

## Can the storytelling strategy improve students story writing skills? An empirical study

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### Abstract

This empirical study examines the sustainability and generalisability of the impact of the storytelling strategy, which was implemented earlier with grade 7 students. The sample of this study involved 30 students which are randomly chosen and four teachers, who participated in the experimental groups. The researcher used the mixed approach for this study were collected during one semester via story writing skills tests and teachers' and students' interviews. The results prompted to statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the students in the follow-up test and the main data collection's posttest in favour of the follow-up test. Statistically significant differences were also found between the mean score of male and female students in the follow-up test in favour of females. The qualitative data showed that the four teachers still continue using the strategy in their written composition lessons hoping for the Ministry to incorporate it within the teacher's guide.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, story writing, arabic teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the principal ways in which humans can learn one other's thoughts and feelings. In today's world, effective writing has considerably expanded importance (Graham, 2006) and it has become necessary for teachers and educationalists to make sure that students have the writing skills to achieve success throughout their academic and/or working lives.

The writing processes taught proved successful since writing skills improved among the students. A study conducted by Awad (2002) was aimed at making learners more aware of planning ideas, writing them down, then revising them in terms of ideas and information. In addition, to make story writing more effective, students need to understand that they have to incorporate writing processes into their story writing.

The basis of any story is usually a specific story structure. The best stories, whether long or short, always have a beginning, an end and that something or several things will happen in between. The beginning presents the central ideas or moral together with the background and characters. The middle takes the plot forward, opening up the events and the conflict between the characters. The end brings the plot to its conclusion and ties up loose ends. To write a good story, the writer must take into account the structures that govern any story. Although story elements are important to any student writing a story, the Arabic language textbook for the seventh grade does not outline them in any detail. The researcher convinced that if the students know these elements, they will write a story correctly.

Temple and Gillet (1989) state that one person's schemas for stories or anything else stem from his or her own experiences. This means that no two persons will ever interpret a story in the same way since each will take their own meaning from it, applying their own schema and drawing their own conclusion. Thus, every story is really invented by its audience since only the individual can make sense of it from his experience. From this, it follows that if two persons are given the same story (say Cinderella or Aladdin), they may each write something quite different.

Kucer (1995) referred that students should have a toolbox of plans to use when they read or write a story. He also mentioned that keeping these from a student was like giving a carpenter just one hammer to build a house. Therefore, language-learning strategies are plans of action and special skills that students need in order to improve their language skills. To give him or her a good grasp of language skills, a learner must use a number of strategies and which specific type is used will depend on what type of knowledge is needed for a particular task.

There are many different aspects to storytelling. Through it, grade seven students can arrange their ideas, find new words, create a network between the story's events and look for meanings. Furthermore, in the literature about storytelling, the researcher found that the story helps students when they are writing a narrative. In addition, the researcher is convinced that storytelling is thought to be a way of teaching children who are not good at story writing. However, there are not many studies about storytelling that have gone into story writing in particular (e.g., Ballast, Stephens & Radcliff, 2008; Farrell & Nessell, 1982).

Stawinski (2005) believed that educational researchers in the past few years paid so much attention to the storytelling strategy because it helped students think in different ways. It also gives students a broader view of the world, teaching them that stories are valuable in everyday life. Kern (2003) listed a number of reasons to teach through storytelling. Initially, it helps children to connect new things with the knowledge they already have. Second, it teaches the child about other societies and ways of thinking. Third, children can share what happens to them. Fourth, children's thinking broadens. Fifth, they become aware of new language and make changes to their own. Lastly, they begin to recognise different language structures such as, intonation and punctuation.

Storytelling is, therefore, a strategy that could be used educationally in many ways, introducing students, for example, to the higher order skills such as evaluation, synthesis and application.

Moreover, it could give chances for learning together and help them with the social skills relevant to such situations.

Storytelling is full of energy. It helps people to feel confident, improves their verbal skills and allows them to respect those people telling the story. Storytelling exercises increase students' ability to write their own stories. Oral and the written language skills are amongst those improved by storytelling (Kies, Rodriguez, & Granato, 1993). In addition, Wendelin (1991) thinks that the storytelling improves communication skills and learning as a group. Oral language is more useful than reading aloud because, while a story is being told, there is excellent interaction between students and teachers with an effective influence on communication and comprehension (Alex, 1988; Robinson, 2008). In addition, storytelling is a way to enrich vocabulary to the students, which leads them to communicate with others (Dujmovic, 2006; Phillips, 1999).

Children must know oral language before they can learn written language and this is integral to learning and making use of written language (Goodman, 1986). Cooper and Collins (1992) indicate that useful skills come to the surface while students listen to a story then tell it once more in their own words. The listener and storyteller must both concentrate on the narrative, following its events then understanding the reasons behind what happens. Stories can be complicated or otherwise some stories that seem simple have a surprising number of levels or layers.

The improvement of writing skills is a likely concomitant of storytelling. After reading, listening and telling stories, children move on to writing their own original stories (Livo & Reitz, 1986). Those doing so will probably write stories with the usual story parts: a beginning, setting (place and time), characters, events, plot (problem), conflict and ending. The researcher thinks that storytelling is of major importance for story writing skills. From it, students learn to write, clearly, producing and managing their ideas to better their communication with other people.

The aim of this study was to investigate the sustainability and generalisability of the influence of the storytelling strategy. The present follow-up study seeks to answer the following question:

1. What is the post-implementation effect of the storytelling strategy intervention on the students' maintenance of the strategy and its generalisability within the local context?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research design**

A mixed method research design was used in the follow-up study. Quantitative data were collected and analysed to determine if students' story writing skills in the follow up had become better than they had been in the earlier post-test of the main study. The difference between the students' post-test marks in the experimental group and the follow-up group was calculated in general and across gender by the *T*-test using the groups' means.

Qualitative data in the follow-up study had to go through a number of stages. To start with, the interviews of the four teachers and eight students were transcribed. The views and ideas could be produced from the transcripts, the researcher read each one and coded and categorised the data to highlight the main points from each interview. The final stage was to summarise the data under each opinion, then interpret it so as to make comparisons and define possible relationships between different parts of the data.

### **2.2. Participants**

The sample of 30 students from grade eight in Salalah city in the Sultanate of Oman has been selected for this follow-up study. The researcher selected 30 students from five classes in five different schools, two of which were male public schools and the other two were female public schools

together with a mixed class from a private school. Students were 13-years old and during this follow-up study, they were in grade eight. During the main study, these students were in grade seven and were in the experimental group among the 120 randomly chosen participants.

### 2.3. Data collection instruments

Three different instruments were developed in order to check the maintenance and generalisation of the impact of the storytelling strategy. These instruments are:

#### 2.3.1. Story writing skills test

The researcher has modified the story writing skills test used in the main study in order to suit the students' level in the follow-up study. The test consists of ten skills (see Appendix #). The modification included replacing almost all the stories with new higher level ones. The questions about the story writing skills test of each new story have not been changed since answering them does not depend on the content of each story separately.

#### 2.3.2. Teachers' interviews

Interviews were conducted with four teachers (three females and one male). The researcher ruled out one of the teachers who participated in the experimental groups as he moved to the directorate of education in the region as a researcher. Semi-structured interviews were used because they permitted to collect more in-depth interpretive data, which reflect individual experiences, ideas, views and feelings.

#### 2.3.3. Students' interviews

Eight students with a difference of seven marks or above between their results in the follow-up test and the post-test of the main study were interviewed. One of the male students comes from a private school (E), two female students from a public school (D) and five male students from a public school (B). Interviews in the follow-up study tried to establish how students felt about the storytelling strategy and story writing in the story writing lessons.

## 3. Findings and discussion

The follow-up study became necessary in this research in order to check the maintenance and generalisation of the impact of the storytelling strategy after implementing it with grade eight students. The analysis, results and discussion of quantitative and qualitative data will be presented separately starting with the story writing skills test followed by the teachers' interviews and students' interviews.

### 3.1. Story writing skills test

The aim of the follow-up story writing skills test is to track any potential change with the sample obtained for this study from the experimental group. The collected data was analysed by calculating the means and *T*-test as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. T-test results comparing between post-test and follow-up test**

Test	N	Mean	SD	T-value	Sig.	Note
Post	30	31.48	11.23	4.920	0.001	Follow up
Follow up	30	36.72	9.00			

Table 1 indicates that the follow-up students' mean score of the story writing skills test is higher than the post-test students' mean score. The reduction of the standard deviation could be attributed to the homogeneity of the sample and the extra learning they acquired after the main data collection. The students' age growth, although a very short period since the main data collection, could have also

contributed to this. Consequently, these results indicate that students’ story writing skills developed after almost a year of the first implementing the storytelling strategy. The next table shows the differences between males and females in their scores of the post-test and the follow-up test.

**Table 2. T-test results comparing the male and female means scores of the story writing skills test in the post-test and follow-up test**

Gender	Test	N	Mean	SD	T-value	Sig.	Note
Male	Post	15	27.27	10.33	3.844	0.002	Follow-up
	Follow up	15	33.27	9.85			
Female	Post	15	35.70	10.78	3.034	0.009	Follow-up
	Follow up	15	40.17	6.71			

Table 2 indicates that the females’ mean score in the follow-up test has increased from 35.70 to 40.17 while their counterparts in the follow-up test (i.e., the males’ mean) were 33.27. These results suggest that the mean score of the females’ story writing skills in the follow-up test is higher. The reduction of the standard deviation for both males and females could be attributed to the homogeneity of the sample and the extra learning they acquired after the main data collection. The students’ age growth, although a very short period since the main data collection, could have also contributed to this. In addition, the results show that male and female mean scores in the follow-up test are higher than the previous post-test in the main study.

Moreover, Table 2 shows the percentage improvement of each student in story writing between the follow-up test and the previous post-test.

**Table 3. Differences in the follow-up participants’ scores between the follow-up test and the post-test**

N	School	Gender	Follow-up test	Post-test	Differences	%
1	B	M	45	24	21	42
2	D	F	36	15	21	42
3	D	F	28	13	15	30
4	E	M	40	25.5	14.5	29
5	B	M	22	11	11	22
6	B	M	35	25	10	20
7	B	M	24.5	15.5	9	18
8	B	M	44	37	7	14
9	A	M	30	26	4	8
10	C	F	44	40	4	8
11	D	F	36	32	4	8
12	A	M	36	33	3	6
13	B	M	40	37	3	6
14	C	F	43	40	3	6
15	C	F	42	39	3	6
16	D	F	35	32	3	6
17	E	F	38	35	3	6
18	A	M	17.5	15	2.5	5
19	C	F	31	28.5	2.5	5
20	A	M	35	33	2	4
21	A	M	30	28	2	4
22	C	F	33	31	2	4
23	D	F	47	45	2	4
24	E	F	47	45	2	4
25	A	M	15	14	1	2
26	C	F	48	47	1	2

27	D	F	47	46	1	2
28	C	F	47.5	47	0.5	1
29	E	M	46	46	0	0
30	E	M	39	39	0	0

Table 3 presents the percentage of difference in scores for each student between the follow-up test and the post-test. It suggests that the performance of weak students has increased substantially in the follow-up test compared with the previous post-test in the main data collection, while the scores of the top and average level students have increased slightly in the follow-up test. Some other students, however, maintained the same marks in both tests. The researcher asked the four teachers about the reason for this change. The four teachers reported that the top and average level students<sup>a</sup> received a story writing lesson once a week, while the weak students are getting one more supportive extra class per week. According to the teachers' interviews, they stated that they continued to apply the strategy even after the main data collection finished for around four months, but with different grades and classes (7, 8, 9 and 10) except the teacher in the private school who is teaching the same students she had but in grade eight.

Overall, based on these results, it can be argued that the storytelling was helpful and efficient with the grade eight students, who were in grade seven in the experimental group in 2010. From the results of the 30 students who participated in the follow-up and were part of those who were also involved in the previous post-tests, it is noticed that they had statistically significant gains in their story writing skills as a results of the strategy. Therefore, it could be argued that the storytelling strategy positively influenced the performance of the participating grade eight students during their story writing. In addition, the continuation of teaching the storytelling strategy to the students after the main data collection last year positively affected the students' performance in the follow-up test.

### 3.2. Teachers' perspectives

The four teachers pointed out that the storytelling strategy was an effective teaching method to improve the students' performance when writing a story. For example, a participant stated:

*Yes, I am implementing the strategy until now because I see a big difference in the students' story writing performance. Also, I apply this strategy with different grades and classes (7, 8, 9 and 10). I believe this strategy improves students' story writing skills such as vocabulary.*

(Teacher 2)

Another participant further commented:

*Yes, I found this strategy very effective in attracting the students' attention during the lesson. In addition, this strategy plays a significant role consolidating information in the students' mind so they do not forget any part of the content.*

(Teacher 4)

In general, all the four teachers expressed that they apply the strategy now to different grades and classes. The storytelling strategy, according to them, is a good and useful teaching method.

Three teachers did not modify the strategy and they have been using it the same way as before. For example, one of the participants expressed:

*No, I did not modify or change the strategy procedures because I feel each step is very important and they are all linked together.*

<sup>a</sup> Although the teachers did not particularly follow the students' levels according to the findings of the previous main data collection study, it coincided with the teachers' general impression about them, specifically the weak ones.

(Teacher 1)

One of the activities in the story writing is to sketch scenes from the stories they were involved in. When asked about any modifications on the strategy, only one teacher who deleted the drawing part in the strategy. In the interview that teacher stated:

*Yes, I deleted the drawing part and I put instead of it the writing activity because some of the students in class could not draw. The writing activity is summarizing the story in the student's language.*

(Teacher 3)

She agreed that drawing depends on students' abilities because some of her students could not draw. This participant mentioned this point as a challenge during storytelling implementation in the main study. However, we cannot generalise this, as many other students managed to draw and many of them enjoyed it.

These four teachers who were involved in the main study and the follow-up one carried out workshops about the storytelling strategy for their Arabic teacher colleagues. The latter welcomed them and were willing to try the strategy in their classes. Due to the time, it requires, the other Arabic teachers only applied the strategy in the extra supporting classes with the weak students. For instance, some of these teachers stated:

*Yes, I did a workshop for Arabic teachers about the storytelling strategy. I presented the idea and how to implement it. The Arabic teachers wondered about this strategy and they commented that it is too long and they hoped to decrease the procedures to suit one lesson.*

(Teacher 1)

Another participant further commented:

*Yes, I did a workshop for my Arabic teacher colleagues about this strategy. Their suggestion is to decrease this strategy to suit the 45 minutes of the lesson.*

(Teacher 4)

In general, all participants also hoped to decrease the number of lessons of the strategy although this strategy is useful to the students. They indicated that they are busy with finishing the Arabic syllabus because it has a lot of materials to cover with limited available time.

The four teachers agreed that they prefer to include this strategy in the teacher's guide. For example, one of the participants expressed:

*Yes, I wish for this strategy to be included in the teacher's guide because it is more useful than the normal method. Moreover, the normal method made the students bored and sometimes they do not feel involved in the lesson.*

(Teacher 2)

Another one indicated:

*Yes, I hope this strategy to be included in the teacher's guide because this strategy took the relationship between the students and teacher to a better level, which was different from the normal lesson.*

(Teacher 3)

The researcher believes that teachers are able to plan their lessons in a way that facilitates the storytelling procedures to create positive interaction among students and between the teacher and their students. Through such interaction, this strategy helps students in discussing their ideas and sharing their vocabulary items as well.

### 3.3. Students' perspectives

Seeking the students' perceptions about the effect of the storytelling strategy on their story writing, they were asked to describe this effect if it existed. All the eight students who were interviewed due to a substantial increase in their scores, perceived themselves as better writers than they were at the beginning of the study. They mentioned that they like storytelling, for example a participant indicated:

*Yes, I like storytelling because it made me imagine the story and predict the events before the teacher continues the story. Also, I can listen to interesting stories and do exciting activities.*

(Student 4)

Another participant stated:

*Yes, I like storytelling because I feel myself in another world. Acutely, I imagine myself in the story's events. In addition, storytelling and its activities are interesting to me.*

(Student 6)

There is widespread agreement that imagination, creativity, literacy and comprehension are all enhanced by storytelling (Rosenfield, 2009). As a child listens to a story, his or her brain develops new neural connections.

Four students mentioned that the storytelling facilitated the interaction between students and their teachers. One of the students stated:

*Yes, I enjoyed it when I listened to the story because I can connect with my teacher.*

(Student 5)

The researcher Chen (2008) reported that students answering his questionnaire agreed that the positive interaction with the teacher helped them to get involved in the storytelling sessions. They felt that their relationship with the teacher in these sessions was a relaxed one and different from their regular story writing lesson.

In terms of students' perceptions of story writing, the eight students agreed that they liked story writing and that it is fairly easy to write. One participant commented:

*I like writing stories and focusing on the different story elements made it easier for me. Now, I can write a story based on its skills.*

(Student 8)

Another participant commented:

*Before I did not know how to write stories. Now, I like to write stories at home. Also, I can write a story according to the story elements that my teacher taught me.*

(Student 2)

Another student expressed:

*I write any story easily because my teacher asked us to write a story every week. Also, I knew more about the story structure.*

(Student 7)

Another interesting finding emerging from the students' interviews was that most of the students considered the storytelling procedures. When asked about the essentials of a story writing lesson, most of them mentioned drawing, role-play and writing activities. Student 1 expressed this point:

*Frankly, I like role-plays in the class. I'm waiting impatiently for the lesson.*



In addition, Student 3 stated:

*I like drawing and writing activities because they improved my writing generally and story writing particularly.*

The researcher believes that this type of storytelling session is important in developing ideas and creativity in their writing. Storytelling improves people's story writing ability and motivation. If someone enjoys writing, he or she is likely to put more energy into the task. If they do not, they will not.

All the eight students involved were interested in the way they taught story writing. They said this was quite different from the past and they recognised that the teacher was relating more closely to them by using different voices, gestures and eye contact. For instance, one participant mentioned:

*Yes, I like the way of my teacher. She totally changed from the past. In the past, my teacher was very boring, but now using the new way, my teacher became more effective and interesting.*

(Student 1)

Another participant stated:

*Yes, the way of my teacher in the story writing lesson is very good because now we understood how to write a story correctly and acquire a lot of vocabulary.*

(Student 3)

In order to recognise the impact of teachers' roles on students, they were asked to explain the extent to which the teacher helps them in their story writing. Students described several roles that the teacher played in this regard. These roles included giving feedback on the students' story writing in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar. One of them stated:

*My teacher tells us to check spelling, punctuation and grammar, so our mistakes decreased compared to the past.*

(Student 8)

Guiding the students through suggesting some vocabulary was another teacher's role as stressed by students. An example of this is:

*My teacher helps us with some vocabulary to improve the sentences when writing the story.*

(Student 5)

There is an agreement that that storytelling expands the language lexicon including vocabulary for the students (Anderson, 2005; Dwyer, 1999; Gregor, 1998; Zamel, 1992). The researcher believes that vocabulary helps students master the words that are essential to write correctly.

Supporting and encouraging the students in their story writing was another role of Arabic language teachers according to the students as the following selection expresses:

*My teacher encourages, supports and gives presents to us in the class. If a student's story writing in a copybook is well-organized she shows it as a sample to all students saying 'I wish all of you like this student'.*

(Student 6)

Arabic language teachers also guided and encouraged group work as mentioned by the students. The following student illustrates this point:

*My teacher requires us to cooperate together as a team work in the classroom.*

(Student 4)

Kern (2003) gave a number of reasons for teaching through storytelling and one is helping children to experience sharing in group work. The researcher indicated that group work is important in BE schools in that students can get together and exchange experiences.

From the last four roles of teachers by the students, it is very clear that a teacher must give guidance during the story writing. Teachers' feedback, for example, helped learners with their story writing, encouraging them to feel positive about the strategy but more importantly, it helped to improve learner' language production. Guiding group work was mentioned by students as yet another role played by teachers. In cooperative learning, students found that when they think together about a story's characters and events, they can help one another to write and can also exchange any new words they have acquired. One technique some teachers use in story writing is to show students the occasional student's well organised notebook. This could perhaps encourage other students to keep neater notebooks with better writing.

#### **4. Implications and recommendations**

With the above findings from the follow-up study, the researcher believes that the storytelling strategy would be useful if it were made widely available at Salalah schools. Teachers have noted that the strategy improves students' performance in story writing and students find story writing much more interesting, especially when expressing thoughts and ideas in a meaningful story context.

There is now evidence to show that curriculum success would be greater if teachers and students were involved in the process of changing and improving the curriculum and its implementation. Students' interest in what they would like to write about would then be incorporated and teachers might have workable innovative ideas on teaching processes to suit their students.

This study has investigated how effective storytelling has contributed to the progress of story writing skills with grade eight students in the southern educational region of Oman. Since it has proved to be a success and provided a number of answers, it is recommended that future research should focus on larger groups of participants in the various educational regions.

Another possible focus for research would be to look at how the storytelling strategy might affect more specific types of writing such as persuasion and exposition. Storytelling helped students visually when writing their own stories, but would learners' language output get better in the same way when they were interested in expository or persuasive writing? Could the writing performance of the second cycle of BE students be enhanced by the strategy even when their writing is upgraded to a more advanced type of writing using argument or persuasion? The answer to these questions could be valuable, perhaps giving us an understanding of learners' performances in more varied types of writing.

Using such resources in written composition, lessons might give students more interest. It could help to develop their writing abilities and could even create students who could work independently with only a few suggestions and a little encouragement from the teacher. Teachers should therefore recognise that any resource or equipment if used properly can only add to the learning process. Teaching resources their ideas and scaffolds their writing and finally to gives a different kind of feedback from their teachers and classmates.

In this study, future research is recommended to investigate the efficacy of storytelling in nurturing elementary level students' interests in and enthusiasm for writing. Such research is considered relevant that examines the effectiveness of storytelling, as arts-based instruction, when the objective in the classroom is a transfer of knowledge to reading, listening, speaking and writing.

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