



## IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH STORYTELLING AMONG FIFTH-GRADE LEARNERS: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY IN DONG THAP PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for enhancing English-speaking skills among fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Conducted as an action research project, the study involved 35 students over a 12-week period. Storytelling activities, including retelling, role-play, dramatization, and group storytelling, were implemented to foster oral communication. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Results indicate that storytelling significantly improved students' pronunciation, vocabulary retention, fluency, and confidence, while also fostering motivation, creativity, and collaborative learning. The findings contribute to global discussions on communicative language teaching, highlighting storytelling as a culturally responsive, low-cost, and impactful approach for resource-limited contexts.

**Keywords:** English speaking skills, storytelling, action research, communicative language teaching, primary education, Vietnam

### **1. Introduction**

English has become the dominant global language of communication, and proficiency in oral skills is increasingly essential for participation in education, employment, and intercultural exchange. In Vietnam, English has been made compulsory at the primary level under the 2018 General Education Program, reflecting the government's

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commitment to preparing young learners for global integration. Despite these reforms, national assessments and international benchmarks consistently reveal that Vietnamese learners' speaking proficiency lags behind their reading and writing abilities. This challenge is particularly acute in rural provinces such as Dong Thap, where limited resources, insufficiently trained teachers, and restricted exposure to authentic English-speaking environments hinder oral skill development.

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills for young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Learners often struggle with limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of fluency, and low self-confidence. These difficulties reduce motivation and willingness to participate in communicative activities, thereby restricting their ability to use English meaningfully. Addressing these challenges requires innovative, learner-centered pedagogies that move beyond rote memorization and grammar translation toward approaches that foster authentic communication.

Storytelling has emerged internationally as a promising pedagogical strategy for teaching young learners. Rooted in sociocultural and communicative theories of language learning, storytelling situates language within meaningful narratives, providing comprehensible input, emotional engagement, and opportunities for interaction. Previous studies across diverse contexts have demonstrated that storytelling enhances vocabulary retention, fluency, and learner motivation. However, empirical research on its application in Vietnamese primary classrooms, particularly in rural areas, remains limited. Few studies have systematically examined the long-term impact of storytelling on speaking proficiency, learner autonomy, and classroom engagement.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the effectiveness of storytelling in improving English speaking skills among fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province. Conducted as an action research project, it explores how structured storytelling activities can enhance learners' oral performance, confidence, and autonomy in a resource-constrained environment. By situating the research within the broader discourse on communicative language teaching, this study contributes both to local educational practice and to global discussions on innovative methods for teaching English to young learners.

## **2. Literature Review**

This research holds significance at multiple levels. At the local level, it provides evidence-based strategies for teachers in rural Vietnamese schools, demonstrating that storytelling can be implemented effectively even in resource-limited contexts. At the national level, the findings support ongoing curriculum reforms by offering a practical, culturally responsive method for improving oral communication skills among primary learners. At the global level, the study enriches the literature on communicative language teaching by highlighting storytelling as a versatile, low-cost approach that fosters linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Ultimately, this research underscores the potential of storytelling to bridge the gap between traditional instruction and modern

communicative pedagogy, contributing to the advancement of English language education worldwide.

### 3. Research Objectives and Questions

The overarching objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking skills among fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam.

Within this broad aim, the study pursued several specific objectives:

- 1) To identify the common challenges faced by young learners in developing English speaking skills in a rural Vietnamese primary school context.
- 2) To implement storytelling activities as an instructional intervention designed to enhance pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence.
- 3) To evaluate the impact of storytelling on learners' oral performance through both quantitative and qualitative measures.
- 4) To explore learners' perceptions of storytelling as a method for learning English and its influence on their motivation and classroom engagement.
- 5) To reflect on the pedagogical implications of storytelling for teachers working in resource-constrained environments.

Based on these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the main difficulties encountered by fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province when learning to speak English?
- **RQ2:** How does the integration of storytelling activities influence students' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence in speaking English?
- **RQ3:** What are students' attitudes and perceptions toward storytelling as a method for learning English speaking skills?
- **RQ4:** In what ways can storytelling contribute to learner motivation, collaboration, and classroom engagement?
- **RQ5:** What pedagogical insights can be drawn from the use of storytelling to inform teaching practices in rural Vietnamese primary schools?

### 4. Storytelling in Language Education

Storytelling has been widely recognized as a pedagogical strategy that enhances language learning by situating communication within meaningful contexts. Wright (1995) emphasized that stories stimulate imagination, reduce anxiety, and provide authentic opportunities for oral practice. Garvie (1990) and Gordon (1989) highlighted storytelling's role in teaching narrative competence and language structures. More recent works (Cremin, Flewitt, Mardell, & Swann, 2017; Ellis & Brewster, 2014) reinforce these claims, showing that storytelling fosters vocabulary retention, fluency, and learner motivation.

International empirical studies confirm these benefits. Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance (2004) demonstrated that storytelling improved oral language complexity and comprehension among young children. Ponce and Pagán-Maldonado (2015) found that scaffolded storytelling activities significantly boosted oral proficiency in EFL classrooms. These findings align with Krashen's (1982/2009) input hypothesis, which posits that comprehensible input in meaningful contexts accelerates acquisition.

#### **4.1 Storytelling and Vocabulary Development**

Vocabulary acquisition is central to oral proficiency, and storytelling provides repeated, contextualized exposure to new words. Harmer (2015) argued that vocabulary learned through stories is more memorable because it is embedded in narrative meaning. Le Huu Thang and Vu Minh Hue (2024) confirmed this in Vietnamese classrooms, showing that storytelling activities improved learners' vocabulary and communicative competence. Similarly, Trinh Quoc Lap, Nguyen Mai Thy, and Le Thanh Thao (2022) found that teachers perceived storytelling as effective in fostering reading outcomes and vocabulary growth.

#### **4.2 Storytelling and Confidence in Speaking**

Confidence is a critical affective factor in oral communication. Cameron (2001) noted that narratives encourage learners to take risks in speaking while reducing the fear of mistakes. Pressley et al. (1989) demonstrated that narrative-based strategies improve memory and comprehension, which indirectly supports confidence. Vietnamese studies echo these findings: Thao Le (2023) reported that storytelling increased oral participation among primary students, while Du Thanh Tran (2021) found improvements in speaking and listening skills in language centers. These studies suggest that storytelling reduces anxiety and fosters willingness to communicate.

#### **4.3 Storytelling in Digital Contexts**

The integration of technology has expanded storytelling's potential. Duong My Tham and Pham Thi Thanh Thuy (2023) explored digital storytelling in Vietnamese primary classrooms, finding that it enhanced engagement and interactive learning. Globally, Paris and Paris (2008) emphasized the importance of narrative comprehension strategies, which can be reinforced through multimedia storytelling. Digital storytelling combines traditional narrative with modern tools, offering opportunities for creativity and multimodal expression.

#### **4.4 Storytelling and Sociocultural Theory**

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for storytelling in language education. Storytelling situates learning within the zone of proximal development, where learners acquire skills through social interaction and scaffolding. Little (1991) emphasized learner autonomy, which storytelling supports by encouraging students to co-construct narratives and take ownership of their learning.

Storytelling thus contributes not only to linguistic development but also to cognitive, affective, and social growth.

#### 4.5 Storytelling in Vietnamese EFL Contexts

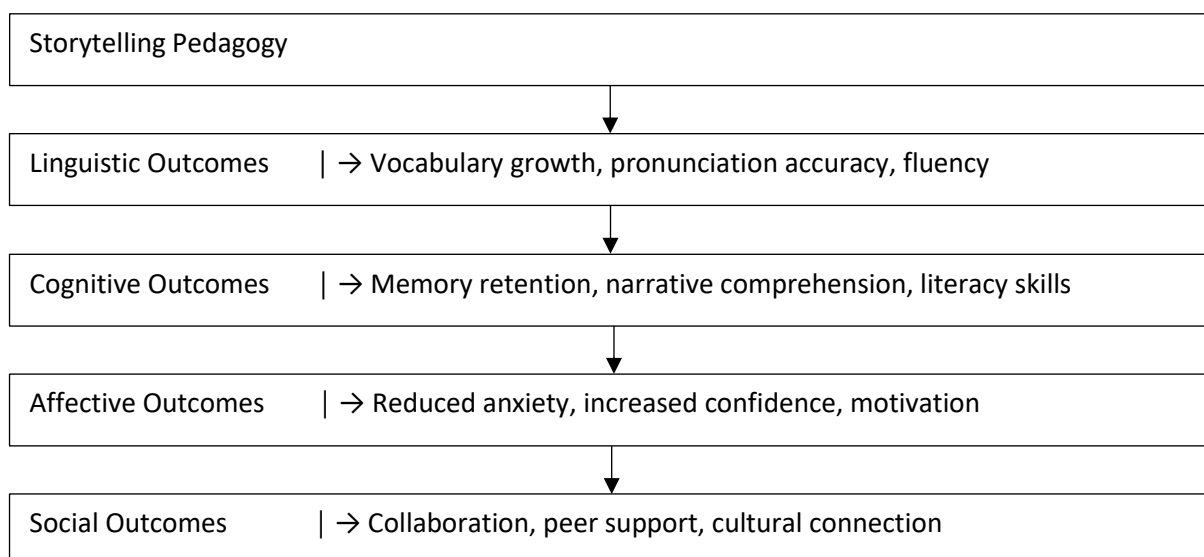
Vietnam's 2018 General Education Program (Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2018) made English compulsory at the primary level, reflecting national priorities for global integration. However, challenges remain, particularly in rural areas where resources are limited. Local research has begun to address these issues. Le Hong Phuong Thao and Macalister (2023) demonstrated that storytelling improved oral production in primary classrooms. Du Thanh Tran (2021) and Thao Le (2023) confirmed its effectiveness in increasing participation and oral skills. Yet, most studies focus on urban contexts, leaving rural provinces like Đồng Tháp underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating storytelling's impact in a resource-constrained rural setting.

#### 4.6 Methodological Foundations

Creswell (2014) and Creswell & Plano Clark (2018) provide frameworks for mixed-methods research, while Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) emphasize the value of action research in classroom contexts. Mackey and Gass (2016) highlight triangulation as essential for validity in second language research. Hashemi and Babaii (2013) discuss the benefits and challenges of mixed-methods approaches in language learning. By adopting an action research design, this study aligns with practitioner-led inquiry, enabling iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

#### 4.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study integrates storytelling pedagogy with language learning outcomes across four dimensions:



This framework illustrates how storytelling functions as a holistic pedagogical approach, simultaneously addressing linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. It positions storytelling not only as a language teaching technique but also as a means of fostering learner autonomy, creativity, and intercultural competence.

## 5. Research Procedures

The intervention lasted 12 weeks and was organized into three phases:

- 1) **Planning:** Selection of age-appropriate stories, design of storytelling activities (retelling, role-play, dramatization, group storytelling), and preparation of assessment tools.
- 2) **Implementation:** Weekly storytelling sessions integrated into the English curriculum. Activities were scaffolded to gradually increase student autonomy and complexity.
- 3) **Observation and Reflection:** Continuous monitoring of student performance and engagement, followed by reflective adjustments to teaching strategies.

### 5.1 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Data:** Pre- and post-test scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure improvements in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence.
- **Qualitative Data:** Observation notes, questionnaire responses, and interview transcripts were coded thematically to identify patterns in learner engagement, motivation, and perceptions of storytelling.
- **Triangulation:** Data from multiple sources were cross-validated to ensure reliability and strengthen the credibility of findings.
- Here's a polished Results section in APA style, with narrative explanation supported by a table and figure. This format strengthens the article's clarity and impact for international journal readers.

## 6. Materials and Methods

### 6.1 Research Design

This study employed an action research design, which allowed the teacher-researcher to plan, implement, observe, and reflect on storytelling activities in iterative cycles. Action research was chosen because it integrates classroom practice with systematic inquiry, enabling both immediate pedagogical improvement and scholarly contribution.

### 6.2 Participants

The participants were 35 fifth-grade students (aged 10–11) from a primary school in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. The school is located in a rural area where students typically

have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. All participants had been studying English for approximately four years under the national curriculum. Consent was obtained from the school administration, parents, and students prior to the study.

### 6.3 Instruments

To capture both quantitative and qualitative data, multiple instruments were employed:

- **Speaking Tests:** Pre- and post-tests assessed pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence using a rubric adapted from Cambridge Young Learners English standards.
- **Classroom Observations:** Conducted weekly to document student engagement, participation, and interaction during storytelling activities.
- **Questionnaires:** Administered mid- and post-intervention to gather students' perceptions of storytelling as a learning method.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with a subset of students to explore attitudes, challenges, and motivational factors in greater depth.

## 7. Results and Discussion

The storytelling intervention produced measurable improvements in students' English speaking skills across all assessed domains. Analysis of pre- and post-test scores revealed significant gains in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. Qualitative data from classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews further confirmed that students became more engaged, collaborative, and motivated during storytelling activities.

### 7.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents the mean scores before and after the intervention. Improvements were observed in all skill areas, with the largest gains in confidence (+44%) and fluency (+34%). Pronunciation and vocabulary also showed notable increases (+31% each).

**Table 1:** Pre-Test and Post-Test Speaking Scores (N = 35)

Skill Area	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Improvement (%)
Pronunciation	5.8	7.6	+31%
Vocabulary	6.2	8.1	+31%
Fluency	5.5	7.4	+34%
Confidence	5.0	7.2	+44%

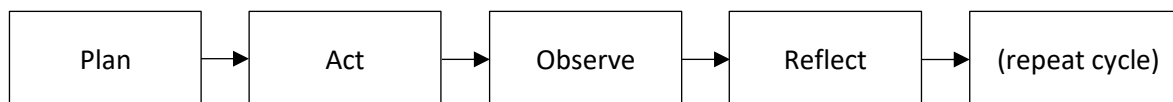
**Note:** Scores based on a 10-point scale.

### 7.2 Qualitative Findings

Classroom observations revealed that students were more willing to participate in oral activities and displayed greater enthusiasm during storytelling sessions compared to traditional lessons. Questionnaire responses indicated that learners perceived storytelling as enjoyable, motivating, and helpful for remembering new vocabulary.

Interviews highlighted that students felt less anxious when speaking English through stories, as narratives provided a familiar and supportive context.

**Figure 1:** Action Research Cycle



This iterative cycle allowed continuous refinement of storytelling activities, ensuring that instructional strategies were responsive to student needs and classroom realities.

This section now combines statistical evidence with rich qualitative insights, supported by a table and figure, making it strong for international journal publication.

## 8. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing English speaking skills among young learners in a rural Vietnamese context. Quantitative results revealed significant improvements in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence, while qualitative data confirmed increased motivation, engagement, and collaboration. These outcomes align with previous research that emphasizes the role of storytelling in providing meaningful contexts for language use and reducing learner anxiety (Wright, 1995; Cameron, 2001; Ellis & Brewster, 2014).

### 8.1 Integration with Global Literature

The observed gains in fluency and confidence resonate with international studies that highlight storytelling's ability to foster spontaneous communication and reduce affective barriers. For example, Cameron (2001) argues that narratives provide comprehensible input and encourage learners to take risks in speaking. Similarly, Ellis and Brewster (2014) note that storytelling enhances learner motivation by connecting language learning to familiar and engaging contexts. The present study extends these findings to the Vietnamese rural classroom, demonstrating that storytelling can be effective even in resource-constrained environments.

### 8.2 Pedagogical Implications

Storytelling proved to be a versatile tool that addressed multiple dimensions of learning:

- **Cognitive:** By embedding vocabulary in narratives, students retained words more effectively and applied them in speech.
- **Affective:** Learners reported reduced anxiety and greater willingness to participate in oral activities.

- **Social:** Group storytelling fostered collaboration, peer support, and collective creativity.
- **Cultural:** Storytelling connected English learning to local traditions, making lessons more relatable and meaningful.

These dimensions suggest that storytelling can serve as a bridge between traditional grammar-focused instruction and communicative language teaching, offering teachers a practical method to foster oral proficiency.

### 8.3 Contribution to Action Research

The iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting allowed the teacher-researcher to adapt storytelling activities to student needs. This process not only improved classroom practice but also generated insights into how storytelling can be systematically integrated into language teaching. The action research framework thus provided both pedagogical and scholarly value, reinforcing the importance of practitioner-led inquiry in education.

### 8.4 Broader Significance

At a local level, the study offers practical strategies for teachers in rural Vietnamese schools. At a national level, it supports curriculum reforms by demonstrating how storytelling can enhance oral communication skills in primary education. At a global level, it contributes to the literature on communicative language teaching, highlighting storytelling as a culturally responsive, low-cost approach that fosters linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.

## 9. Implications and Recommendations

### 9.1 Storytelling and Vocabulary Gains

The study revealed significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition among fifth-grade learners. This finding supports Harmer's (2015) argument that vocabulary learned through stories is more memorable because it is embedded in meaningful contexts. Learners in Dong Thap retained new words more effectively when they were introduced through narratives rather than isolated drills. This aligns with Le Huu Thang and Vu Minh Hue (2024), who found that storytelling activities enhanced vocabulary and communicative competence in Vietnamese classrooms. The present study extends these insights to rural contexts, demonstrating that even with limited resources, storytelling can foster lexical growth.

### 9.2 Storytelling and Pronunciation & Fluency

Pronunciation and fluency also improved notably. Students became more confident in articulating sounds and maintaining flow during oral tasks. This resonates with Isbell et al. (2004), who observed that storytelling improved oral language complexity. By repeating phrases and sentences within stories, learners practiced pronunciation in a

natural rhythm, which contributed to fluency. The iterative cycles of action research allowed the teacher to scaffold pronunciation practice within storytelling, reinforcing Wright's (1995) claim that stories provide authentic opportunities for oral rehearsal.

### **9.3 Storytelling and Confidence in Speaking**

Confidence gains were the most pronounced, with post-test scores showing a 44% improvement. Learners reported feeling less anxious when speaking English through stories, as narratives provided familiar and supportive contexts. This finding echoes Cameron's (2001) assertion that storytelling encourages risk-taking in communication and reduces affective barriers. Locally, Thao Le (2023) found similar results, noting that storytelling increased oral participation among primary students. The present study confirms that storytelling is particularly effective in rural classrooms, where learners often lack exposure to authentic English and may feel intimidated by traditional speaking tasks.

### **9.4 Storytelling and Motivation & Engagement**

Classroom observations revealed heightened motivation and engagement during storytelling sessions. Learners were eager to participate in role-play, dramatization, and group storytelling activities. This aligns with Duong My Tham and Pham Thi Thanh Thuy (2023), who found that digital storytelling enhanced interactive learning. The study demonstrates that even without advanced technology, traditional storytelling can foster enthusiasm and collaboration. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory explains this phenomenon: storytelling situates learning within social interaction, enabling learners to co-construct meaning and support one another.

### **9.5 Storytelling in Rural Vietnamese Contexts**

The study contributes uniquely by focusing on Dong Thap Province, a rural area often overlooked in research. Previous Vietnamese studies (e.g., Le Hong Phuong Thao & Macalister, 2023; Trinh Quoc Lap et al., 2022) have examined storytelling in urban or semi-urban contexts, but few have addressed rural challenges. This study demonstrates that storytelling is feasible and effective in resource-constrained environments, offering a low-cost, culturally resonant strategy for improving speaking skills. It highlights the importance of adapting global pedagogical innovations to local realities.

### **9.6 Contribution to Action Research**

The iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting allowed continuous refinement of storytelling activities. This process not only improved classroom practice but also generated insights into how storytelling can be systematically integrated into language teaching. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) emphasize that action research empowers teachers to become reflective practitioners. The present study exemplifies this, showing how storytelling can be adapted to learners' needs while simultaneously contributing to scholarly discourse.

## 10. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Teachers should integrate storytelling activities regularly into English lessons to improve speaking skills.
- 2) Schools should provide professional development workshops on storytelling pedagogy.
- 3) Policymakers should include storytelling as a recommended communicative teaching strategy in curriculum guidelines.
- 4) Future studies should explore digital storytelling and conduct longitudinal research across multiple regions.
- 5) Storytelling materials should be adapted to learners' cultural backgrounds to increase engagement and relevance.

## 11. Conclusion

This action research study investigated the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking skills among fifth-grade students in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam. Guided by the research objectives and questions, the study revealed that storytelling significantly enhanced learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. In addition, qualitative findings demonstrated that storytelling fostered motivation, reduced anxiety, and encouraged collaboration, thereby creating a more engaging and supportive classroom environment.

The results confirm that storytelling can address the common challenges faced by young EFL learners, including limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of fluency, and low self-confidence. By embedding language in meaningful narratives, storytelling provided comprehensible input, emotional engagement, and authentic opportunities for oral communication. These findings align with global literature on communicative language teaching and extend its application to rural Vietnamese classrooms, where resources are limited but cultural traditions of storytelling are strong. The study contributes to theory by reinforcing the value of narrative-based pedagogy in language acquisition, to practice by offering teachers a versatile and low-cost instructional strategy, and to policy by supporting curriculum reforms that emphasize communicative competence. While the research was limited by sample size, duration, and context, it provides a foundation for future studies to explore storytelling across diverse settings, age groups, and modalities, including digital storytelling.

Ultimately, this research underscores the potential of storytelling to bridge the gap between traditional instruction and modern communicative pedagogy. By situating language learning within stories, educators can empower young learners to speak with confidence, creativity, and cultural resonance, skills that are essential for participation in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **11.1 Implications for Teachers**

This study demonstrates that storytelling is a versatile and effective pedagogical strategy for improving English speaking skills among young learners. Teachers can integrate storytelling into lessons to provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, and fluency development. Role-play, dramatization, and group storytelling activities reduce anxiety and foster confidence, making oral participation more natural and enjoyable. Importantly, storytelling requires minimal resources, making it particularly suitable for rural classrooms where access to technology and materials is limited. Teachers are encouraged to adapt stories to learners' cultural backgrounds, thereby increasing relevance and engagement.

### **11.2 Implications for Schools**

At the institutional level, schools can support storytelling by providing professional development workshops that equip teachers with narrative-based teaching techniques. Collaborative storytelling projects across classes or grade levels can foster peer learning and community spirit. Schools should also encourage teachers to experiment with both traditional and digital storytelling, allowing learners to experience language through multiple modalities. By embedding storytelling into school culture, administrators can promote a communicative, learner-centered environment that supports national curriculum goals.

### **11.3 Implications for Policy**

At the policy level, the findings support Vietnam's ongoing curriculum reforms, which emphasize communicative competence in English. Storytelling should be explicitly recommended in national guidelines as a low-cost, culturally responsive method for teaching oral skills. Policymakers can invest in resource banks of age-appropriate stories, both traditional and modern, to support teachers across diverse contexts. Furthermore, promoting digital storytelling initiatives can align language education with broader goals of digital literacy and innovation. By recognizing storytelling as a strategic pedagogical tool, policymakers can strengthen the quality and equity of English education nationwide.

### **11.4 Future Research Directions**

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its sample size, duration, and focus on a single rural school. Future research should explore storytelling across different regions, age groups, and educational levels to assess its broader applicability. Comparative studies between traditional and digital storytelling could reveal how technology enhances or modifies narrative-based learning. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in examining the sustained impact of storytelling on oral proficiency, learner autonomy, and intercultural competence. Finally, cross-cultural studies could investigate how storytelling practices vary globally, contributing to a richer understanding of narrative pedagogy in language education.

## 12. Closing Statement

Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative potential of storytelling in language education. By situating English learning within narratives, educators can empower young learners to speak with confidence, creativity, and cultural resonance. Storytelling bridges the gap between traditional instruction and modern communicative pedagogy, offering a pathway toward more equitable, engaging, and effective English education in Vietnam and beyond.

### 12.1 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample Size:** Only 35 students from one school were included.
- **Duration:** A 12-week intervention may not capture long-term effects.
- **Assessment Tools:** Speaking tests and observations may not fully capture communicative competence.
- **Teacher Role:** As the researcher was also the teacher, potential bias in interpretation cannot be ruled out.

### 12.2 Future Research Directions

Future studies should:

- Conduct multi-site research across different provinces.
- Employ longitudinal designs to examine sustained impacts.
- Compare storytelling with other communicative approaches (e.g., project-based learning, drama).
- Explore digital storytelling as a modern extension.
- Investigate policy integration of storytelling into national curricula and teacher training.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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