The Effect of Digital Picture Storytelling (PST) on Improving Young Iranian Learners' Foreign Language Oral Production

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Abstract

This study focuses on the development of speaking skills in young Iranian learners and its contribution to the achievement of adequate oral production. It was conducted in a foreign language institute in Tabriz, Iran. Some 18 language teachers and 272 learners took part in the study. The learners were selected based on the convenient sampling in which they were placed into 18 intact classes using a placement test. The study employed a mixed-methods design. Digital picture story books were prepared using The Little Red Hen and Three Billy Goats storybooks. The experimental group was given digital picture story books and the control group traditional story books without the special treatment. A pre-test, a post-test, and a semi-structured interview were used to answer the questions. SPSS software was used for data analysis. The outperformance of the experimental group at the post-test revealed that using digital picture storytelling enhances learners' oral production. Semi-structured interviews outlined the positive motivational effect on the learners and the teachers' experiences using this method in their classes. The findings could aid language teachers in selecting a method that can facilitate young learners' oral production.

Keywords: Digital Picture Storytelling Method, Motivational Effect, Oral Production, Young Learners

1. Introduction

The recent growth and popularity of picture books in teaching the English language to young learners suggests considering many research fields in this regard. Some vital issues will be raised in this discussion, and it is hoped that other researchers will engage in the initiative to deepen the existing further in the future. In examining the reasons and the methods of using picture books in English language teaching, the realities of today's practice should be clarified to discover the potential of picture books. Typically, specific published materials are used in classroom contexts for teaching English. However, most teachers have no time, expertise, or even inclination for the constant development of their materials. Considering the contemporary situation, proposing picture books to become an essential part of lessons seems impractical and probably unsuitable in many contexts. Considering curriculum demands, the limitations of classrooms, and the particular enrichment qualities of a story itself, the present study discussed whether these books are best positioned as an essential part of a lesson. Thus, it is necessary to prepare the required materials in this path.

One of the keys to successfully applying storybooks with young EFL learners is to compel social interaction and classroom speaking that supports children's learning from an initial spontaneous response (often in their mother tongue) to enhancing creativity, autonomy, and competency in English. Using storybooks in primary EFL lessons is an appropriate teaching practice in various contexts. As a result, many recent books and works on teaching methodologies and resources have discussed it for teachers of young learners. If teachers appropriately select storybooks, the combination of attractive illustrations and

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meaningful content and related discourse structure would have a considerably socio-affective attraction. In addition, the provided contexts would have great potential for learning and acquiring a language in enduring and enjoyable ways.

Picture books offer opportunities for young learners to authentically experience the pleasure of story, rhymes, or information directly in the EFL. In this way, children are encouraged to behave as readers, share the book as a social experience, and gain confidence in telling the story themselves, which is crucial for becoming an actual reader. Such experiences could be as actual for reading in a first language as learning to read in the L1.

Over the past few decades, picture books have become highly popular in classroom contexts and in the school systems. Teachers have effectively employed picture books in classrooms for developing reading comprehension, story writing, and oral language skills. This trend is also becoming popular among EFL learners in Iran. Researchers have proposed different models for improving the language proficiency of young learners of foreign languages, ranging from structured grammatical tasks to interactions with authentic materials and situations.

Hence, the present study explores previous studies on the possible ways of employing picture books in the classroom to support EFL acquisition and enhance oral production in young learners. It can be claimed that picture books are both motivating and engaging and offer an exposure opportunity to various cultures, ideas, customs, and places. Moreover, by combining pictures and texts in picture books, EFL learners can connect with new words and vocabulary and are naturally exposed to grammatical forms, an authentic conversation, and dialogue.

According to the literature, the effectiveness of this strategy in enhancing language learning performance among young Iranian EFL students is investigated by engaging the learners in the EFL learning process through utilizing additional tasks and techniques in the classroom. The implication of this new approach has an important role in improving young learners' oral proficiency because of the EFL impact, the nature of the textbooks, or the supplementary textbooks employed for this purpose.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Young Learners and Storytelling Effects

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is growing globally with inclusion of English as a subject in formal education in schools from early ages (Ghosn, 2002). TEYL is regarded as a challenge for teachers. English is learned by many children as a second or foreign language (Pinter, 2017).

Professionals with a high level of preparedness is required for such early exposure of children to a foreign language (Cameron, 2001). With making various language learning experiences, children can improve literacy skills so that their oral language competence is supported. Consequently, in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), teachers and teachers are required to design and plan activities appropriate to the level of learners since young learners barely have adequate opportunities for interaction with the target language in the environment outside the classroom (Nunan, 2011).

There are many studies conducted on the way of improvement of language skills in secondary and college-level EFL students through storytelling activities (Marzuki et al., 2016; Chou, 2014). "Young learners" can be defined as children in the chronological age from birth to puberty years (Nunan, 2018). Teachers and teachers should plan and design their activities according to the emotional, cognitive, and physical stages that children endure through this process (Duckworth, 1964).

Research findings indicate that children at seven years old still lack a completely developed logical reasoning. However, with growing age, their brains start rearranging thoughts for classifying and building operational mental structures. Therefore, stories have the capability of improving literacy skills in

children in the early educational stages (Bolay & Yazici, 2017). Tomlinson (2013) contends that children can learn from what they can hear, touch, and see, what surrounds them, and from their experiences.

Young learners have special attributes, e.g., they need approval and attention from their instructor, they have a short attention span, curiosity, and inner motivation, and they are eager to speak about themselves. Educators should carefully consider these particular characteristics that represent vital components for improving classroom methodologies so that children are engaged in group or individual activities (Harmer, 2003). The proper activities within the instructional learning process are defined and delimited by the age developmental limitations (Nunan, 2011).

The classroom oral communicative or speaking activities are limited to repeating formulaic sequences and short conversation (Roos & Becker, 2016). This is principally because of assumptions of teachers that authentic tasks are complicated for young learners. According to Mackey et al. (cited in Ross & Becker, 2016), children have interaction in oral communicative tasks. Moreover, using retelling tasks, it is possible to further improve oral language skills. Retelling means an activity occurring after a reading or listening task in which learners tell what they heard or read orally, in written form, or by illustrations (Liu, 2006). These practices, however, are not frequent tasks in young learners' EFL classrooms.

Story reading and storytelling create meaningful social and linguistic situations for young learners. Children are mostly familiar with storytelling/reading frame and the discourse involved in stories in their mother tongue. As a result of this familiarity, they can make skills and knowledge learnt during storytelling sessions in their mother tongue. Besides, an environment is created where children feel safe, and, a natural learning process occurs since the affective filter is low. Ultimately, through stories, the target language structures and words are presented as embedded in a context related to children's life, rather than in an isolated way.

For a long time, teachers selected appropriate books for reading and sharing with their young learners (YL). Original picture books (in the teaching profession these books are known as "real" books) that are available nowadays have been attractive for keen teachers for their colorful, beautiful illustrations that amuse the readers. Skilled teachers understand the potential of these books for young beginners in English. They have developed their linked activities for extending the story pleasure with the use of these materials for teaching in the young learner classrooms.

Storytelling involves a process in which a person (the teller) communicates with others (the audience) using narrative structure, mental imagery, and vocalization. On the other hand, the audience also uses mental imagery and communicates back to the teller (Craig, 1996). Core assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) were described by Richards (2006) and it was affirmed that learners should be engaged in meaningful communication and interaction for improving language competency. In a research carried out in China, it was indicated that storytelling is an improved ability for self-evaluation of oral performance of learners (Kim, 2014).

According to the researchers, storytelling is as a guided activity for challenging learners to speak about themselves and it requires students to express their ideas by using words for conveying meaning (Gower et al., 1995). Teachers should carefully select stories based on their objectives so that the best outcome can be achieved (Thornbury, 2005). The exceptional value of "real" books is that they have been written for native speakers of English, and thus, they are authentic materials. Besides, they contribute to a long tradition in many cultures that employ the power of story to convey crucial cultural elements to the next generation of children. Stories as rich resources are full of cultural information and opportunities for experiencing the magic of the story, and provide a proper medium to contribute to the educational objectives of nurturing development of children and making them familiar with English as a foreign language.

2.2 Picture Storytelling

Picture is described as a representation or design built through different means, like drawing, painting, or photography (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Using images, young learners are allowed to break down the sequence of a short story, to process ideas, and to utilize familiar, simple words for transmitting meaning. Using picture storytelling books, the self is revealed and surroundings are discovered. With reading the literature, the readers are invited to various places and different times and they are exposed to ideas and experiences they might not have experienced, and then, they can use these experiences as starting points for their own stories. Furthermore, it has been discovered that the visual aids can be used as the most effective strategies for helping learners make an association between meaning and words and maintain motivation and engagement (Macwan, 2015).

It should be noted that children make sense of language through making sense of the situation (Donaldson 1987). Therefore, picture books add a further dimension to the familiar context and schemata that children depend on when they listen to a story in the foreign language. Pictures and images create interest and are an essential component of the process of meaning-making (Marriott 1998). Hence, experiences of picture books help develop visual literacy in children (Dunn 1999), and the knowledge construction in areas other than language learning is prepared and supported.

In the following we describe implications of picture books. First, prompt access is provided by the picture books: the pictures are not needed to be translated, and with the physical presence of the book, as an object that we can handle with pages that we can turn back and forth, we can check and support our arguments or look for new ideas. Second, picture books, like works of art, invite our engagement. The pictures attract children, no matter they can read the words or not, and as it has been revealed, it is possible to hold their attention using picture books for a long time during which they reflect and discuss on the meaning of the images. Third, a dispositional atmosphere is created through picture books in which the affective effect potentially broadens attitudes and cultivates thinking. Fourth, when picture books are looked at, it involves wide-spectrum cognition; that is, looking at picture books engages many cogitative processes, like analytical thinking, visual processing, posing questions, verbal reasoning, testing hypotheses, etc. Besides, they are essential part of learning for communication in a different language. Lastly, picture books inspire multi-connectedness, and using them, we can make links with many other human experience contexts, such as history, literature, philosophy, morality, geography, other cultures, and art itself (Perkins 1994).

By definition, there are various realizations of picture books: information books ("Sachbücher" as called by Germans), stories, activity books, illustrated collections of poems, songs, and rhymes, etc. These books have the potential of enriching the EFL learning classroom, although in different ways. From an educational perspective, the artwork and content of these books should comply with high-quality standards with a view to the language, contents, artwork, and specific educational requirements. In summary, these books should match with the curricular framework in which they are utilized. The book should reflect the primary educational objectives of the school, and the provided content should be in the intellectual scope of the age group. Nevertheless, the aspects that should be considered in this regard are not confined to these points. Picture books should not be seen merely as vehicles for conveying information, and the aesthetic dimension should also be taken into account. Even though picture books employed in classrooms need to be selected as examples of good literature and sound art, it is presented to and read by English language learners as a foreign or second language also affects their selection.

Sometimes, authentic picture books, i.e. those that are not written for school teaching purposes, are successful in integrating images more enjoyably and are better than school readers for young learners. A picture book chiefly designed and written for educational purposes may be according to different considerations determining its images and text – be that a choice of wording based on level of proficiency

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or word frequency, or a specific cultural bias based on the need to inform. Besides, there might be additional activities for helping students work with the language in the book and notes for the teacher.

There are a large number of studies confirming the advantages of using picture books in the English as foreign language classes and the impact of these books on development of the EFL learners' writing skills. The Sage Journals related to Language Teaching Research (Boers, 2018) published an article in which findings of three studies were summarized. The focus of these studies was on using visual description-related tasks as a way of eliciting language input for collection of such data as oral proficiency samples, grammar feature samples, and a picture story as a prompt for a writing task. It was found that for classroom researchers and educators, visual description and pictures facilitate assessment of children's linguistic acquisition progress and language skills.

For practicing instructional speaking, it is possible to use storytelling for eliciting personal anecdotes through asking students to make oral answers by the use of pictures as visual aids (Thornbury, 2005). According to some studies, interaction can be facilitated using pictorial aids and speaking proficiency can be developed, while improving motivation and speech. Moreover, Briesmaster and Lavalle (2017) analyzed picture descriptions for determining a positive impact on communicative skills.

As maintained by Janice Bland (2013), picture books can present a lively process involving experimentation and imagination in the EFL classes. Additionally, using the material provided by picture books, interest of young learners can be maintained for longer periods since children repeatedly return to picture books. Therefore, these books are generally beneficial in developing an interest in stories and reading.

Other reasons for effectiveness of these books are the opportunities offered by them to develop verbal and visual literacy, that is, making meanings based on visual and verbal clues, meeting information about other cultures and contexts and practices of target language, gaining higher-order skills in comprehending complex narrative meanings, improving sense of humor and critical thinking, attaining interactive reading and participatory. Given the profits of story-telling and listening to stories and thinking in stories, schools should essentially construct and cultivate narrative sensibility and nurture the narrative form potential as a means of learning.

The picture books are potentially useful for language learning because of the active engagement between book and learner, resulting in using and participating with language (Mourão, 2015). According to Mourão (2013), even very young learners have the capability of comprehending narrative meanings delivered through pictures of picture books, for example, the endpapers, the front and back covers, dedication and copyright pages, and title pages. Picture books can be utilized as a motive for sharing thoughts and experiences, creative responses, bouncing off viewpoints, and entertainingly spending class time. Future teachers should have the ability of recognizing the potential of picture books in language learning and applying these tools in practice. Nevertheless, how is it possible to achieve this goal?

2.3. Digital Picture Storytelling

Basically, digital storytelling refers to the use of technology for telling stories. It is possible to define digital storytelling as the process of producing a short film by joining a text or an original story with multimedia elements, including sounds, pictures, and videos. In this study the researcher created digital picture storybooks using *The Little Red Hen and Three Billy Goats* storybooks' pdf files. *The Little Red Hen* and *Three Billy Goats* are the Family and Friends 1 story books. The written text of the stories were omitted, additional sounds and animations were added using Adobe Photoshop Mix software.

2.4. Fluency in Young Learners Oral Production

Recently, Cameron (2003) conducted a research aiming at moving the existing understanding forward in child FLL by presenting a model of language construction construct. In this model, oral skills are

diagrammatically separated from written skills, and then, the learning of oral skills is sub-divided into discourse and vocabulary. In this diagram, no similar sub-division is offered for the pre-reading/writing skills related to written language learning (refer to Cameron 2001). It is a 2D representation, with the inevitable consequence that the reader is offered a bi-polar concept, which probably implies separate learning of written skills and oral skills. No insights are offered by this diagram regarding the early stages of becoming literate in a EFL for young learners. Considering this gap in the theoretical discussion, the lack of appropriate research in this area is reflected, and it emphasizes the significance of a clearer understanding of the way of interaction of oral, written, and visual texts in EFL learning process for young learners.

Despite the strong arguments on the significance of authentic picture books, there is still uncertainty about their real value in supporting development of literacy in EFL learners. Studies in some countries have indicated the impact of attractive and colorful books of high quality, instead of conventionally available books in locally produced publications, on motivating development of foreign language literacy.

Nunan (2018) believes that fluency in speaking instruction for young children should be regarded as the ability of holding a stream of speech without hesitation or long pauses. Thus, fluency means the ability of speaking without interruptions. Fluency at beginner levels can be attained by engagement of learners in amusing learning through activities that involve interaction and using new or recycled vocabulary (Nunan, 2018). Using storytelling through picture description leads in empowerment of primary school students and boosts oral production by motivating authentic, honest communication with their teachers and peers. Finally, the picture books offer a precious opportunity for reinforcing oral skills in both the first language and foreign language since the young children increasingly become familiar with written text and take over the reading process.

2.5. Instructor Competency in Story-Based Approach

Competencies in a story-based approach is related to the areas of understanding skills and knowledge and classroom strategies. There is evidence suggesting the requirement for inclusion of these competencies in teacher development courses focusing on the use of children's literature and storytelling techniques.

The crucial competencies for successful implementation of a story-based approach can be categorized under the main areas of teacher education. These competencies include values and attitudes that should be encouraged and promoted by language teaching, understanding and knowledge essential for EFL teaching and the diversity of learning and teaching, and classroom skills and strategies. There is interrelation among many of the competencies, but the competencies associated with values and attitudes underpin all other ones. There is a close relationship between competencies related to understanding and knowledge and planning, teaching, and assessment (Kelly et al., 2004).

A critical part of planning and anticipation is classroom management, which involves making decisions about various aspects, including time management, organization of storytelling, checking to understand, giving clear demonstrations and instructions, keeping the pace of the lesson, making underlying rules for behavior management, integrating and using such resources and props as multimedia or audio-visual aids, routines, managing group- and pair-work, diversity management, making a book corner, presenting children's work, and dealing with accidental interruptions or incidents. With an effective classroom management, a purposeful learning environment can be established.

Valuable opportunities can be provided by a story-based approach for the instructor to enhance students' learning strategies and metacognitive awareness. When a story-based program of work is carefully planned, the learners are involved in planning by informing them about the reasons of using a specific storybook, what they would learn regarding the content and language, and the main outcomes. By engaging learners in relevant activities, as well as by combining, extending, personalizing, and

reviewing covered work, the instructor can involve students in experimentation with the language presented through the story. It is essential to have a teacher-led end of activities or a lesson review session, also called a plenary.

Carefully guided questioning inspires young learners to reflect on their learning, the involved processes, and their learning. Using guided questioning, learners are helped improve cognitive strategies and metacognitive knowledge systematically and explicitly. Particularly, when children listen to stories, they become aware of audio and visual clues as clues to meaning, and they can use these to predict meaning, to listen for gist and specific information, to become aware of the way of activating and using contextual clues and prior knowledge for meaning prediction, and many other cognitive strategies built through related language learning tasks.

2.6. Learning Assessment

For effective teaching, teachers should have the capability and commitment for analyzing and reflecting on their practice and improving it through engagement with new knowledge and ideas and personal development. Teachers should be able to judge their teaching and recognize ways of creating improvements. This can include their classroom practice and broader aspects of their professional knowledge and skills.

Regardless of using storybooks as the main source or as supplementary teaching aids, teachers should account for what they are doing and present evidence of what learners are learning. Despite the possibility of assessing the progress in terms of linguistic outcomes, assessment of affective, cognitive, social, and cultural outcomes is more challenging. Teachers can give progress tests to children so that formal evaluations of learning can be obtained.

Moreover, observation sheets can be employed for keeping individualized records of each learner's performance and progress, which is based on informal observations during classes (Brewster & Ellis, 2002). Teachers can also build individual profiles for each child by keeping progress tests, self-assessment, observation sheets, and storybook evaluations. Lastly, using story folders or portfolios, progress can be appropriately documented based on positive achievements rather than deficits. In order to better conduct the current study, the following questions were formed.

Research Question One: Is there any significant relationship between digital picture storybooks and learners' oral production enhancement?

Research Question Two: What are the motivational effects of digital picture storytelling on learners' oral production?

Research Question Three: What are the experiences of teachers using digital PST method in their classes?

3. Methodology

 3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were Young Iranian EFL learners of a foreign language institute in Tabriz, Iran. A total of 272 participants were selected using the intact class sampling method. The participants were both females and males in the mixed EFL classes. The learners were assigned to the classes through the institute's placement test. The learners were at the A2 level of English proficiency according to CEFR, the international standard of describing language ability. Also, 18 male and female teachers with 5 years or more teaching experience took part in the study.

Table 1: Learners' characteristics (N=272)

Gender / Age	Categories	N (%)
Gender	Female	155 (56.98%)
	Male	117 (43.01%)
	Total	272 (100%)
Age	8-year-old	68 (25%)
	9-year-old	103 (37.8%)
	10-year-old	74 (37.2%)
	Total	272 (100%)

Table 2: Teachers' characteristics (N=18)

Gender / Age	Categories	N (%)
Gender	Female	11 (61%)
	Male	7 (39%)
	Total	18 (100%)
Age	23 – 25	5 (28%)
	26 - 28	8 (44%)
	29 – 31	5 (28%)
	Total	18 (100%)
Level of Education	B.A.	14 (78%)
	M.A.	4 (22%)
	Total	18 (100%)
Experience of Teaching	5 – 6 years	15 (83%)
	7-8 years	3 (17%)
	Total	18 (100%)

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1 Digital Picture Storybooks

The participants were studying *Family and Friends 1* student book, workbook, and storybooks. The researcher created digital picture storybooks using *The Little Red Hen and Three Billy Goats* storybooks' pdf files. *The Little Red Hen* and *Three Billy Goat*s are the Family and Friends 1 storybooks. The written texts of the stories were omitted, and additional sounds and animations were added using Adobe Photoshop Mix software.

3.2.2. Oral Proficiency Assessment 1

The researcher provided an oral proficiency assessment to examine the oral production level of the learners. This oral proficiency assessment included an observational checklist on learners' language utterances during storytelling. This assessment considered the number of uttered sentences for each story page, the use of L2 vs. L1 in storytelling, and the use of target words, paraphrasing, or circumlocutions. *Three Billy Goats* digital picture storybook was used for OPA 1.

3.2.3. Oral Proficiency Assessment 2

Similar to OPA 1, the oral proficiency assessment 2 encompassed an observational checklist on learners' language utterances during storytelling. This assessment was based on the number of uttered sentences for each story page, the use of L2 vs. L1 in storytelling, and the use of target words, paraphrasing, or circumlocutions. *The Little Red Hen* digital picture storybook was used for OPA 2. These observational checklists helped keep an individualized record of each learner's oral performance.

3.2.4. Semi-Structured Interview

The researcher used a semi-structured interview, i.e. a blend of close-ended and open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview included 5 open-ended questions and 3 close-ended questions. The interview was done to explore the experiences of the teachers who were using digital picture storybooks in their courses. The interview was also done to clarify any motivational effect on young EFL learners using digital picture storytelling.

3.3. Design of the Study

The study employed a quasi-experimental design and semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected using the intact group sampling method. The triangulation method was done to examine whether findings converge, are consistent, or contradict. This study examined and compared the outcomes for participants receiving the digital picture storytelling method (experimental group) with outcomes for a similar group of participants not receiving the treatment (control group). The dependent variable is the oral proficiency of learners and the independent variable is method of teaching story books.

3.4. Procedures

Based on the study design, we recruited 272 participants, of which 132 were assigned to the control group and 140 to the experimental group. To ensure whether there are initial differences between the control and experimental groups, the researcher applied a pre-test. The pre-test was piloted to a group similar to our society to ensure its effectiveness. Also, the pre-test was analyzed by several professionals in the field to employ any revisions, omissions, or substitutions required. Next, the pre-test scores were analyzed by SPSS software using an independent sample t-test to compare the means of two groups. Independent t-test analysis revealed that there were not any significant differences between the control group and the treatment group. Hence, after ensuring the initial similarity in oral proficiency of both groups, the research was continued using the mentioned control group and experimental group. In the next phase, the control group was instructed through the traditional story reading method. In this method, first, the teacher and then the learners were asked to read the storybook. Afterward, the students were supposed to summarize the story without looking at the text.

On the other hand, the experimental group received the novel digital picture storytelling method, in which a special digital picture storybook was prepared. In this method, there was not any text in storybooks. First, the instructor asked students some questions about the pictures, elicited the pictures using new words and any required sentences about the story, and provided animations and sounds included in the digital picture storybook. The instruction was continued for 12 sessions, and the treatment lasted for 20 minutes in each session.

After instruction fulfillment, an oral proficiency post-test assessment was accomplished for both the control and experimental groups. The collected post-test assessment results were analyzed through an independent sample t-test by SPSS software. Results were extracted according to the mean differences between the two groups. Decisions were made using the independent sample t-test results. An independent sample t-test was performed to prepare the data and information to answer the first research question. At the end of the instruction, the teachers were interviewed through a semi-structured interview such that the researcher could gain the needed information for research question three.

3.5. Data Analysis

An independent T-test was employed to analyze the data. The following assumptions should be adhered to for conducting a valid test using an independent sample t-test: 1) the data values must be independent; 2) measurements for one observation should not affect measurements for any other observation; 3) data in each group must be obtained via a random sample from the population; 4) data in each group are

normally distributed; 5) data values are continuous; 6) the variances for the two independent groups are equal. Since the data met these assumptions, the independent sample t-test was used in this study.

4. Results

4.1. Research Question 1

According to the applied inferential statistics in post-test (table 8) and *p* value which is less than .05, the null hypothesis is rejected and there is a meaningful relationship between digital picture storybooks and learners' oral production. According to Figure 1 the number of male and female participants are almost similar. Also, table 3 shows that 56.6% of participants with frequency of n = 154/ Total = 272 are females and 43.4% of participants with frequency of n = 118/ Total = 272 are males.

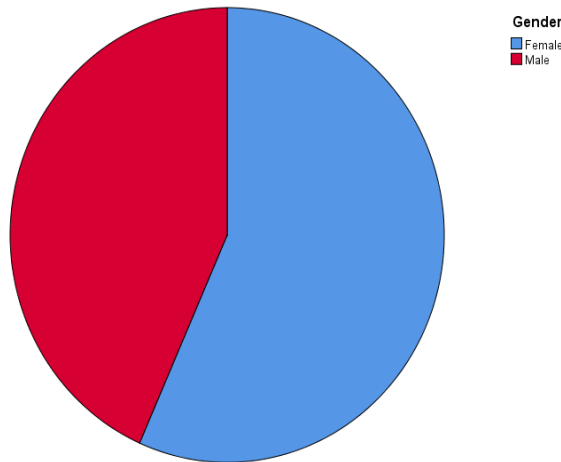Figure 1: Distribution of Participants' Gender

Table 3: Frequency of Gender

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	154	56.6	56.6	56.6
	Male	118	43.4	43.4	100.0
	Total	272	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2 displays the distribution of participants in control group and experiment group. The blue color shows the control group's frequency while the red color outlines the experimental group's frequency. The statistics of the participants' distribution in control and experiment groups are provided in table 4. According to table 4, 48.5% of participants (n = 132/Total = 272) were included in the control group, and 51.5% of participants (n = 140/ Total = 272) were included in the experiment group. Therefore, the frequency of participants in two groups was nearly equal.
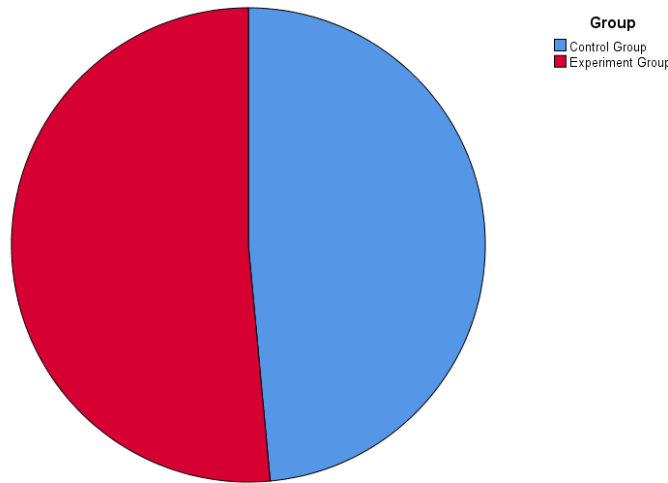
Figure 2: Distribution of Participants in Control and Experiment Groups

Table 4: Frequency of Participants in Control and Experiment Groups

Group

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Control Group	132	48.5	48.5	48.5
	Experiment Group	140	51.5	51.5	100.0
	Total	272	100.0	100.0	

A pre-test was given to the control and experimental groups to apply the treatment. Table 5 provides descriptive statistics, namely mean and standard deviation, for the two groups that were compared. The oral proficiency of the control group ($N = 132$) was associated with $M = 7.35$ ($SD = 1.662$). By comparison, the oral proficiency of the experimental group ($N = 140$) was associated with $M = 7.34$ ($SD = 1.617$).

Table 5: Descriptive Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Oral Proficiency Assessment	Control Group	132	7.35	1.662	.145
(Pre-test)	Experimental Group	140	7.34	1.617	.137

To test the hypothesis that the control group and the experimental group were associated with statistically similar oral proficiency levels, an independent samples t-test was performed. As shown in Table 6, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested and satisfied via Levene's F test, $F(270) = 0.33$, $p = 0.566$. The independent samples T-test was associated with $t(270) = 0.02$, $p = 0.977$. Thus, with 95% CI, it was assumed that the control group was associated with a statistically similar mean to the experimental group and there was no statistically significant difference in oral proficiency mean between the control group and experimental group.

Table 6: Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	Df.	Sig.(2-Tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Oral Proficiency Assessment (Pre-test)	Equal Variances Assumed	.330	.566	.028	270	.977	.006	.199
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			.028	267.995	.977	.006	.199

After pre-test analysis, the control group was instructed through the traditional story reading method, and the experimental group received the novel digital picture storytelling method. The instruction was continued for 12 sessions, each treatment lasting for 20 minutes. At the end of instruction, an oral proficiency post-test assessment was given to both the control and experimental groups. The collected post-test assessment results were analyzed through an independent sample t-test by the SPSS. Table 7 compares descriptive statistics for the control group and the experimental group. The oral proficiency of the control group ($N = 132$) was associated with $M = 7.9$ ($SD = 1.341$). Based on the obtained results, the oral proficiency of the experimental group ($N = 140$) was associated with $M = 11.89$ ($SD = 1.870$).

Table 7: Descriptive Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Oral Proficiency Assessment (Posttest)	Control Group	132	7.90	1.341	.117
	Experimental Group	140	11.89	1.870	.158

An independent t-test was conducted to test the hypothesis that the control and experimental groups were associated with statistically significant differences in oral proficiency levels. According to Table 8, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested and satisfied via Levene's F test, $F (270) = 17.74$, $p = 0.000$ ($p < .05$). The independent samples T-test was associated with a statistically significant effect, $t (270) = -20.08$, $p = .000$ ($p < .05$). Thus, with 95% CI, it was assumed that the experimental group had a significantly larger mean than the control group.

Table 8: Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig.(2-Tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. error Difference
Oral Proficiency Assessment (Posttest)	Equal Variances Assumed	17.749	.000	-20.084	270	.000	-3.984	.198
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			-20.084	252.352	.000	-3.984	.197

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed on both the control and experimental groups to explore the impact of digital picture storytelling (PST) on improving oral production in young Iranian learners' foreign language. Table 9 provides the number of participants (N), mean scores, and Standard deviations (Std).

According to Table 9, there were no significant differences among the control group's mean scores ($M = 7.35$, $SD = 1.66$) and the experimental group ($M = 7.34$, $SD = 1.61$) at the outset of the study. However, the control group's mean score (M = 7.90, SD = 1.341) and the experimental group ($M = 11.89$, $SD = 1.87$) differed at post-test.

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics of Control Group and Experimental Group

Oral Proficiency Assessment	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	Control Group	132	7.35	1.662
	Experimental Group	140	7.34	1.617
Posttest	Control Group	132	7.90	1.341
	Experimental Group	140	11.89	1.870

Moreover, their scores increased in the delayed post-test. In the initial stage, the null hypothesis (i.e. there is no significant difference between the control group and experimental group) was accepted. In the post-test stage, the alternative hypothesis (i.e. there is a significant difference between the control group and experimental group) was accepted. Therefore, the experimental group had a larger mean after instruction through the digital PST method. Furthermore, according to the statistics, the PST method it had a positive impact on improving oral production in young Iranian learners' foreign language.

4.2. Research Question 2

In this study, a semi-structured interview was employed to examine the existence of a positive motivational effect on oral production of young learners' storytelling using the digital PST method. For this purpose, five questions aimed to answer the second research question.

According to the teachers' responses, more than 70% of them found the instruction fully motivating and claimed that the new method enhanced the learners' willingness to participate in the storytelling activity. Also, it was reported that the new method has significantly reduced the learners' anxiety. Furthermore, the learners were more relaxed while retelling the story since applying the new method. Thus, a positive motivational effect was traced in the groups using the digital PST method.

4.3. Research Question 3

On the other hand, the semi-structured interview contained three questions to provide the teachers with an opportunity to share their experiences in using digital PST files in their courses. The teachers were asked about the handiness of these files in receiving learners' feedback. Also, they were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of this method. Some of these experiences that were randomly chosen are reported anonymously in the following lines:

N.1 "They were highly relaxed without being stressed out while reading the sentences because I asked them to look at the pictures and talk about whatever they saw each session. It was enjoyable for them. All students volunteered each session to look at the pictures and explain the happenings to their friends."

N.2 "Actually, it helped them use new vocabularies in sentences, and even they made some sentences that they didn't know their structure, but they knew what the sentences meant."

N.3 "Students tried to use the learned words when they didn't have the text before themselves. This triggered the use of passive knowledge and generated active Vocabulary usage, and they made story time more productive."

N.4 "In my opinion, PST is a great way of alteration of passive knowledge into active usage of language. But because it was their first time, they weren't confident enough to share their version of the story. Therefore, few students had the willingness to retell it."

N.5 said "Pros of this method are more tendency to speak and participate in class activities; using new vocabularies and structures and learning them autonomously. Cons: Probably, the students that can't summarize very well will get demoralized."

N.6 "I always do the same in my low-level classes. I show the pictures of selected pages of a storybook to my students and ask them to talk about these pages. In this way, even the shyest student is ready to say something. Students don't like to read sentences. Also, looking at the pictures and trying to make some sentences enables them to save those pages in their minds for a long time. I understand this by reviewing the previous pages in each session. They rarely forget the content of the story."

N.7 "It encourages students in storytelling. Students tell the story in their own words instead of memorizing it. This strategy is very useful to help students visualize the story."

5. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, this study investigated and analyzed three research questions. To answer research question one, in the pre-test stage the present study's findings retained the null hypothesis, suggesting there was not a statistically significant difference between the average oral proficiency scores of the participants in the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test. Thus, both groups were similar at the outset of the study. In the post-test stage the present study's findings rejected the null hypothesis and indicated a statistically significant difference between the average oral proficiency scores of the control group and experimental group.

In line with the findings of this study, other research findings indicate that children at seven years old still lack a completely developed logical reasoning. However, with growing age, their brains start rearranging thoughts for classifying and building operational mental structures. Therefore, stories have the capability of improving literacy skills in children in the early educational stages (Bolay & Yazici, 2017). Tomlinson (2013) contends that children can learn from what they can hear, touch, and see, what surrounds them, and from their experiences.

The second research question aimed to find out the motivational effects of digital picture storytelling on learners' oral production. The semi-structured interview revealed the emergence of a positive motivational effect in the groups using the new method. Similarly, Ford and Lisenbee (2017) recognized storytelling as a means for creating a reliable connection between real-world experiences and academic content. As concluded by other research findings, storytelling also improves and motivates cognitive engagement, critical thinking, and visualization as a way of understanding written texts (Agosto, 2016). Furthermore, it (Macwan, 2015) has been proven that the visual aids can be used as the most effective strategies for helping learners make an association between meaning and words and maintain motivation and engagement.

Research question three focused on the experiences of teachers using digital PST method in their classes. As revealed in the findings of the present work, the teachers' expectations had a critical role in children's reactions when reading a picture book. Some of the learners chosen by teachers for participation in the study, except the silent or uninterested ones, proved their teachers as wrong since they were turned out as the most experienced readers of the image or the most articulate when speaking about pictures. In contrast, some of the learners who were expected to provide insightful responses regarding their high achievement in the classroom turned out to be less visually competent. Overall, it seemed that their unilateral focus on the written text somehow blocked their picture reading. Generally, the children had the highest accessibility to picture books and other visual media rather than the best textual "decoders" who could achieve deeper levels of meaning.

Nevertheless, as confirmed by our findings, careful looking draws the attention of most children, including those who are not fluent in English. As a result of constructive dialogue with both peers and teachers, children as readers are enabled to develop their textual and visual understanding of language. It was also found that the volunteer aesthetic and emotional engagement of children allowed them to link their cultural legacies and knowledge with other symbolic systems or ideas. In this way, using picture books enabled students to build and cross bridges.

In line with the findings of present study it is believed that, storytelling is as a guided activity for challenging learners to speak about themselves and it requires students to express their ideas by using words for conveying meaning (Gower et al., 1995). Teachers should carefully select stories based on their objectives so that the best outcome can be achieved (Thornbury, 2005). There is a close relationship between competencies related to understanding and knowledge and planning, teaching, and assessment (Kelly et al., 2004).

6. Conclusion

Some critical contributions are presented in the current study in opening different ways of improving EFL skills in learners. One of these ways is storytelling, which promotes learners' authentic communication inside and outside the classroom. Language acquisition can be facilitated through endless opportunities in young learners.

The research outcomes suggest that it is possible to use stories as a practical approach to improve language competence in young learners and fill the gap in research on how storytelling can actively support language development in earlier CEFR levels. However, useful pedagogical implications can be drawn from the study results. Since this study used intact random groups as its population, its findings should be interpreted cautiously. On the other hand, if this method is applied correctly, it can facilitate the learning and teaching processes. English teachers can also use the present findings to develop the learners' oral proficiency levels. According to the findings of this study, there would be some horizons for further research in this field.

- The research can be replicated in another context with learners from different language backgrounds.
- This study was done on EFL learners'; further research could be done using this method for ESL learners.
- Future studies should apply this research to older learners at a higher level (in primary or high school) and investigate more complicated vocabulary and approaches.
- It is suggested to examine other language skills and sub-skills to test whether storytelling brings about the same outcomes when applied to other skills, like reading, writing, or listening.

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8. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

As the authors, Associate Professor Leila Dobakhti and Mahshid Panahi declare that we do not have any conflicts of interest.

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