Storytelling to Young EIL Learners in Taiwan: A Cautionary Tale

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Abstract

The practice of storytelling in young learner foreign language classrooms is gaining increasing attention around the world and considerable benefits are claimed for it, yet it is largely absent from English as an International Language (EIL) instruction in Taiwan state elementary schools. Moreover, much that is written in favor of story-telling is based on L1 experiences and not founded on any research in L2: L2 studies that do exist are often small scale and/or lack a control group. The Taichung Ministry of Education therefore funded a large scale intervention over a semester in ten state elementary schools in central Taiwan, using classes of matched grade level in each school (covering grades 3-6), 40 classes and 1036 learners in all, either receiving or not receiving a daily storytelling session and related listening/reading support. In order to ensure scalability and sustainability after the study, the project utilized only teachers, teaching time and other resources which were normally available in elementary schools and the storytelling was based on existing published Rainbow Time Magazines (RTM) and associated materials provided by Cornel Co., Ltd, and the Cornel English School. Results show a pattern of favorable attitudes, together with considerable gains between pre- and post-tests of reading and listening, but interestingly no overall significant difference between the score improvements in the storytelling classes and those in the control classes. Likely reasons for this are discussed, with considerable implications both for the Ministry, researchers and teachers wishing to use storytelling in the young learner classroom.

Key words: young learners, EIL, storytelling, listening, reading, attitude
Introduction

Storytelling has tremendous intuitive appeal as a component of teaching language to children. Moreover it gains support from several theories of learning. Krashen's natural approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) embraces it as a key source of input, provided it is comprehensible, through which language acquisition at all levels may occur. It is also compatible with social interactive learning theory (Gupta, 2008), provided it is implemented in the zone of proximal development and interactively, or even collaboratively, between teacher and learners. It also fits with some recognized language teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching and the associated method of Task-based Instruction, if the primary focus is on the transmission of the content of a story which was previously unknown to the learners, rather than on language points (Saucedo, 2005). Indeed storytelling is separately recognized in a teaching method of its own called TPRS (Ray & Seely, 2004). This initially stood for Total Physical Response Storytelling, drawing on the ideas of Asher (2000) and highlighting how children can learn through performing actions connected with the characters and events in the story. However it has now changed to stand for Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling, and draws more on Krashen's aforementioned ideas together with those of Mastery Learning.

Furthermore, there is a considerable literature in support of its benefits in L1 language teaching with young children. There is no space to review this fully here, but it must be said that it ranges widely from enthusiastic and anecdotal teacher endorsement to serious empirical research papers. Furthermore, measures of success vary considerably, including measures of listening comprehension, oral retelling quality, vocabulary learning, general literacy or language proficiency gain, and attitude.

In brief, the main claimed L1 advantages fall into the following areas (based primarily on Isbell et al., 2004; Lockett, 2011). The main language skill developed is obviously listening, but children often also read the stories themselves or are on the threshold of reading and it is widely held that both reading and listening comprehension are assisted. If children are expected to retell or discuss stories orally or in writing then production skills may also be promoted. If stories are truly told to them rather than just read aloud, children also learn valuable information about nonverbal means of communication. Reading, and hearing stories told or read, are also considered major sources of vocabulary (Morrow, 1996). Learning about other cultures can also occur, if the stories are suitably chosen, and this can further enable children to build "appreciation and respect for those unlike themselves" (Lenox, 2000: 97). Wider benefits for thinking and learning include developing listening/reading strategies such as how to guess and infer (Mallan, 1996), while the deeper involvement which may be generated in a story than from other kinds of input may lead to better retention both of content and language. Finally there is a whole range of affective benefits such as anxiety reduction (compared with reading), inspiration of
the imagination, interest and motivation, including prompting a desire to read more.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Storytelling in L2 Classrooms

In the literature on L2 storytelling we again find, as in the L1 literature, a good deal of pedagogical wisdom in favour of storytelling, but not always with a very clear foundation in empirical studies. Reliance is often placed on what the L1 literature claims, or perceived common sense. Standard textbooks on teaching young EIL learners all endorse storytelling, e.g. Halliwell (1992), Phillips (1993), Moon (2000), Cameron (2001), Pinter (2006). Many websites recommend it, including the reputable British Council site (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/telling-a-story-0) who also, however, record in a worldwide survey of young learner teaching "One very noticeable absentee from the list of frequently used activities is storytelling. Only 42 per cent of the teachers reported telling stories every lesson or often, while 17 per cent said they never or rarely read stories." (Garton et al., 2011: 12).

Some L2 studies do justify storytelling based on an SLA or psycholinguistic theoretical basis, but without gathering data. Costenaro (2008) for example presents elaborate proposals for how to tell stories in different ways and with involvement of the children in associated tasks to promote what he calls 'language acquisitional storytelling'. Storytelling is seen as "a useful strategy in order to prompt and implement the acquisition of English while following the main stages of English acquisition as an L1, and at the same time adapting them to the specific context of second language learning and teaching" (p66). In similar vein González and Inés (2010) in their review refer to Krashen and echo many of the claimed benefits we listed for L1 storytelling.

Studies which have actually empirically investigated L2 storytelling are somewhat scarce and when examined closely do not by any means present a picture of unqualified storytelling success. Furthermore, many published studies are small scale in time and number of participants, have no comparison group (often being in effect action research), and some only measure attitudes or immediate learning of some aspect of what was in the story that was told (e.g. vocabulary, or gist) rather than improvement in general proficiency. Yang (2009) for example investigated the effects on attitudes in a junior secondary class in Hong Kong and found that "using short stories will not automatically make students become more interested in English unless the stories are interesting and the language used meets the level of the students" (p35). The narrative genre was reported as helping participants understand the stories easily, but the study was too short to show any effects on confidence in using English. Yildirim and Torun (2014) also just measured attitudes of 6th grade Turkish learners to five authentic animated stories, projected from a computer, with further support from realia and powerpoint, in which some basic vocabulary, structures, and functions of English were integrated. There were many associated materials and activities including worksheets, singing, acting out stories, class
surveys, preparing food, games, and making a poster. Initial positive attitudes towards learning English with animated stories were maintained and anxiety about learning English decreased.

González and Inés (2010) provide a somewhat broader account in an action research study of 2nd/3rd graders in Colombia, where trainee teachers created their own stories according to the children's interests and likes, planned the lessons, and collected and analyzed data. Not only learner attitudes and motivation but also comprehension ability and vocabulary acquisition were found to improve qualitatively. In more traditional quantitative studies, Soleimani and Akbari (2013) and Abasi and Soori (2014) found that Iranian young learners improved significantly between pre-test and post-test on English picture vocabulary test items (including ones related to the stories that were told). However, without a control group we do not know if other methods of teaching the vocabulary would have fared equally well. One study that did have a control group was Amer (1997), conducted on sixth graders in Cairo. The control students just read the story but the experimental group, rather than just being told the story, in fact both read it and heard it read aloud by the teacher at the same time. Hence the effect of learners just having a story read to them compared with just reading it themselves was not tested. The combination did however yield significantly greater comprehension (and is used in the current study).

Tsou et al. (2006) in Taiwan developed an EIL multimedia Storytelling Website, including a multimedia story composing module, and story re-playing module, which they implemented in one elementary school. They found that it indeed facilitated teacher’s storytelling and children's story recall. Lee (2012), also in Taiwan, implemented storytelling using power point and an online recording system called VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com/) with 6th graders, the former to provide clear illustrations and print during storytelling, the latter to present the story with audio and visual aids to help children review key vocabulary and read aloud simple sentences. Results showed that the improvement in reading aloud was of small magnitude; students' attitude and motivation, however, did improve noticeably in their more active responses to the stories presented using technology, and more cooperative behavior in related activities.

By contrast, there have been a number of studies which appear to assume that it is already proven that EIL storytelling is beneficial, and that the need is to progress (as in some L1 studies) to investigate the more specific issues of how different aspects of storytelling may have an impact on that success. In a mixed study of L1 and L2 Yoruba children, for example, Oduolowu (2014) targeted the effect of presence or absence of story book pictures visible to children as the story is told in the target language, finding some advantage for their presence on a story retelling task. Another example is Moon and Maeng (2012) who, over 10 weeks with two groups of 20 young EIL Korean learners, investigated story reading versus story singing by the children as follow ups to being told a story and found a slight advantage in story retelling ability for the group that read
rather than sang.

In reality there remain a host of variables whose effects are as yet under-investigated in L2 (and L1) storytelling research (though commonly considered in studies of general listening and reading), related to such factors as: different choices of type of story text (e.g. culturally familiar or unfamiliar topic); different ways in which the teacher can tell the story; the involvement or not of L1 support, of multimedia support, or from the children also reading the story etc.; various kinds of related activity that can be instigated before, during and after the storytelling (e.g. pre-teaching vocabulary or activating prior knowledge, stopping and asking students to predict what comes next, having children act out the story or answer simple questions about it); and the many kinds of linguistic or other behavior which can be measured as outcomes in order to ascertain the effects of the storytelling.

Perhaps the most crucial variation to research, however, is that of how precisely the teacher tells the story, in particular whether the story is actually 'told' in some rich sense or just 'read aloud' to the children (including maybe on a CD rather than live). In the L1 literature this has been looked at for some time, e.g. by Trostle and Hicks (1998), Walker (2001) and Isbell et al. (2004). A key L2 investigation of this is Uchiyama (2011) who used 120 Japanese primary school students ranging in age from 10 to 12 years to test the effects of two types of English storytelling. One was where the teacher simply read the story aloud (SR); the other, called Character Imagery Storytelling Style (CI), pioneered in L1 by Trostle & Hicks (1998), involves the story teller dressing up and using vivid and dynamic speech and gestures to tell the story in the past tense. The story teller is an actor, who "in fact, 'becomes' each significant character momentarily, by using a combination of pantomime, body positioning, and different voice intonations for each new character. However he/she returns to the primary role of protagonist when not assuming another character's role." (Trostle & Hicks, 1998, p129). Uchiyama's procedure is unclearly described but it seems that some reading by the students was also done in one or both conditions. Both modes of storytelling were found to be effective (though we are not told if there was a third, control group), but CI was found to be significantly better in improving both comprehension and vocabulary development.

2.2. The YL Context in Taiwan

As in many outward looking countries in today's globalized world, there is an increasing need in Taiwan to learn English effectively. Consequently the starting age for learning is becoming younger and younger (currently grade 3), the demands on elementary students are becoming greater (for instance they are now expected by the Ministry of Education to learn over 380 English words before they graduate from elementary school), and many parents feel the need to send their children to cram schools daily after attending state school (and indeed to private English kindergartens before the state starting age for learning English). An issue of concern recently has also been the perceived rural-urban gap in education, including in students'
English proficiency (partly perhaps due to lack of availability of cram schools in country areas). Consequently, any improvement that can be implemented to advance learning of English at this level in a way that is motivating, sustainable and can be pursued effectively in all parts of Taiwan would be most welcome in the local context.

Encouraged therefore by the promise offered by storytelling as a means to enhance young learners' learning for the reasons given above, the Taichung Ministry of Education funded the study reported here in what were seen as 'seed' schools, prior to adoption across the country. We were aware from the start, however, as Tsou et al. (2006) report, that any such study would need to combat the fact that EIL teachers in Taiwan may hesitate to incorporate storytelling into language instruction both because of an already overloaded curriculum and due to feelings that they lack prior experience in this area, do not know where to locate appropriate stories, and possess insufficient language and cultural ability to handle storytelling in English appropriately.

We were also aware of some earlier initiatives which have been tried in this area in Taiwan. Hsu (2005) and Liu (2010) for example report small classroom projects conducted by master's students. Tsou et al. (2006) and Lee (2012) have been discussed above. All these initiatives, though to an extent encouraging in their results with respect to the reported effects of implementing storytelling in Taiwanese classrooms, suffered however from a lack of ready scalability to pan-Taiwan requirements. Yet our study needed to test solutions which had this potential. It was felt that, in order to be viable not just as a small scale intervention for research purposes, dependent on the particular teaching and/or IT skills of an individual teacher-researcher, but, if successful, sustainable as a teaching innovation that could be rolled out across the country, it was necessary to harness resources that already exist. The study therefore relied almost totally on existing teachers and teaching time in state elementary schools and on stories already available in either state or private educational resources. The main source for the stories was Rainbow Time Magazine (RTM) and related resources, produced by the private Cornel English School which offers classes from kindergarten to sixth grade, while from the public sector the online English reading testing platform provided by Taichung City Government was also involved (see Intervention below for further description). Cornel products were chosen because they cover the target elementary level. Although there exists in Taiwan a variety of English learning magazines, most of them are for learners of junior high or senior high school level. Cornel is also an award winning and innovative private language school and conducts regular story-telling activities not only in urban state schools but also in rural ones.

3. Research Questions

Given the aim both to further EIL storytelling research and hopefully to confirm the value of storytelling for the local context, this study posed the following research questions:

1. Will there be any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test
listening and reading scores of elementary students who have been exposed to storytelling supported by Rainbow Time magazines (RTM) and related materials? Will the difference be greater than that in the control group which had no such intervention?

2. What are teachers’ and students’ opinions about RTM and the storytelling?

4. Methodology

The study was primarily a quantitative experiment, implementing pre-tests and post-tests with an experimental group receiving RTM storytelling, and a control group which did not. There was also a teacher and student survey conducted with the experimental group eliciting opinions about the intervention, the former with some qualitative open response items.

4.1. Participants

The target population of this study was learners in state elementary schools in Taichung City. In each of 10 schools, four classes participated (mean class size 27), two randomly assigned to be part of the experimental group and two to join the control group, with matching of grades between the two groups within schools. Across all schools students were mainly from grade 5 (62%) but there was also some representation of grades 3 (6%), 4 (11%) and 6 (21%). All were native speakers of Chinese. 1095 learners took part, but due to inevitable absences on days when data was gathered, the analysis of test scores includes 1036.

The student survey was completed by 345 experimental group participants. In addition, a sample of 11 teachers of experimental group students from eight of the schools was surveyed (three male and eight female, age range 26-45). Apart from one dedicated English teacher, they were all general elementary school teachers.

Since students were assigned to experimental or control group based solely on grade equivalence within schools, males and females were more or less equally represented and we deem that socio-economic background factors, which might differ between schools due to different catchment areas, but not within them, were controlled for. The survey however showed interestingly that 66% of the respondents went to private cram school in addition to state school where the study took place. This was however not expected to impact on the study since storytelling would not be a feature of instruction in the typical cram school, as they prepare students for tests which do not involve that sort of listening skill. Other sources of extra English input outside state school were less marked: 30% claimed to read extra English materials, 13% claimed to listen to English radio programs, 21% were assisted at home by parents, and no student said they watched English TV. There is no reason to suppose that the result would have been different had the control group been surveyed on this point.

4.2. Intervention Procedure

The experiment took place between November 2013 and June 2014, over eight months (a total of thirty four weeks and students were allowed to take the rainbow time magazine home for self-study during three weeks of winter break).
The experimental group classes in the schools essentially had the benefit of two things not available to the control group classes: provision of a daily English 'Story-Telling Morning Time' session in class, and access to extra English story listening and reading related materials and tests for use both in and out of class.

4.2.1. Experimental group

The experimental 'Story-Telling Morning Time' sessions were based around stories from RTM and took place daily. Each story in the current issue of RTM was covered in turn, often with more than one morning session devoted to one story. In most of these morning sessions only 10/15 minutes was available and the storytelling was led by the general class teacher who played a CD of an English story being read aloud, with no attendant preparation or associated activities. On occasion the English teacher might offer some extra help other than that, but due to time limitations mainly students just listened to the CD, which included bilingual translations of vocabulary and some music sound track as background, and at the same time read the hard copy RTM, which had pictures accompanying each story.

However, on some occasions foreign English teachers from the Cornel English School took turns visiting schools and telling a story in person in a 40 minute session. These stories were told vividly by the teachers, who acted the parts, used realia and interacted with the children, more in the style of CI rather than SR. The storyteller was supported by screen projection of the story text and pictures, and by the class teacher (who would use Chinese where necessary). Additional activities included having the children repeat the story aloud, play related word games, sing songs, role play the story themselves and review stories they had heard and read in the past few weeks.

The extra materials available to the experimental group primarily consisted of 60 Rainbow Time Magazines (RTM) donated every month to each school by Cornel English School. RTM is specially designed for 6-12 year old children and includes English stories, poems, comics, and so on. Instead of traditional fairy tales such as Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood, the stories are all originally created by foreign teachers from America, Canada and South Africa on topics such as detectives, life experiences, nature, science fiction, exotic culture, holidays, current news, etc. (Rainbow Time, 2014; www.rainbowtime.com.tw). The monthly magazines also include English only and bilingual CDs with the audio version of the stories. All this was supplied in principle for use by experimental group learners not only in the daily class story sessions but also out of class and at home, though in practice teachers varied in how freely they allowed them to be taken away from school.

Apart from this, Cornel hosts an online certified reading program (read.tc.edu.tw/reading_certificate/index.php) which the experimental group was encouraged to take for at least four stories. The school teachers either would take the whole class to their school computer lab to do this or encourage the students to do it after school time. This site essentially administers a comprehension test on stories they have read in the classes.
and, if they pass, gives them a certificate. The experimental group was also encouraged to use the government Taichung online reading testing site which has a huge bank of English books and stories classified into different levels, so that children can find the most suitable reading material to check their reading comprehension. Cornel added to this site 750 reading comprehension questions related to 75 bilingual stories.

4.2.2. Control group

The control group by contrast only had the normal class input in relation to English reading and listening, as the experimental group also did. This is based around reading and hearing single words or sentences or simple dialogs, rather than connected story texts and is generally considered less interesting. Furthermore, the control group classes had English tests monthly while the experimental group classes were tested weekly (on Fridays for 20 minutes). The control group had none of the extra resources described for the experimental group: for example they would only have access to RTM if their parents bought it. However, there are some Cornel resources that would be available to all students. Cornel Co., Ltd. provides radio programs on ICRT (http://www.icrt.com.tw/index.php) and Classical Radio (http://www.family977.com.tw/index.asp) every week in order to decrease the rural-urban gap in education, together with online videos on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/user/corneltai).

4.3. Instruments

4.3.1. The pre- and post-test

This was a paper test, targeting reading and listening skills, created by one of the researchers in a format similar to that of Cambridge Young Learner examinations. It was administered in school twice, at the start and end of the intervention, to both the experimental groups and the control groups. The content was similar on each occasion and was based on Cornel audio magazine.

4.3.2. Student Survey

A students’ online survey in Chinese was used to collect experimental group students’ opinions at the end of the treatment period. It covered:

1. Background information on what school and grade they were in, and whether they generally did extra English work out of school, e.g. at additional private classes (cram school), at home with parents, watching English TV etc.
2. Their reported use of RTM storytelling facilities in class and out of class
3. How well they said they understood the stories and test questions and with what assistance from teachers, or CDs, pictures in the magazine, sound, dictionary etc.
4. What impact they thought RTM storytelling had had on their listening ability, reading ability, vocabulary, pronunciation, culture knowledge, speaking anxiety, motivation to learn English, attitude to reading

Most of the items elicited response either in yes/no format or on a five-point Likert scale: 5. Strongly agree, 4. Agree, 3. Neutral, 4. Disagree, 1. Strongly disagree.

4.3.3. Teacher Survey
A teachers’ online survey in Chinese, in similar format to the student survey, was also used to collect opinions at the end of the treatment period. It covered:

1. Background information on what school they taught in and whether they were a teacher of English or general primary school teacher
2. Their reported use of Rainbow Time magazine facilities by students out of class and whether they thought those who used it out of class learnt more
3. How good they thought was RTM design and stories, and what they thought was the most interesting kind of story topic
4. What RTM assistance they thought helped students understand more, e.g. CDs, pictures in the magazine, sound, dictionary etc.
5. What impact they thought RTM had had on student learning English overall, listening ability, reading ability, speaking, more varied English, culture knowledge, motivation to learn English
6. Whether they would go on using RTM
7. Open response about how to improve the RTM program.

4.4 Data analysis

Since the test score data passed Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality, three way mixed ANOVA (2 tests x 2 groups x 10 schools) was primarily used to analyse the data. Since survey responses were not obtained from all experimental group participants or all schools, they are reported only as descriptive statistics (mean ratings and percent choices).

5. Results: Pre- and post-test scores

The first purpose of this study was to compare the pre-test and post-test scores of students, to see if the experimental group improved significantly, and if so whether it did so more than the control group. From Figure 1 and Table 1 we can see that overall there were indeed significant gains in scores generally across all schools and groups over the period of the study. The pre-test/post-test by group interaction effect on scores was, however, not significant, though if improvements were generally greater in the experimental than the control group we would expect a difference here. The mean improvement in the experimental group was descriptively greater at 12.3%, versus in the control group slightly less at 11.4%. Noticeably, schools as wholes differed significantly, in that some generally scored higher than others across both tests and groups, and some showed greater pre-post gains than others. This was not due to grades included in the study being not equated between schools, only within them, since analyses with grade included as a covariate, and indeed with school treated as a random effect, made little difference to the overall picture. Indeed there was no relationship between grade and score improvement: correlations of grade with score improvement were in the experimental group r=.041, p=.342, and in the control group r=.031, p=.485.

Perhaps the most important finding was that the three way interaction effect of pre-test/post-
test by group and school was highly significant. This tells us that there were in fact some instances where gains were not the same in the control group and the experimental group, but that these occurred in particular schools only. By inspection of figure 1 we can see fairly clearly that three schools might evidence this, and indeed follow up analyses for each school separately confirm this. In Wenya and (marginally) Chulin improvements were significantly greater in the experimental group than the control group (respectively $F=8.47$, $p=.004$, and $F=4.01$, $p=.048$) while in Shuentian it was the reverse ($F=10.15$, $p=.002$).

![Figure 1](image)

**Table 1**

<table>
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<th>Effect</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
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<td>.513</td>
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6. Results: Surveys

In order to present a unified picture of themes covered in both teacher and student surveys, we combine data from the two surveys, including open questions, where relevant. Responses are either in percent, for yes/no questions, or agreement ratings on a 1-5 disagree-agree scale, with midpoint 3. In general, student ratings are much nearer to the midpoint than teacher ones, maybe because inexperienced learners are afraid of expressing a very extreme opinion.

6.1. Reported student use of RTM

Regarding student use of RTM facilities out of class, 60% of students said they listened to a story CD in the classroom every day in morning or evening break time, and 40% said they did this at no regular times. The teachers gave very varied reports about how many of the students actually took the magazine and CD home to reread and reread stories: three said a quarter, three a third, two a half and three said more than half. Clearly there was some take-up of the RTM resources in this way, and our enquiries uncovered that the variation was in part due to some teachers actually not allowing the materials out of the school. The teachers unanimously agreed that those who took the magazines home made more progress in English than those who did not.

Concerning what happened during Rainbow Time, the students only slightly agreed that they listened to the CD and read RTM stories in storytelling sessions (mean 3.8): this implies that maybe they did not always find their attention retained by this form of storytelling, which as we have seen was mostly SR rather than CI. Teachers however reported that the students greatly looked forward to the special Rainbow Time storytelling sessions with the foreign teachers and wanted them to come back to teach them again.

6.2. Quality of RTM and the stories

The teachers judged the general design of RTM as good (4.7). In RTM, they said the pronunciation was correct, and the bilingual explanation with Chinese and English was very clear. The stories were also highly attractive (4.9). As for which story topics they thought were more interesting for the students they voted songs which accompany some stories the highest, followed by animal stories and Chinese festival stories, then fairy tales and Western festival stories, with current events and poetry last. Teachers claimed that the topics were suitable for students because they were close to their lives and so made learning more interesting. The second most popular story found from the online reading certification website was in fact La Cucaracha (The Singing Cockroaches).

6.3. Reported understanding of RTM stories and with what assistance

On average students moderately agreed that they could understand the stories told by foreign teachers in class (mean 3.6) and the online test questions on the Cornel reading certification website (3.5). They agreed more strongly that they could understand RTM in English after teacher Sandy and teacher Alice's bilingual explanations: these are available on the CD version of RTM (3.8). The parts of the magazine itself that helped understanding most were claimed by students to be the all English story CD (39%), closely followed by the bilingual CD (36%) and the dictionary and
vocabulary section (34%). Multimedia features, music and sound, and color pictures lagged behind (respectively 29% and 23%). The teachers in fact disagreed, thinking that the bilingual CD was the most helpful (100%), followed by colored pictures (64%), then music and sound, and the dictionary and vocab sections (each 55%), with the English CD last (27%). One teacher said that when students were listening, they followed the music and kept their concentration.

Teachers however commented that understandability varied considerably depending on the student. Some students found the materials they used in the class too easy, but other students said that they could not keep up with the class. Students who had a good level gained more from the RTM reading stories and listening sessions. However, students who were only at a basic level could not understand something that was all in English. They needed someone to explain in Chinese.

6.4. Reported impact of RTM storytelling

In terms of English skills, the teachers strongly agreed that storytelling aided general learning of English better than traditional teaching and encouraged more diverse English (4.7 and 4.8). With respect to listening, reading and speaking, both teachers and students regarded them as the main areas affected by RTM storytelling and placed them in that order. Students further agreed that vocabulary was also enhanced (3.8), and teachers stated that RTM could help students to learn more vocabulary by reading the stories or current events. Students also thought RTM to some extent enhanced cultural knowledge (3.5) as did teachers more strongly (4.7).

Teachers made a further specific point that students who did not have the home environment to learn English, or did not go to the cram school, were able to learn and contact English more regularly with RTM. They said they valued this opportunity to learn English, and they wanted to know more about it.

In terms of motivation and interest, both teachers and students thought RTM storytelling boosted general English learning interest/motivation, though the teachers were more definite (teachers 82%, students 3.7/31%). The teachers commented particularly that the teaching by the foreign teachers was lively, and they used a lot of body language so that the students would be more interested in studying English. Students would not only try to contact the foreign teachers but also wanted to practice more English conversation. Even students who were not interested in English listening before were willing to learn it by degrees in this way.

In relation to anxiety, the students were also asked whether they were less afraid of speaking in general, where 35% said yes, and specifically when talking to foreign teachers, where they gave their highest rating for agreement in the whole survey (3.9). Teachers also commented that after this activity, students were willing to talk and try to communicate with foreign teachers.

Finally, on whether attitude to reading was favorably affected in terms of greater likelihood of reading and more patience for reading, three questions to students yielded a moderate positive rating of 3.6. Teachers also endorsed this effect.
6.5. Willingness to use RTM storytelling in future

The teachers agreed quite strongly that the intervention could become permanent (4.7), saying it was a great magazine and it was worth continuing this activity. There were however some organizational issues. Some teachers thought that it was not suitable to hold the listening/reading sessions in the morning as the school had its own schedule in the morning, and that after school was a time when some students needed to practice their activities in extra-curricular clubs. Therefore the teachers cannot regularly use every morning to let students listen to an English CD. They did however feel that other free time could be found to have a special reading session which did not affect the normal school English course. They also suggested changing the weekly test to a monthly test to avoid using normal teaching time. Further they pointed out that every student should ideally have his / her own copy of RTM, with the implication that this would be a problem after the study due to the cost.

More radically the teachers proposed that the storytelling should be related to the regular English materials used to teach English, and so reinforce vocabulary that students had learned before, rather than be independent of it as Cornel’s material is. The underlying problem here is that most English teachers (whether in the elementary or cram schools) feel obliged to focus on work for upcoming tests, and the tests in neither institution focus on story listening or reading skills. This implies that a change in the tests might be needed in order to allow useful communicative skills to be developed.

Furthermore, it was suggested that Cornel could put each story recording on every school’s English teaching website, and so allow students and their parents to listen to the recording at home without the need for a CD. We believe that Cornel is investigating this but there are copyright issues. Again, it was suggested that if a teaching video was offered, the effect would be better. Finally there was a proposal for Cornel Co., Ltd. to hold an English camp in the summer or winter vacation or at weekends - in effect an intensive immersion English course which would be more beneficial than just a fragment of time in each morning section when some teachers might consider it interrupting their usual schedule.

7. Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

This study in some ways reflects the literature on L2 storytelling in that results for attitudes were quite consistently favorable. It also agrees with the many studies in the literature which include no control group in that there are notable gains in measured listening and reading ability in the groups who received storytelling, when considered alone. However, given that when the control group which had no storytelling is also considered, we find little evidence of greater improvement in the storytelling group, the whole result takes on a different character. Indeed it throws into serious doubt what one can really conclude about the benefits of storytelling from studies that do not include a non-storytelling group for comparison, or indeed which compare two kinds of storytelling but again without a control group with no storytelling. Consequently, there are clear implications for researchers, and in our view, much of the L2 (and to an extent L1) research base for the common
claims about the actual learning benefits of storytelling is in question.

Our result also raises interesting questions about why this result may have been obtained. Here we must to some extent speculate, but there are a number of possible factors suggested by the survey responses. Several of them stem from the rationale of the study being to implement an intervention that would be sustainable and scalable across Taiwan, and hence had to use available resources rather than, as in many research studies of teaching methods, test out an improvement which required special equipment, resources or expertise which in real life would never be available in the normal teaching context. There were several possibly negative consequences of this.

First, it seems clearly disadvantageous that most of the storytelling sessions were in the hands of the general class teachers rather than English teachers. These teachers do not have a similar level of English competence to English teachers and do not normally teach English at all. Thus even if they are familiar with storytelling to children in Chinese, they were poorly suited, most likely to exhibit the attitudes found by Tsou et al. (2006), and naturally would fall back on playing a CD rather than themselves reading or telling the story. It was the school rather than the researchers who decided this, however, based on what teacher resources they felt able to spare to the experiment.

Second, it is very likely that 15 minutes per day for storytelling, isolated from any other English instruction, was inadequate and any effect of it was totally swamped by the much greater time spent in regular English classes and (for the 60% that went) in cram school. In published storytelling studies often 40 minutes or even more is common for a storytelling session, to allow for rich development with pre-, during and post- activities, and so forth. This amount of time was exceptionally allotted when the foreign teachers came, but mostly it was very limited by what the schools thought they could spare. Indeed the survey showed that there was some feeling that even 15 minutes of school time taken up daily with the project was inconvenient and that any work of this sort should be entirely outside of class time. Possibly this also reflects a limited interest on the part of the schools in a project which they were essentially required to participate in by the Ministry rather than which they chose to participate in.

Third, and largely due to the two factors just mentioned, the mode of storytelling was clearly predominantly SR rather than CI, except in the very few sessions with foreign teachers. The research literature clearly indicates the benefits of something approximating CI over bare reading aloud. In the only study we know that included stories read aloud on CD (albeit an L1 study: Walker, 2001) it was again full storytelling in person that came out as most beneficial.

Fourth, there is doubt as to how far the ancillary materials were in fact exploited by students out of class. While there was apparently some listening again to the CD in the classroom in break times, and some organized use of the reading certification website, the students were not in fact routinely allowed to take RTM and its CDs home for further study as intended. Doubtless, and probably with some justification, teachers were concerned about these materials not being returned.

Fifth, the stories themselves, although
universally viewed favorably for their interest, language level and suitability to the participants, do seem to have been isolated from the other English teaching that students experienced and disconnected from the sort of test/exams that the students have to work towards. While an entertaining change from the usual type of instruction is clearly motivational, and one of the aims of the project was indeed to raise interest levels, it remains questionable what its value really is if it does not also contribute to whatever skills the students actually have to possess to pass the expected exams.

There are several important implications for stakeholders from the above. First, given the financial and teaching costs involved, clearly the Ministry would be ill-advised to roll out English storytelling in this form more widely across Taiwan. It needs to be trialed again in a revised form with the cooperation of schools. For instance, it might be more successful if delivered by English teachers, with some training in how to do CI rather than SR, and if instead of 15 minutes per day, an hour once a week was allotted as part of the official syllabus rather than as an orphan addition struggling to find a place in the schedule. This would allow for something closer to CI storytelling to be implemented. One of the aims of the study was to help learners who live in country areas and/or do not go to cram school. Given that students who do go to cram school may spend 240 minutes a week on English there, compared with the usual 80 minutes per week in elementary school, an extra 60 minutes in state school still falls short of compensating for the difference.

Furthermore, any magazine or CD resources donated by Cornel or paid for by the schools/Ministry need to be genuinely available for students to borrow and use out of school. For its part, if Cornel can make these resources available online on license to schools, accessible by students with a password, clearly problems of materials not being returned are overcome.

More radically, the Ministry needs to consider why it is promoting storytelling if the exams that students work to in elementary school do not measure story listening skills. Doubtless they wish to promote more communicative and useful English learning in a context where what is tested in the usual exams (whether in state or cram school) has a reputation for being rather mechanical and irrelevant to real-life use of the language. This is laudable but, without also changing the assessment, the forces of backwash from the exams (Hughes, 2003) inevitably work against any such innovation. It has been a common experience of governments round the globe to eagerly promote communicative teaching and textbooks in classrooms while failing to reform the examinations which remain highly traditional. Then they wonder why the desired improvements do not materialize (e.g. in Egypt: Abel Latif, 2012). An alternative, but surely less desirable, solution of course is for Cornel to adjust its materials in a way that conforms better to preparing for existing exams, e.g. by making sure the vocabulary used fit the Ministry's target 380 words and using tasks and games which develop skills directly tested in existing tests.

Overall, the experience of this project then provides salutary lessons alike for researchers and for well meaning would-be innovators attempting
to work within the constraints of the real world context.

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Storytelling to Young EIL Learners in Taiwan: A Cautionary Tale


運用說故事模式於臺灣小學基層英文教學:初步發現

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摘要

雖然運用說故事模式於基層外語教學優勢已逐漸受到全球重視，但在臺灣公立國小以運用說故事模式教授英語為國際語言卻仍乏善可陳。僅管在運用說故事模式在母語教學文獻上頗有參酌，然而在運用說故事模式教授英語為國際語言上研究上不但寥寥可數，且缺乏對照組別相關研究。因此台中市政府教育局主導專案大規模介入臺灣中部十所小學採用說故事學英文教材，對象包含三至六年級使用彩虹時間有聲雜誌及配套教材。研究結果發現廣受好評，且在前後側聽力及閱讀成績有顯著進步，但與對照組無顯著差異。潛在因素及相關建議一併在文中討論，以作為台中教育局及相關行政單位、學者及教師在今後有心運用說故事模式於小學基層英語學習者為國際語言教學研究及相關政策上之參酌建議。

關鍵詞：國小基層學習者，英語為國際語言，說故事，聽力，閱讀，學習態度