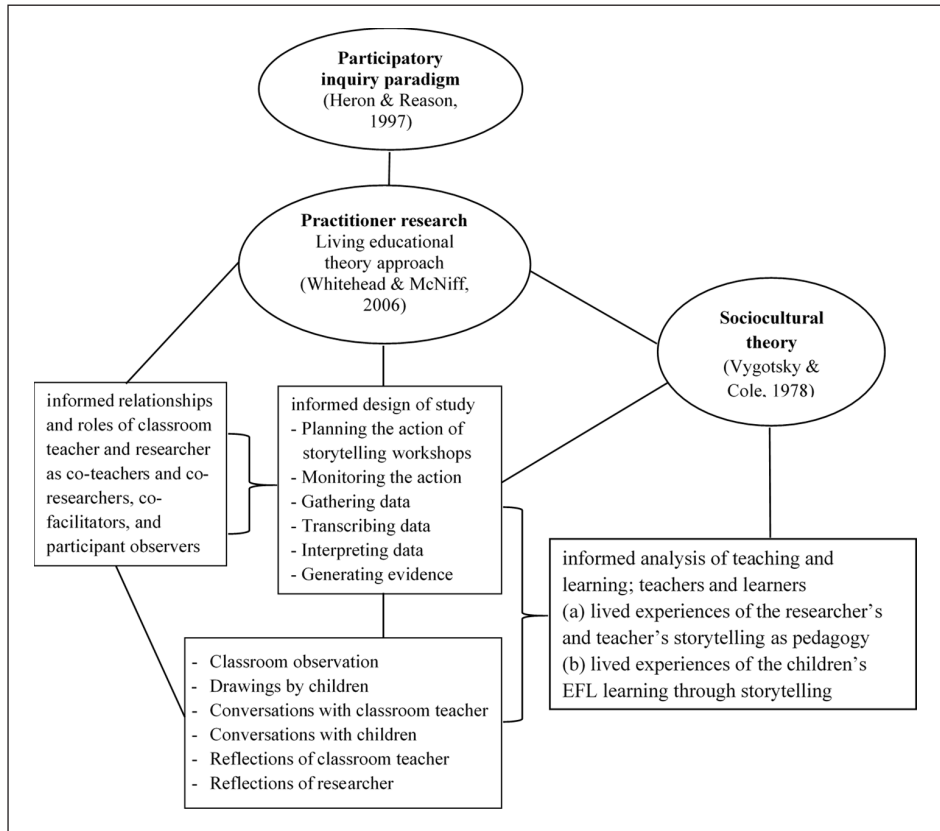


Figure 1. Interrelational links of theory, methodology, and data collection.

b Generating evidence. Through iterative engagement with the data, content analysis (Patton, 2015) was used to search for recurring patterns of storytelling and responses between the teacher and children, to identify major themes of storytelling as pedagogy. A coding process (Creswell, 2013) was engaged to organize the data into categories. The first author used predetermined codes from the literature review on storytelling and second language learning including ‘responsiveness’, ‘engagement’, ‘multimodality’, and the participants’ actual words as in vivo codes. Examples of participant words as codes were ‘storytelling inspired me’, ‘a linguistic model’, and ‘I find a way to remember meaning.’

The analytical process involved coding generation and theme development. The framing and wording of the themes evolved from our understanding of storytelling as pedagogy and through our inquiring dialogue about the data.

The first author read the transcripts of the eight video-recorded workshops and also made memos and diagrams of categories for a reflection about insights into storytelling. Utterances by children were coded drawing from the conceptual frameworks of classroom talk (Gibbons, 2015) and multimodal expressions (Block, 2013). The teacher’s

storytelling was grouped into facilitating meaning making, teaching acts, and interaction through storytelling. These included what a storytelling teacher did for learning, the interaction protocol with children, interactional patterns, realia use, teacher's techniques of telling stories using multimodality (e.g. gestures, postures, facial expressions, visual aids, questions, and translanguaging), and scaffolding in storytelling.

Utterances by children in response to storytelling were categorized into: procedural meaning, ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, textual meaning, and spatial meaning (Halliday & Webster, 2009). There were subcategories based on the multimodality frame which was characterized by modes: spoken language, postures, gestures (i.e. iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and beat), bodily movements, facial expressions, and gaze. From that, particular moments of children's meaning making, interest, and engagement with learning were identified.

Nga's and the first author's reflective journals were analysed for critical feedback on the workshops. Transcripts of conversations in Vietnamese with children and Nga after each workshop were read to identify resonant elements of storytelling that supported children's learning. Transcripts were read after each workshop to improve the pedagogy and generate evidence. Episodes of the storytelling workshops were selected to illustrate identified key pedagogical elements and children's meaning making and agentic learning. The translation of transcriptions was done after data analysis for the presentations of the findings and discussion.

3 How storytelling worked as a pedagogy in an EFL classroom

From the generative content analysis described above, four elements of storytelling pedagogy were identified as being productive in enhancing children's English language learning. These were responsiveness, multimodality, mutual inspiration, and a linguistic model. The following subsections explain each element with illustrative examples and analysis for evidence of learning through engagement with theory and literature which, according to Dick (2004), widens the dialectic and strengthens the research rigour. Relating data to theory and literature created a process of what Winter (1998) referred to as 'dialectical analysis' (p. 67) through contemplation, speculation, and placing the data in wider contexts.

a Storytelling as a responsive strategy. The stories were started as naturally as possible through a connection with the children, not as memorization for recitation, as Lake (2001) describes storytelling as 'the art of narrating a tale from memory rather than reading it' (p. 127). From decades of experience as a storyteller and storytelling pedagogue, the second author advises to relax and be in the story – to fully commit to being there with your audience. This is what brings the story alive and makes it the lived experience of all present.

Nga recognized that storytelling should not be reading from memory. Rather, she was transported into the stories telling as if she and the children were in the story to make the story meanings alive for the children. Literary critic, Walter Benjamin (1955/1999) described the act of storytelling as the storyteller drawing from her experience or that of others and 'making it the experience of those who are listening to the tale' (p. 87).

After the first workshop, Nga and the first author agreed that storytelling required the storyteller to be responsive in their role by employing different ways.

Nga: When I am telling, I do not know . . . if it is my own technique and useful or not, I try to create something for children to make an inquiry about and give them hints for meaning making or language use. (Conversation 7, Nga, 38)

In the interaction with the children, Nga and the first author found that they needed to adopt different roles and be as authentic and energetic as possible. The first author noted in her research journaling.

I was acting in various roles to scaffold the children's foreign language learning. I was a narrator, an actor, a scaffolder, a primary teacher of English in my storytelling and a researcher. This is very exciting but challenging. (the first author's reflection WS 6: 77)

At times, the first author felt that the children were making quite an effort to figure out the stories as she reflected on her storytelling, 'Lion and Peter did not smile or act out. They looked around at other classmates wondering why most of them were laughing and acting out the slop action together' (the first author's reflection WS 6: 75). Then, she decided to simplify some details, shorten several sentences, and role-play the scenes (see example below). In this way, she was more responsive to children's engagement with storytelling and attentive to challenge their thinking.

- 109 The old woman said, 'That's poor woman. We must stop pouring the slop over the front garden wall.' But she thinks (*shows thinking*) where do we pour the slop? Can you guess? (.)
- 110 And the old woman has an idea. We can have a door at the back of the house. (*pauses storytelling*) This is the front and this is the back (*explains the position of the house imaginatively exemplifying a wall of the classroom*). The house has a front door (*pointing at the main door of the room*) and they open the front door to walk to the front garden and pour the slop. But now the woman said we can have a door at the back of the house (*pointing at the back of the room pretending to make a back door here*). The old man said yes, maybe because I could not walk around the house to throw the slop (*walking around*). It's a far distance.
- 111 So they asked a carpenter. Everyone, a carpenter.
- 112 C: A carpenter.
- 113 T: A carpenter makes a door for them. Who can make a door? A carpenter. Như vậy các con đoán được a carpenter là gì không? ((Can you guess the meaning of a carpenter?))
- 114 C: (*Thinking and guessing*): (xxx) (WS 6-Slop: 109–114)

Multiple roles in the storytelling process are defined as being 'fully engaged in a story' (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004), and 'transportation into the narrative world' (Green & Brock, 2000). According to Green et al. (2004, p. 311), 'Transportation into a narrative

world is an experience of cognitive, emotional, and imagery involvement in a narrative.’ The full engagement of cognition, emotion and attention to imagery would modify the storytelling as responsive strategies to the children’s meaning making.

The following example illustrates the cognition skill of prediction as evidenced by sentence completion. This was elicited by a pause (see transcript code⁸) in the storytelling, which was a useful strategy to challenge children to make meaning of the story details in English.

- 177 T, C: He saw a wee little woman. What did the wee little woman do? She mopped (*pretends mopping*). She mopped up the (.)
- 178 = C: Slop
- 179 = Steven: [The dish water]
- 180 T, C: She mopped up the dishwasher.
- 181 Jack: (*hand gestures of mopping*)
- 182 T: (*sweeping*) and she (..)
- 183 = Steven, C: She sweep the peelings.
- 184 . . .
- 187 T, C: The old woman mopped the dishes water and swept (.)
- 188 = Steven: PEELINGS. (WS 7-Slop: 177–188)

The teacher noticed when children were starting to voice prediction of forthcoming words by pausing and welcoming children’s vocalization of story content. The unfinished sentences of the storytelling teacher were often readily completed by the children (lines 178, 179, 183, and 188). This illustrates how children’s meaning making can be enhanced in production of English when they are telling the story along with the teacher.

Moreover, the children’s responses suggested ideas to the teachers. For instance, their response to the fox snapping the Gingerbread Man elicited the teacher’s thought of the Gingerbread Man being in the fox’s stomach. The story describes what the fox does to the gingerbread man:

The gingerbread man tiptoed up to the fox’s head . . . The fox tossed his head, and SNAP! The gingerbread man was a quarter gone. SNAP! He was half gone. SNAP! Three quarters gone. SNAP! And that was the end of him.

- T and C: The gingerbread man ends.
- T: Where is the gingerbread man now?
- C: In the fox.
- T: In the fox’s stomach and story ends. (WS 2-Gingerbread Man: 133–136)

When Nga heard children say, ‘in the fox’, from the observation, she was surprised because she stopped for a while when she did not predict this response (WS 2-Gingerbread Man) of processing cause and effect of that when you eat something, it goes to your stomach. It was possible that she would have finished the story as it was, but then she decided to end the story by expanding their answer with ‘in the fox’s stomach’ responding to her audience’s interpretation of the story.

We recognized storytelling as a responsive strategy at play, when the storytelling teacher responded to the children's cognitive (e.g. Steven bent his body to show how the Gingerbread Man was snapped; sentence completion in storytelling along with the teacher), emotional (e.g. learning joyously with laughter and smile) and imaginative (e.g. children tried to imagine how the old couple poured the slop bucket onto the wee little couple's house) dimensions in storytelling. Nga and the first author shaped their storytelling practice through interactions with the children such as asking questions, expressing ideas, and clarifying meaning. We see this as a responsive pedagogical practice likened to story-tailoring in which the storytelling-teacher skilfully assesses the requirements of the listeners to craft a story that responds seamlessly to their ideas, interests, and queries (see Phillips, 2012).

b Storytelling as multimodal pedagogy. Multimodal ways of storytelling were performed to support meaning making as scaffolding of learning. Results showed some differentiation in both storytelling teachers' verbal and non-verbal scaffoldings, with more of the latter used. Multimodal scaffolding is comprised of word hints, unfinished utterances, questions, gestures, voice changes, facial expressions, sensory involvement with auditory and visual cues, realia for touching and smelling, acting, and translanguaging. All these methods animated the storytelling.

In the following extract of *Friends* story, the children internalized the story through the embodiment of gestures and speech.

- 53 T: But suddenly, there is a sound from the henhouse. What happened?
- 54 James: Đẻ một quả trứng ((laying another egg)) [[some C: o egg o (laughing)]]
- 55 T: A loud clucking, cluck. Sam said another egg. Alice was happy. Let's go and find it. Look. Another egg (*picking up an egg from the chicken*) (*children are excited, surprised and laugh a lot*) And they ran to the henhouse. What happened? Sam put the egg into the hat and Alice put the hat in the (.) (*putting the hat in the bucket*) [[Sam: bucket]], and they put the bucket in the (..) wheel(.) barrow [[Sam, Jack: wheelbarrow, wheelbarrow]]
- 56 T: Then they tiptoed (*tiptoeing*) past the geese and the dog. =(Some C *tiptoe*). Where will they go? They walk back home. At home, who did they meet? And they saw mum. Mum asked (..) What did Alice and Sam do?
- 57 C: Lấy trứng ((get eggs))
- 58 T: They found eggs together. (Sam: found eggs). What does it mean together? (*moving two fingers closely*)
- 59 James: cùng nhau ((together)) (WS 4-Friends:53–59)

The first author and the children told the story together by using gestures (lines 56 and 58) and translanguaging between English and Vietnamese in line 54 and 58–59. In this social context of storytelling, the children learned English by making meaning through non-verbal scaffolding of distinctive gestures, sensing and speech (lines 53–59).

Storytelling offers multimodality to create meaning making by a child, among the children, and between the storytelling teacher and children. The data illustrates how storytelling is a form of social interaction in which language develops because storytelling mediates the interpersonal interaction of children. This finding confirms the comment made by Ortega (2009) about the role of the linguistic environment in which interaction can be seen as important:

What matters in the linguistic environment is not simply 'what's out there' physically or even socially surrounding learners, but rather what learners make of it, how they process [or not] the linguistic data and how they love and experience that environment. (Ortega, 2009, p. 80)

Verbal and non-verbal scaffolding in storytelling enhances children's interactions to make meaning of and process the linguistic data through different modalities. There is a constant interplay between modalities consisting of linguistic (e.g. the language of stories), gestural (e.g. body language of the storytellers and children), visual, tactile, auditory, and textual modes (e.g. teaching aids including puppets, realia, posters, story cards, illustrative drawings; the song about Gingerbread man, the sounds created during the storytelling, and the story books that children can read through in Workshop 8). These modalities provide diverse mediational tools that facilitate meaning making for children. A multimodal storytelling style can give children an understanding of not only the language but also the visual images, the touched objects, and other gestural meanings in storytelling interactions.

c Storytelling as mutually inspiring engagement. Experience with storytelling throughout eight workshops revealed that a key theme of the EFL storytelling was mutually inspiring engagement. That is, both teacher and children were inspired through storytelling to engage in English language teaching and learning. By engaging actively, several children became attentive to their learning with meta-awareness (e.g. Jack, Sam, Alex and Steven were conscious of developing strategic learning for story listening and vocabulary and grammar, which can be seen in the data examples throughout). The greater the engagement the children experienced during storytelling, the more focus they put on their language learning. As Lake (2001) explained by borrowing from Vygotsky's ZPD theory, 'stories organize thoughts', because 'storytelling, like play, places students in a higher ZPD' (p. 127). Therefore, to a certain extent, the children can manage learning meaning through their storytelling engagement.

The children inspired Nga and the first author's storytelling.

Nga: The children supported me enormously. Of course, this could not be seen right away. I know that I need the children to motivate myself. Sometimes I followed their performances and forgot the lesson plan. (Nga's reflection WS 7-8: 70)

Nga felt greatly inspired, following the children's performances. Similarly, in the first storytelling, the first author felt excited despite being quite nervous at the beginning until she reached the middle of *The Gingerbread Man* story; the children motivated her

greatly. When the first author told this story the second time without any effort to scaffold children's comprehension, she felt that they facilitated themselves to make more meaning of the story to role-play it. Children told the story along with her verbally and non-verbally when they used their hands to illustrate the characters. Some of them observed her carefully and whispered along to practise pronouncing the words (see Steven and Alex below). In the third time, 'I told the story more quickly while they did the role-play' (the first author's reflection WS 5: 24).

Nga and the first author were more encouraged and tremendously inspired when they had eye contact with all the children during the storytelling performance. 'Our feelings were that the children sought a way through eye contact with us to enter the stories and when we could do that, their eye contact revealed how much they made meaning of what the teachers just told' (the first author's reflection WS 1: 56). Through eye contact they cultivated what Kuyvenhoven (2009) referred to as the 'listener's hush' (p. 34): those moments when listeners are completely entranced by the ability of the storyteller to bring the story alive. She noted how storytelling teachers (e.g. Dailey, 1994; Rosen, 1988) switch to regularly incorporate storytelling into their teaching because of the power of the hush. The second author has also recognized this powerful quality of storytelling. In her storytelling practice, she models and advocates for eye contact with listeners to invite the audience to come into the story with her. The subsequent hush feeds back that the students are engaged and switched on as listeners and learners.

There were moments when Nga and the first author forgot their roles as teachers because they forgot the fact that these children were learning English. Rather, they perceived the children as 'creatures of story' (Gottschall, 2012, p. 23). In these moments, the story language lived, not the formulaic English language as a foreign language which is written or designed for a teaching direction to focus on form (i.e. an integration of forms and meaning) or rules as in L2 instruction.

From the first author's reflections and reflective conversations with Nga, they both had similar perceptions of how the children inspired their storytelling practice. Children also admired their peers as a source of motivation for their own learning. Jack and some children kept mentioning Steven, who set an excellent example for other children to follow.

Jack: Steven remembered the whole song. He could sing it all. He was the best, teacher. I like rereading the story. (first author's reflection WS 3: 51–52)

Steven's performance motivated Jack to reread the story so that he could demonstrate his best learning.

Storytelling inspired both learners and teachers for engagement. This finding is in agreement with Swain's (2013) idea 'that learning another language is not just a cognitive process but an emotional one as well' (p. 195) and further supports the idea of the role of emotions in foreign language learning in recent studies (Dewaele, 2015; Saito et al., 2018). Compared to other aspects in SLA, work on emotions is still in its infancy as very little was found in the SLA literature on the role of emotion (Swain, 2013). However, the past decade has witnessed more interest in how emotions enhance foreign language learning generally for adult learners (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Li, 2020;

Méndez López & Peña Aguilar, 2013). If it is assumed in foreign language education that children should be the centre of learning and teaching, there must be a reconsideration of teaching methods when teachers mainly lecture about the learning content. Children will feel bored, tired, and passive (Rantala & Määttä, 2012). Tossa (2012) speculated that ‘effective storytelling is a form of communication from the heart of the storyteller to the heart of the listener’ (p. 200). Perhaps, this idea that there is a presence of warm relationality in storytelling supports how mutually inspiring engagement happened in those storytelling workshops.

d Storytelling as a linguistic model. Lexis and grammar have been assumed as playing a central role in teaching and learning a language (M. Lewis, 1993; Scrivener, 2011) and in students’ expectations. Researchers emphasized the importance of language expressions (i.e. collocations, multiword units, prefabricated constructions, fixed strings, formulaic sequences, routines, phrasal vocabulary units), which help language learners achieve effective comprehension and fluent production (see, for example, Hinkel, 2016, 2018; Schmitt, 2004). How storytelling was used shows the potential of storytelling as a linguistic model for relational learning.

The storytelling offered meaningful contexts where relationships of language facilitated children’s relational learning of pronunciation, sounds, and movements of the English language. For instance:

Sam: Alice pushed wheelbarrow. I can put the egg in my hat.
 Alex: I can put your hat in my bucket.
 T, C: I can put [Alex: put your hat in my bucket.]
 Kevin: o I can put the egg in my hat o (WS 4-Friends: 228–231)

Alex uttered the word ‘put’ incorrectly, but he corrected himself immediately when he heard the teacher and other children saying it correctly. Alex’s prompt pronunciation correction is evidence of learning English pronunciation through storytelling role play.

Throughout the workshops, the children quickly picked up words denoting sounds (i.e. onomatopoeia) such as ‘snap’ in *The Gingerbread Man*, ‘cluck’ in *Friends*, and ‘clink’ in *Slop*. Linguistic devices such as onomatopoeia, as in the word *clink* (i.e. the semiotic sound of a coin hitting a hard surface) mediated understanding and produced language. In other words, these devices supported the process of languaging for meaning making.

262 T: (Rolls the coin) Clink, clink [[C: Clink, clink]]
 263 T: What is clink sound?
 264 Sam and some children: It’s a gold coin. (WS 7 ST 3: 262–264)
 149 T: He slopped the bucket over the wall, over the wall
 (telling and acting) [[C: SLOP]]
 150 T: What happened? What did he hear?
 151 Jack, Alex: Stop, Stop. (WS 7 ST 3: 149–151)

As R. Ellis and Heimbach (1997) explained, ‘Children may find it easier to learn words that label objects which they have themselves elected to attend to’ (p. 256). In this case, it is not only repetition that promotes their fast uptake. One possible explanation is that



Figure 2. Meaning making through drawing and writing.

through storytelling, the sound is more accessible to remember in the context of language use. According to Coyle and Gracia (2014), onomatopoeia helps ‘reinforce new word meanings’ (p. 283). Therefore, the children can connect the meaning of a sound (e.g. the cluck of a hen laying an egg, or the clink of a rolling coin on a hard surface) with the onomatopoeic verbs (i.e. snap and slop).

The first author observed that the children recognized written story scripts and sounded them out, also demonstrating their EFL literacy. For example, in the activity of guessing, the children were attentive to the meaning and tried to sound out words or phrases, then read them aloud. Another example is where the children orally described what they had drawn and tried to write down the description (Figure 2).

Mary drew the picture of the wee little woman sweeping the peelings, which she learned from the storytelling performance of the story *The Slop*, and ‘sweep’ was a new word for her. She demonstrated her meaning making of ‘sweep’ by representing it through drawing and writing. In terms of grammar, she did not use the correct verb configuration of ‘sweeps’; however, she expressed the meaning correctly.

Storytelling as a linguistic model also provoked children’s agentic learning. They seemed to develop a meta-awareness of learning as shown in the following excerpts.

The children talked about how they made meaning of new and difficult words in the stories. Alex said:

The story has a lot of new words. I noticed how the teacher told the story through her actions so that I was able to make sense of the characters. I wanted to understand the movements and act them out and use the teaching aids like the teachers. (conversation 1: 34)

Alex implicitly mentioned his awareness of how to make meaning of English. He noticeably observed the teaching aids such as puppets, posters and movements of the verbs from the story (i.e. pattered, ran, sped, raced, scampered) because he wanted to learn the meaning of these verbs.

Steven talked about his awareness of learning grammar and shared his own strategy of learning in Vietnamese, except for a horse, a cow, gingerbread man in English.

Steven: I learned the words like *a horse, a cow, gingerbread man*. I can use these words as a subject in a sentence. (Conversation 1: 38)

Steven perceived the function of nouns as a subject in a sentence (e.g. a horse, a cow, a gingerbread man originally in English) through a sequence of events about these characters although he did not address the words as nouns.

He also transferred English that he had listened to through the teacher's storytelling to his self-regulation of silent pronunciation and memorization.

Steven: Because I concentrated when you were telling a story, I listened to your pronunciation. I tried to pronounce words silently, and I could speak. (Conversation 5: 10–15)

For example, at first, he pronounced the word 'egg' as /eɪg/, but after listening to the storytelling, his pronunciation was /eg/ (WS 5-Friends). In the same way that Alex corrected his pronunciation of 'put' from /pʌt/ to /pʊt/ when he heard class pronunciation in storytelling.

The children were conscious of developing strategic learning for story meaning making. They watched the visual prompts of gestures and props as elements of the told stories, listening, silently pronouncing the words, and memorizing and recounting aspects of the story when asked. Block (2000) uses the term meta-pedagogical awareness to refer to what and how a learner 'is able to think and talk about language learning and teaching experiences' from the learner's perspective (p. 100). The children talked about their learning in terms of self-regulation and with pedagogical awareness. There was no requirement for rote learning in the storytelling workshops. The children had some freedom of choice to take in what they liked. They were very willing to listen to stories and acquire English. The results of this study provided evidence that storytelling enhanced their confidence, meaning making and enthusiasm to learn English.

Taken together, the evidence of relational learning and meta-awareness of learning makes visible the storytelling pedagogy as a linguistic model in which children could be actively involved (see Dufva & Aro, 2014; Pennington, 2009). This points to the value of storytelling as an effective pedagogy for fostering more agential foreign language learning for young learners, with greater capacity for meta-awareness of learning.

VI Conclusions

Storytelling in this study worked as pedagogy that embraced both relational English language learning and agentic learning. Four key elements of storytelling as pedagogy

were identified. The first element is storytelling as a responsive strategy to engage children's cognition, emotion and imagination. The second key element of storytelling is multimodality, recognizing the constant interplay between linguistic, gestural, visual, tactile, auditory, and textual modalities. These modalities provide diverse mediational tools that facilitate meaning making for the children. The third key element acknowledges that storytelling has a great propensity to activate mutually inspiring engagement between the children and teacher. The children, through their responsiveness and attentiveness to aspects of the story, inspired the teacher's storytelling, which in turn inspired them to communicate their meanings during EFL learning more enthusiastically. The fourth element recognizes storytelling as a linguistic model which enables children's agentic learning, implying the children's self-assertion in language learning. Activating children's agency in learning through choices in multimodal relational communication of content enables children's awareness of how they learn.

Identification of the aforementioned elements in the practice of storytelling provides some support for the conceptual premise that storytelling as pedagogy enhances EFL learning for young learners. Evaluation of these elements assists in understanding the role of stories and storytelling in teaching EFL to children, offering an alternative pedagogy in the interdisciplinary study of second language acquisition and education. It is difficult for children to feel this intimate sharing in English as a foreign language in a mainstream EFL class in Vietnam as it typically follows 'a formulaic methodology' of structure-based instruction in which teachers didactically teach children through prescribed lesson plans for grammar (C.D. Nguyen, 2018). Storytelling as pedagogy counters passive and unimodal teaching of EFL to young learners. The recognition of the capacities of storytelling as pedagogy has specific implications for EFL teaching. We see these key elements of storytelling pedagogy as a generative guide for TEYL teachers to adopt in enhancing English language learning. More recently, research on EFL with children has focused on the application of child development theories after a period of methodological adaptation of adult learner age groups other than the primary age group. Enever (2015) points out the absence of age-appropriate pedagogy in many EFL primary school contexts worldwide today where teachers have been trained to 'teach across the whole age range' (p. 14). This study of storytelling pedagogy for children's EFL learning provides a generative example of a child-friendly pedagogy that centres on meaning making and emotions for learning to contribute to this gap in EFL literature.

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Notes

1. Story synopsis: Everyone wants to catch the gingerbread man, but he's too fast for them, until he reaches a river and meets a suspiciously helpful fox (Sims, 2011).

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