

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS
ON STORYTELLING TO LEARN ENGLISH AS
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

NEUS FRIGOLÉ

Universitat de Barcelona

MARIA-DEL-MAR SUÁREZ

Universitat de Barcelona

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that pre-service teachers do not read much. Although they are usually considered expert readers (Colomer & Munita, 2013), their reading habits (Chartier, 2004; Vélez & Rapetti, 2008; Yubero & Larrañaga, 2015) and their knowledge and capacity for interpreting literary texts (Diaz Armas, 2008; Duszynski, 2006) show they are not. In fact, different studies have shown that they have a weak reading profile and usually express disaffection for reading (Aguilar Ródenas, 2020). Similarly, other studies (Contreras & Prats, 2015; Gallego & Rodríguez, 2015; Skaar et al., 2018; Vera, 2017) have made it evident that students from teaching degrees lack communicative skills and their reading habit and motivation towards literature is insufficient (Applegate et al., 2014; Vera, 2017). However, they should have a solid training in literature didactics to help their forthcoming students appreciate literature (Mendoza, 2004). They should also find ways to immerse their prospect students in language in all its dimensions, fostering not only proficiency but also a deep appreciation for its nuances and cultural context. In fact, the education of literary readers encompasses an emotional dimension that goes beyond merely being an exemplary reader who shares strategies and knowledge with their students. It involves the act of instilling the joy of reading and actively participating in the social realm of books, not just as an isolated endeavour but as a

shared experience within the broader literary community (Applegate et al., 2014; Sanjuán, 2016). Hence, linguistic and literary training is undeniably needed (Aguilar Ródenas, 2020) so that future teachers' communicative skills improve and so do their students'. In this educational narrative, the roles of literary education and the art of storytelling emerge as critical catalysts in the journey towards linguistic fluency.

Besides not being sufficiently skilled, some studies (Bozu & Aránega, 2017; Medina & Pérez, 2017) have concluded that teachers do not feel prepared enough to act as mediators when dealing with literature in the classroom, that is, to act as facilitators and bring literature closer to children. However, the change of paradigm in the process of teaching and learning literature implies that the teacher adopts this role of mediator as they are no longer seen as a person who only delivers content, but as the person who acts as a mediator and thus facilitates the students' learning process by offering them the appropriate tools and strategies (Colomer, 2006; Mendoza, 2004). Contreras (2020) also affirms that mediators have an important role in literary education. In her study, she found out that those students with a weaker reading profile were those who could not mention any mediator related to their literary learning experiences. In contrast, students with a stronger reading profile were those who reported more instances of dual mediation between their family and teachers. Moreover, their memories related to literature and their self-image as readers were consistently positive.

Pre-service teachers usually believe that the only books that have great educational potential are those with a pedagogical criterion, forgetting the artistic and literary ones (Aguilar, 2020). Hence, children's literature usually goes not only overlooked but also undermined. Consequently, pre-service teachers' training in literary education is vital so that they can make good use of literature in the classroom. Naturally, if the previous literary education received by future teachers is insufficient, the training in the didactics of children's and youth literature during their undergraduate studies will also not be effective (Colomer, 2013). In order to attain this objective, literary education should focus on assisting students in their development as readers, providing them with the necessary knowledge to produce, comprehend, and interpret

literary texts. Furthermore, it should equip them with the capability to establish hypertextual connections and to formulate reasoned judgments about what they have read. Importantly, literary education should also address the cultivation of reading habits, the fostering of a positive disposition toward literary endeavours, and active engagement within the broader social sphere of literature (Mendoza, 2002; Munita, 2014).

In connection with this, it is essential that pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of experienced readers to mediate learners' learning, organize activities, select books, and systematize knowledge (Munita, 2014; Munita & Manresa, 2012). In other words, formal training that includes the informed organization and selection of books is needed, both of these leading to the so much needed systematization of knowledge. However, it cannot be forgotten that there is a direct relationship between the teacher's reading profile and the reading education practices they provide to their students. In fact, teachers bring their own reading practices into the classroom, which influence their teaching practice (McKool & Gespass, 2009; Morrison et al., 1999; Trotman & Kerr, 2001). It is therefore imperative that reading literature is fostered in nowadays' schools so that students' literacy does not continue to diminish. Consequently, it is necessary that future teachers are trained on children's literature and its didactics, both theoretical and practical (Martin & Rascón, 2015).

As Trotman and Kerr (2001) claim, pre-service teachers' own experiences as learners have a great impact during their training as future teachers. Contreras (2020) states that although some pre-service teachers had literature school mediators who were of little significance to them, these teachers they had at school may have inadvertently become their models. Consequently, when they themselves act as mediators, they may also lack significance to their own students because, as it has already been pointed out, one's personal biography becomes a significant influence in the construction of a teacher's identity and thus, it should be addressed during their university education (Berríos Barra, 2018; Díaz-Plaja & Prats, 2013). Hence, it is important to delve into prospective teachers' perceptions as regards the use of literature in the English as a foreign language classroom and the importance of being

trained on communication skills since their beliefs are key to explain the actions they will undertake in the classroom in the future (Ramírez et al., 2012). Moreover, exploring pre-service teachers' beliefs can have important implications in the teaching degrees, which must address, among other aspects, the modification of preconceived ideas of future educators (Tatto & Coupland, 2003).

2. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Considering what has been explained in the previous section and the lack of research into the importance of communicative and storytelling skills in pre- and in-service teachers, the aim of the present study is to examine future teachers' perceptions on being trained to improve their communicative and storytelling skills in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. The research questions (RQ) the present study seeks to answer are:

- RQ1: In students' views, to what extent do the activities proposed throughout the subject help them improve their communicative skills?
- RQ2: What are the pre-service teachers' beliefs on the importance of using stories to teach in Early Years and Primary (PE) education?

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the RQs, mixed methods were used. On the one hand, participants were asked to answer a questionnaire at the end of the intervention. On the other hand, they were also asked to write a critical reflection which was analysed qualitatively.

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

A total of 23 students from the Primary Education (PE) degree attending the compulsory subject *Learning English Using Stories* participated in the study. The *Learning English Using Stories* subject is taught during the second semester of the last year of the university degree, and it

lasts for 3 months. All of the participants were studying to become English primary teachers.

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

To conduct the study, the following instruments and materials were used.

3.2.1. Content materials

Different materials were tailored in order to teach students different strategies to select good storybooks to work on EFL in the primary classroom as well as strategies and techniques to become a good storyteller. Therefore, students were given tips to read out aloud, develop their confidence, assess their storytelling skills –pronunciation, stress, rhythm, intonation and variation– and to communicate effectively. Participants were also taught the kind of questions they could ask to involve pupils actively in the story, to elicit language or information, to arise curiosity and motivate learners, to encourage students to predict and to check understanding, among others.

3.2.2. Google Sites

At the beginning of the course, students were asked to get in pairs so that they could carry out a peer-assessment after each of the activities performed during the course. Moreover, they were also asked to create a Google Sites and to share it with both the teacher and their peer in order that both of them could edit it. They were also encouraged to introduce themselves and talk about their teaching and learning experience in foreign languages.

Once the foundations had been set, they were presented with the compulsory tasks they would have to complete in their Google Sites –peer assessments and critical reflection– during the course.

FIGURE 1. *Example of a student's Google Sites design*



Source: Student's Google Sites

Peer-assessment and self-assessment

The storytelling project consisted of two different stages. In the first stage –storytelling in small groups–, learners carried out both a self-assessment and a peer-assessment piece of writing. In the self-assessment, they were asked to mention three things they considered they had done well during their storytelling and three things they believed they had not done so well. Stemming from that, they also had to clearly state the course of action they intended to take to improve their storytelling delivery in front of all their classmates at end of the course. The peer-assessment followed the same pattern, only that instead of talking about what they would do to improve their storytelling, peers had to provide the storyteller with suggestions as to how to improve their performance. In the second stage –storytelling in front of the whole group–, which involved a competition element, learners had to offer their peers a rather extensive peer assessment on Google Sites. In this case, no guidelines were offered, but students were asked to consider all the content materials they had been offered during the course. Moreover, the rest of the participants were given a rubric to punctuate the student who was delivering the story.

Critical reflection task

At the end of the course, participants were asked to complete a critical reflection task on their Google Sites. They were asked questions about:

- Feeling of learning as regards delivering stories.
- Usefulness of their classmates' feedback.
- Steps taken between the first stage (storytelling in small groups) and the final stage (competition) to improve their storytelling.

3.3. PROCEDURE

The project took place throughout eight weeks. At the beginning of the course, students were taught about the project. After having been offered the different theoretical materials presented above – techniques and strategies to select a good storybook and become a good storyteller–, learners were asked to select a storybook of their taste considering what they had been taught in class. Once all the students had selected a storybook of their taste, they had to write it down in a forum created for such purpose to make sure all the students had chosen a different book. Then, in one of the lessons, students were allotted in groups of 4 or 5 students. They had to tell the story in small groups and each student explained their picture book to the rest of the students in the group. After having told their story, the rest of the classmates in the group mentioned three things they considered the presenter had done well, three things they believed s/he had not done so well and finally, suggestions on how to improve the storytelling. At the same time, the storyteller had to write down three things s/he thought s/he had done well, three things s/he thought s/he had done so not well and finally what s/he would do to improve her/his final storytelling in front of the whole class.

A week later, there was a competition which involved all the students in the group. Individually, each student had to explain their storybook in front of the rest of their classmates. While the storyteller was explaining the story, the other learners were given a rubric meant to

punctuate the storyteller communication skills and the storytelling techniques used. Once all the students had rated their peers' performances, the student with the highest punctuation of them all was awarded with an extra 0.5 in the final mark of the subject. Moreover, students also received some rather extensive peer assessment on their Google Sites from their pair chosen at the beginning of the course.

FIGURE 2. *Example of peer assessment on Google Sites*

Last Friday, Alba did her storytelling about "Me and my fear" by Francesca Sanna. Now, I will bring Alba a brief feedback about her storytelling.

First of all, Alba, thank you for sharing your storytelling about "Me and my fear" with us. I enjoyed listening to you and it was awesome to see how we can bring this book, which I love, into a primary class. Then, in terms of communication, your English was clear and easy to understand and your intonation, rhythm, and stress fit the speech well. However, I noticed some pauses in the right places, especially at the end of sentences and paragraphs, which sometimes made it difficult to follow the story. To improve this fact, you can practice reading your story out loud and try to reduce the pauses gradually to improve your fluency and flow.

Additionally, I noticed that some individual sounds, both vowels and consonants, were not pronounced clearly and correctly. This could lead to misunderstandings, especially for non-native speakers as your future students will be. To improve it, you can try practicing the specific sounds that you find difficult, for example, using tongue twisters or listening to English speakers through online resources.

Focusing on the storytelling part, your storytelling techniques were excellent! You create a great atmosphere that guides us and engages us throughout the entire story. You did a great job keeping the story moving at the right speed and pausing when needed to emphasize important parts. By using different intonations and rhythms for each moment of the plot, you were making the story more interesting and helping us to understand what the feelings of the character were. Pointing at words also helps to make the story more fun and realistic and even to help us be focused.

What was really impressive about your storytelling is how you can make us, as children, so interested in your story. We stopped making noise and listened carefully in order to follow what you were saying. You have a special talent for connecting with your audience and making them feel involved in the story you're telling. This is a great talent that you have, even though at your first minutes you were a little bit nervous.

To sum up, you did a great job with your storytelling, and with some practice, you can improve even more and become an even better storyteller in English. Keep up the good work!

Source: Student's Google Sites

At the end of the course, students were asked to answer a questionnaire enquiring about their degree of agreement with a series of statements regarding the issues tackled along the term. The questionnaire was divided into three big blocks. The first one, included questions related to the strategies learnt to deliver a story, the second one focused on the importance of primary teachers having good communication skills and finally, the third one asked about peer assessment and the competition element included in the project. They had to select the extent to which they disagreed or agreed from a scale from 1 to 4. Apart from answering the questionnaire, students had to write a final reflection on the subject. In this critical reflection, they had to reflect on their learning process as regards delivering stories and the usefulness of their classmates' assessment.

FIGURE 3. Example of final reflection on Google Sites



Source: Student's Google Sites

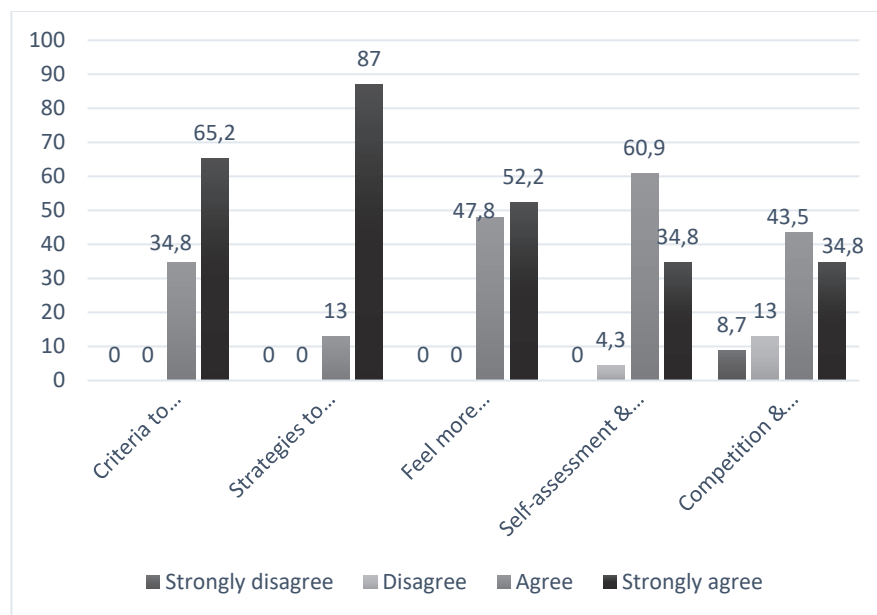
3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

For the purpose of the study, data from the questionnaire and the critical reflection task were analysed. The peer feedback offered on Google Sites after each of the activities asked was not considered as we were interested on students' perceptions as regards their feeling of learning. The critical reflections were analysed thematically, and the most recurrent topics were examined. Quotes were extracted to represent the main ideas verbalized by the participants. Regarding the questionnaire, the participants' self-perceived usefulness of the content materials and the self- and peer-assessment activities were considered. The degree of satisfaction with the gamification element included in the project was also calculated, the maximum being four and the minimum, one.

4. RESULTS

The first RQ enquired about the helpfulness of the subject on improving participants' storytelling skills. Graphic 1 shows that this subject was meaningful to students in several ways, especially regarding learning the criteria to select books, the strategies to deliver stories and, to a slightly lesser extent, to acquire more confidence when telling stories. Somewhat mixed results appear when it comes to the peer-assessment and self-assessment activities, which were not to the taste of all students. That dislike appears specially regarding the gamification element of the whole experience.

GRAPH 1. *Usefulness of the subject*



Despite the highs and lows just described, all students considered this subject to be a positive and enriching experience, with a special emphasis on the acquisition of storytelling techniques and strategies that they had not considered before taking this subject, despite them being about to finish their degree. They also mentioned the usefulness of peer-assessment, and how, after this short yet intense course, they have started feeling more prepared and self-confident to take stories to the EFL class.

To answer RQ1, critical reflections were also considered. They were analysed, and quotes extracted and categorised in two main categories –usefulness of the subject to learn how to deliver stories and usefulness of the peer-assessment. Participants highlighted, among others, topics like one’s feeling of reassurance after the course, thanks to several aspects, such as deliberate practice, and getting to enjoy the subject thanks to a new approach to stories, where techniques to deliver them had been taught explicitly. This subject was also a chance to learn about new story books in English:

I’ve learnt the importance of using storytelling techniques throughout the whole story, such as using different voices for different characters, changing up the rhythm, pointing at words or pictures that are relevant to the story and using props related to the story (stuffed animals for instance). [P2_PG]

I got a lot of ideas and knowledge about books and of course about reading books. [...] I learned in this class, working with books is a great way to teach them English. I’ve been introduced to so many great children’s books and learned so much about the different ways to work with books. [P5_JG]

The peer-assessment phase was also positively valued. Quite a few students mentioned their feeling of embarrassment or insecurity at the beginning of the course and how the dynamics of the sessions, along with the peer-assessment helped them develop a sense of security. Practice was repeatedly mentioned as key to success in the final storytelling performances.

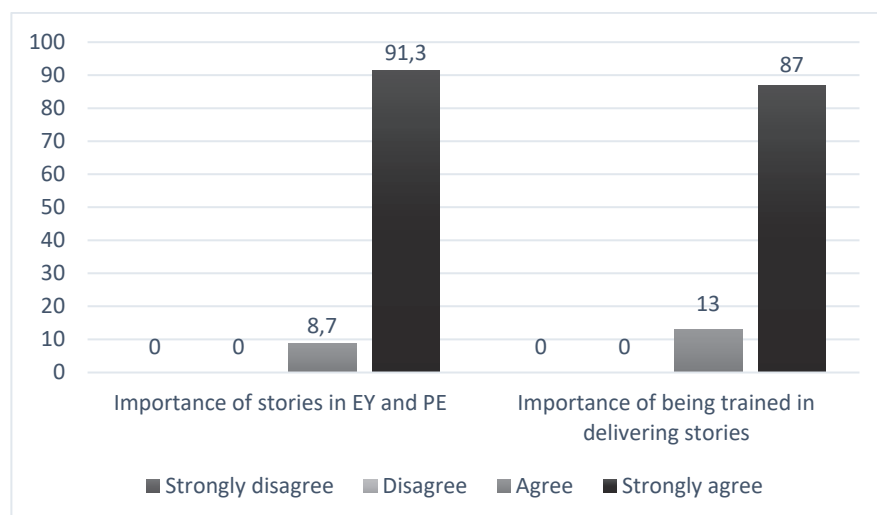
When the activity of storytelling was suggested, I felt overwhelmed. [...] Nevertheless, the outcome was different from what I thought. In my opinion, through peer assessment, I have developed new strategies to make storytelling about books more dynamic and enjoyable. [P1_AA]

My classmate’s feedback has been very useful. I think that a pair of somebody else’s eyes can always give you insight and objective feedback that you wouldn’t get otherwise. [P2_PG]

Without a doubt, being able to test your storytelling with a few colleagues has been a great help for me to improve the weak points I had and thus be able to do it better on the day of the presentation. My colleagues commented on aspects of my storytelling that they liked a lot, such as my expressiveness. However, apart from having good feedback, I also had to pay attention to those things I had to improve. [P7_AL]

Focusing on the RQ2 –pre-service teachers’ beliefs on the importance of using stories to teach in Early childhood and Primary education–, which targeted the main ontological axis of the course, that is, transmitting the importance of storytelling in Early Years and Primary Education, students state that they agree that they have become fully aware of its relevance thanks to this subject, as they do as well in the sense that training is needed in this domain.

GRAPH 2. *Importance of stories in Early Years and Primary Education*



It is also important to point out that students emphasised how they became aware of the usefulness of stories as a powerful tool to EFL and how the subject was also a great opportunity to see that stories are crucial for getting children’s attention and fostering their likes of books. Therefore, as it can be extracted from the following quote, it seems that this subject was also illuminating in the sense that it makes pre-service teachers arise interest in books and see how important they are for children’s education:

Without a doubt, I now give much more importance to encouraging reading in the classroom, as it contributes to learning in a captivating and dynamic way. [P7_AL]

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated pre-service PE students' perceptions on being trained to improve their communicative and storytelling skills in the EFL classroom. The reasons for this were, first, that storytelling is at the heart of Early Years Education and, though to a lesser extent but also very present, in Primary Education. Second, it is known that stories are useful not only to develop pupils' creativity but also oracy and literacy skills, which are also crucial for one's development of reading comprehension, empathy and many other personal and academic growth aspects. Overall, students affirmed that it was thanks to this subject that they realized not only this importance but also how necessary it is to be trained in delivering stories. In other words, this subject helped students acknowledge and understand that reading a story is not just taking a book and start reading, but it requires prior and conscientious training. Similarly, the results show that the totality of the participant believe that this subject was useful for them, and that, throughout the course, they had dealt with storytelling in ways they had never seen before, which indeed helped them to express themselves in different ways and gain self-confidence. Hence, this leads us to think that it might be the case that storytelling is not very well represented in our current Early Years Education and Primary Education degrees or that, at least, the impact that previous subjects dealing with this topic had on pre-service teachers was not enough.

Moreover, without being explicitly taught about the positive aspects that storytelling has according to research to date, students mentioned them in the reflections they wrote towards the end of the subject. They mentioned the importance of storytelling techniques, gaining self-confidence in expressing oneself and narrating, and growth of interest in books or literature in general. Although data regarding this might not have been systematized, the results imply that our students are capable of sensing that children's literature should be given particular presence at school as a means to educate beyond entertaining.

As regards the usefulness of peer- and self-assessment, they were regarded as mostly positive actions leading to one's personal

improvement, and naturally better results, in the subject. We believe that these assessments as well as the reflections are needed so that our students can state specific goals and work towards them, thus arising more metacognitive awareness at the pre-service stage.

In contrast, the thin-layer gamification (Marczewski, 2013a, 2013b) element in this experience was noticeably considered as accessory. It could be affirmed that a 0.5 increase in the final mark of the subject was not so revolutionary as a prize as participants were all students in the English mention, which means that they all had a fairly good level of English to pass the subject with a notable or excellent mark without this extra help. Furthermore, since they were students in the English specialization, they already had intrinsic motivation for the language or the subject, which means that the extra boost provided by gamification could be irrelevant to them. Finally, the hype for gamification has made it to be present in quite a few subjects during their degree. Therefore, it was not a novel ingredient for them but repetitive and familiar to them. Consequently, many of the positive aspects believed to be linked to gaming might not have been relevant for these students about to finish their degree.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has shown that training students in the art of storytelling is effective to raise pre-service teachers' awareness towards the importance of storytelling as part of children' education as well as for their own personal improvement as a professional in communicative and lesson-planning terms. However, this study is not without limitations. First, the results obtained were based on students' perceptions and reflections towards the subject, but no factual data were collected as regards learning evidence. Moreover, the sample size was small, and therefore, might not be generalizable. Consequently, we can conclude that the project was indeed a good teaching innovation approach, but its effectiveness remains unknown.

Apart from that, the students' perceptions and the results stemming from them may be biased, as they were all participating in a thin-layer

gamification (Marczewski, 2013a, 2013b) project and their reflections were a compulsory activity that students knew the teacher would grade. This is the reason why we believe more research is needed to: first, identify which activities and to what extent they have been key in improving students' communicative and storytelling skills; second, explore if this "interest in books" expressed by the students is genuine, and finally, see if there is indeed a correspondence between participants' interest in reading and its implementation in the classroom as an in-service teacher.

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