



ENHANCING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Reading comprehension remains one of the most essential yet challenging skills for elementary students learning English as a foreign language. Many students can recognize words and answer literal questions, but they often experience difficulties in constructing meaning, making inferences, understanding vocabulary in context, and connecting story events with prior knowledge. Conventional reading instruction frequently emphasizes translation, repetition, and factual exercises, while young learners need more interactive, multimodal, and meaningful literacy experiences. This article aims to examine how interactive storytelling can enhance elementary students' reading comprehension in English language learning classrooms. This study employed an integrative literature review by synthesizing international peer-reviewed studies related to storytelling, digital storytelling, multimedia learning, reading comprehension, and English language teaching. The findings indicate that interactive storytelling supports reading comprehension through four main mechanisms: activating prior knowledge, scaffolding vocabulary and narrative structure, promoting inferential thinking, and increasing students' engagement through dialogic participation.

The article proposes an Interactive Storytelling Reading Cycle consisting of pre-story engagement, guided story encounter, interactive meaning negotiation, collaborative story reconstruction, and reflective comprehension assessment. The discussion emphasizes that interactive storytelling should not be treated merely as entertainment or digital decoration. Instead, it should be positioned as a structured literacy pedagogy that integrates narrative, interaction, multimodal support, and comprehension strategy instruction. The article concludes that interactive storytelling has strong potential to make English reading instruction more active, contextual, communicative, and developmentally appropriate for elementary learners.

Keywords: *interactive storytelling; reading comprehension; English language learning; elementary education; EFL literacy*

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A. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental competence in English language learning because it enables students to construct meaning from written texts, connect information with prior knowledge, and use language for academic and communicative purposes. For EFL elementary students this is more complex, since they must understand texts in a language that is not their primary means of communication.

Many elementary students can pronounce English words or identify literal meanings but struggle with deeper meaning. Comprehension requires integrating word recognition, vocabulary, background knowledge, text-structure awareness, inference-making, and monitoring (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004).

In many classrooms, reading instruction is still teacher-centered: students read a text, translate difficult words, listen to explanation, and answer factual questions. Such practice identifies

explicit information but rarely develops inferential, evaluative, or reflective comprehension, since students are not invited to predict, question, visualize, or connect the text to their own experience.

This condition indicates the need for a more interactive, meaningful approach. Elementary students learn more effectively when emotionally engaged, socially involved, and cognitively guided — supported not only to read the text but to think with it, talk about it, and reconstruct its meaning. Interactive storytelling offers one potential strategy to address this need.

Storytelling is a long-recognized pedagogical practice, providing meaningful contexts, narrative structure, emotional appeal, and language patterns through which students learn vocabulary, sentence patterns, and cultural meaning naturally. It becomes more powerful when interactive: students predict events, respond to guiding questions, interpret motives, negotiate meaning with peers, and create alternative endings, rather than remaining passive listeners.

This relevance is strengthened by digital and multimodal learning environments. Digital storytelling has been found to enhance academic achievement, critical thinking, and motivation (Yang & Wu, 2012; Hava, 2021), and to strengthen multimodal literacy and engagement when pedagogically integrated (Chubko, Morris, McKinnon, Slater, & Lummis, 2020; Hafner, 2014; Kim & Li, 2021) — though effectiveness depends on pedagogical design, since entertainment-only or purposeless digital media may distract students without developing comprehension (Takacs, Swart, & Bus, 2015; Bus, Takacs, & Kegel, 2015).

This article assumes that interactive storytelling enhances reading comprehension when it integrates four dimensions: narrative structure, dialogic interaction, multimodal support, and comprehension strategy instruction.

This article addresses three questions: (1) how does interactive storytelling support elementary students' reading comprehension in EFL learning? (2) what instructional stages are needed to implement it effectively? and (3) what challenges and pedagogical principles should teachers consider?

B. Method

This study employed an integrative literature review design, selected because the article synthesizes theoretical and empirical findings across several interrelated fields — reading comprehension, storytelling, digital storytelling, multimedia learning, multimodal literacy, and EFL pedagogy — to formulate a pedagogical understanding of interactive storytelling for reading comprehension. The reviewed literature consisted of international peer-reviewed journal articles, searched using keyword combinations such as interactive storytelling, digital storytelling, reading comprehension, EFL, elementary students, and multimodal literacy, prioritized from reputable journals in education, educational technology, literacy, psychology, and English language teaching.

Sources were included if they discussed storytelling, digital or electronic storybooks, or story-based learning; were relevant to reading comprehension, EFL, multimodal literacy, engagement, or comprehension strategy instruction; and offered theoretical, empirical, or review-based contribution in a recognized peer-reviewed outlet relevant to elementary or school-level learning (a few secondary/higher-education studies were included for theoretical insight).

Analysis followed thematic synthesis: literature was read to identify key concepts, findings were grouped into recurring themes (prior-knowledge activation, vocabulary scaffolding, narrative structure, dialogic interaction, inferential comprehension, engagement, multimodal support, teacher facilitation, assessment), and the themes were interpreted into a pedagogical model presented as findings and discussion. This review does not claim to be systematic or a meta-analysis; it aims to provide an integrated conceptual and pedagogical synthesis to guide teachers, curriculum developers, and future researchers.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The synthesis indicates that interactive storytelling can enhance elementary students' reading comprehension through four mechanisms: activating prior knowledge, scaffolding vocabulary and narrative structure, strengthening inferential thinking, and increasing engagement through active participation — mechanisms that work together because comprehension is an integrated cognitive, linguistic, social, and strategic process.

Interactive Storytelling as a Pre-Reading Scaffold

Interactive storytelling supports comprehension from the pre-reading stage: teachers can use pictures, guiding questions, short videos, character prompts, or key vocabulary to activate background knowledge, which matters because EFL students often lack not only vocabulary but contextual knowledge about the story.

For example, before reading a text about friendship, a teacher may show two characters, ask students to predict their relationship, introduce key words, and invite similar experiences — inviting students to anticipate meaning rather than simply read, and connecting language input with personal and conceptual knowledge.

Interactive storytelling also helps students grasp narrative structure — orientation, complication, sequence of events, climax, and resolution — which supports organizing and remembering story events coherently, consistent with the view that comprehension requires integrating information into a meaningful mental representation (Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016).

Multimodal Support for Vocabulary and Meaning Construction

One of interactive storytelling's most important contributions is its multimodal nature. Since vocabulary and sentence structures are often unfamiliar, images, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, sound effects, and animation can help students infer meaning before fully understanding the written words.

This is consistent with multimedia learning theory: learning improves when verbal and visual information are meaningfully integrated (Mayer & Moreno, 2003), and interactive multimodal environments support understanding when they guide attention and reduce unnecessary cognitive load (Moreno & Mayer, 2007) — visual and digital elements should clarify story meaning, not merely decorate the lesson.

In reading comprehension, multimodal storytelling helps students understand vocabulary, character emotion, setting, and sequence: a facial expression, illustration, or sound effect can convey a word like frightened, while pictures or storyboards help organize the plot — support especially useful for elementary EFL learners still developing both proficiency and reading strategies.

Digital storytelling can also strengthen multimodal literacy: student digital video projects function as multimodal ensembles in language teaching (Hafner, 2014), facilitating learning and identity development as students express ideas through multiple modes (Kim & Li, 2021).

Dialogic Interaction and Inferential Comprehension

Interactive storytelling strengthens comprehension by creating dialogic interaction: rather than answering questions only after reading, students predict, explain character motives, identify clues, and evaluate decisions throughout the story — moving beyond literal comprehension.

Inferential comprehension — understanding information not directly stated — is one of the most important aspects of reading. Stories provide a natural context for inference, since readers must interpret motives, emotions, causes, and consequences; a teacher pausing to ask why a character acted a certain way helps students connect textual clues with their own reasoning, also supporting critical reading through discussion of characters' decisions and real-life relevance. Digital storytelling has been linked to critical thinking (Yang & Wu, 2012) and to broader outcomes such as speaking confidence and writing self-efficacy (Nair & Yunus, 2021; Ozudogru & Cakir, 2021).

Engagement, Motivation, and Emotional Involvement

Reading comprehension is strongly influenced by engagement: interested students pay more attention, persist longer, and participate more in comprehension activities. Interactive storytelling increases engagement by making reading participatory — students become listeners, speakers, predictors, performers, and creators, not only readers.

Digital storytelling has been found to increase motivation and satisfaction in EFL education (Hava, 2021) and to improve motivation, problem-solving competence, and achievement through project-based approaches (Hung, Hwang, & Huang, 2012), consistent with earlier work linking it to engaged, technology-integrated learning (Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008).

In elementary classrooms, emotional engagement is especially important: young learners respond to characters, conflict, humor, and suspense, and this connection can become an entry point for deeper comprehension — though teachers must direct engagement toward learning goals, since enjoyment alone does not guarantee vocabulary development or comprehension monitoring.

Table 1 Interactive Storytelling Reading Cycle

Stage	Teacher Activity	Student Activity	Reading Comprehension Focus
Pre-story engagement	Introduces theme, pictures, key vocabulary, and guiding questions	Predicts topic, activates prior knowledge, and shares experiences	Background knowledge and vocabulary preparation
Guided story encounter	Presents story through reading, oral narration, pictures, or digital media	Listens, reads, observes, and identifies key events	Literal comprehension and story structure
Interactive meaning negotiation	Pauses the story, asks inferential questions, and	Predicts, answers, asks questions, and explains	Inferential comprehension and reasoning

	clarifies difficult words	reasons	
Collaborative story reconstruction	Guides students to retell, sequence, map, dramatize, or rewrite the story	Reconstructs plot, works in groups, and creates story maps	Organization, recall, and synthesis
Reflective comprehension assessment	Provides comprehension tasks, reflection prompts, and feedback	Responds to questions, evaluates characters, and connects the story with real life	Critical comprehension and metacognitive reflection

Source: Author synthesis based on reviewed literature.

This cycle shows that interactive storytelling is a structured instructional sequence rather than a single activity: pre-story engagement prepares students, guided story encounter supports literal understanding, interactive meaning negotiation supports inference, collaborative reconstruction strengthens memory and organization, and reflective assessment encourages deeper interpretation.

Teacher's Role in Interactive Storytelling

The teacher plays a central role — not merely a storyteller but a facilitator of comprehension, selecting appropriate stories, identifying reading objectives, preparing vocabulary support, designing questions, managing interaction, and assessing understanding. Without this scaffolding, storytelling may entertain without educating.

Teachers also need to adjust activities to proficiency — beginners benefit from short texts, repeated phrases, and simple questions; more advanced learners from complex plots, creative retelling, or producing alternative endings. Questioning is particularly important: literal questions (who, where) should be combined with inferential and evaluative ones — why a character

was sad, what clue shows fear — guiding students to construct rather than simply retrieve meaning.

Digital Tools and Interactive Storytelling

Digital tools can enrich interactive storytelling when used appropriately — digital storybooks, animated stories, interactive slides, audio narration, digital comics, story-mapping apps, or student-created videos combine language with images, voice, music, and visual design, creating opportunities for multimodal literacy and student-centered learning.

Digital tools should not dominate the process, however; the goal is comprehension, not technology for its own sake. Multimedia features enhance comprehension when they support the narrative but distract when irrelevant to it (Takacs et al., 2015), and multimedia story environments support early literacy most effectively with meaningful adult guidance and design that supports rather than disrupts the story (Bus et al., 2015; Korat & Shamir, 2007; Verhallen, Bus, & de Jong, 2006).

Robot-based digital storytelling has been shown to enhance EFL learners' multimodal storytelling ability and narrative engagement (Liang & Hwang, 2023), and presentation mode can influence learners' outcomes, emotions, and grit (Chen Hsieh & Lee, 2023). Even where advanced technology is unavailable, the underlying principle holds: simple tools such as slides, flashcards, or recorded narration can support interaction, discussion, retelling, and reflection.

Challenges in Implementing Interactive Storytelling

Implementation faces several challenges: teachers may lack training in connecting storytelling with explicit comprehension objectives; large classes limit equal participation; varying proficiency requires differentiated tasks; digital storytelling requires devices, internet, and digital skills; and poorly designed multimedia may distract students. Assessment is a further challenge, since storytelling is sometimes assessed only through participation or enjoyment rather than indicators such as identifying main ideas,

sequencing events, explaining motives, and making inferences — observable evidence being more reliable than assumed competence, since perceived and actual digital competence may differ (Porat, Blau, & Barak, 2018).

2. Discussion

The findings indicate that interactive storytelling enhances reading comprehension because it aligns with the cognitive, linguistic, social, and affective nature of reading — a meaning-making process involving prior knowledge, language resources, interpretation, and engagement that interactive storytelling can develop simultaneously.

From a cognitive perspective, interactive storytelling reduces the difficulty of unfamiliar texts: pictures, gestures, audio, and teacher explanation provide contextual clues for inferring meaning, consistent with multimedia learning theory's emphasis on meaningful integration of verbal and visual information (Mayer & Moreno, 2003; Moreno & Mayer, 2007).

Multimedia use must be selective, however. It does not automatically improve learning: excessive animations, sounds, or unrelated clickable features shift attention from meaning to entertainment (Bus et al., 2015), so each feature should serve understanding of character, event, vocabulary, or moral meaning.

From a linguistic perspective, it provides comprehensible input (texts, narration, peer discussion) and meaningful output (answering questions, retelling, describing characters), integrating receptive and productive use that EFL learners need through repeated, meaningful exposure. From a social perspective, it promotes collaborative meaning-making — students discuss predictions and reconstruct stories together, learning language more effectively through social participation than isolated exercises. From an affective perspective, it increases motivation because stories are emotionally engaging, and emotionally involved students attend more and persist longer in comprehension tasks, consistent with Hava's (2021) finding on motivation and satisfaction —

engagement is part of the comprehension process, not a secondary benefit.

It also strengthens inferential comprehension: many reading difficulties arise because students cannot connect information across sentences or infer unstated meaning, and stories provide a strong context for practicing inference through teacher-guided questioning, without which students may grasp only surface-level information.

The proposed Interactive Storytelling Reading Cycle offers a practical framework: pre-story engagement builds readiness, guided story encounter secures literal understanding, interactive meaning negotiation supports inference, collaborative reconstruction organizes information, and reflective assessment enables evaluation and monitoring — reflecting comprehension's progressive development from preparation to interpretation.

For elementary EFL classrooms, interactive storytelling should be simple, structured, and age-appropriate. Sophisticated technology is not required — a picture book, story cards, or simple slides can be effective if used interactively; the essential element is the quality of interaction, not the technology itself.

For teachers, the implications are to select stories appropriate to students' language level and culture, identify comprehension objectives before designing the activity, prepare vocabulary support and questions, use multimodal resources to clarify rather than overload, and include retelling and reflection. For curriculum development, interactive storytelling can be integrated into narrative text units with structured pre-, while-, and post-reading activities and digital audio, illustration, and glossary support, provided every feature is linked to learning objectives.

For assessment, reading comprehension should not rely only on multiple-choice questions; story maps, retelling rubrics, inference questions, and reflective journals provide richer evidence, with oral retelling and picture sequencing often more developmentally appropriate for young learners.

Overall, interactive storytelling should be understood as a literacy pedagogy rather than entertainment, integrating narrative,

language, interaction, multimodal support, and comprehension strategy instruction to help elementary EFL learners move from passive reading to active meaning-making.

D. Conclusion

Interactive storytelling has strong pedagogical potential to enhance elementary students' reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. The synthesis shows it supports comprehension by activating prior knowledge, scaffolding vocabulary and narrative structure, promoting inferential thinking, and increasing engagement through a structured process of pre-story engagement, guided story encounter, interactive meaning negotiation, collaborative reconstruction, and reflective assessment. It should not be reduced to entertainment or digital decoration, but aligned with reading objectives, supported by teacher questioning, and assessed through meaningful comprehension indicators. Future research should test the proposed cycle's effectiveness across grade levels and classroom contexts.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, and readability. The tools were not used to generate data, conduct analysis, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments and scholarly decisions remain the authors' responsibility, and all AI-assisted outputs were reviewed and verified for accuracy and originality.

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