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THE EFFECT OF STORYTELLING ON IMPROVING ENGLISH LISTENING COMPREHENSION AMONG B1-LEVEL LEARNERS

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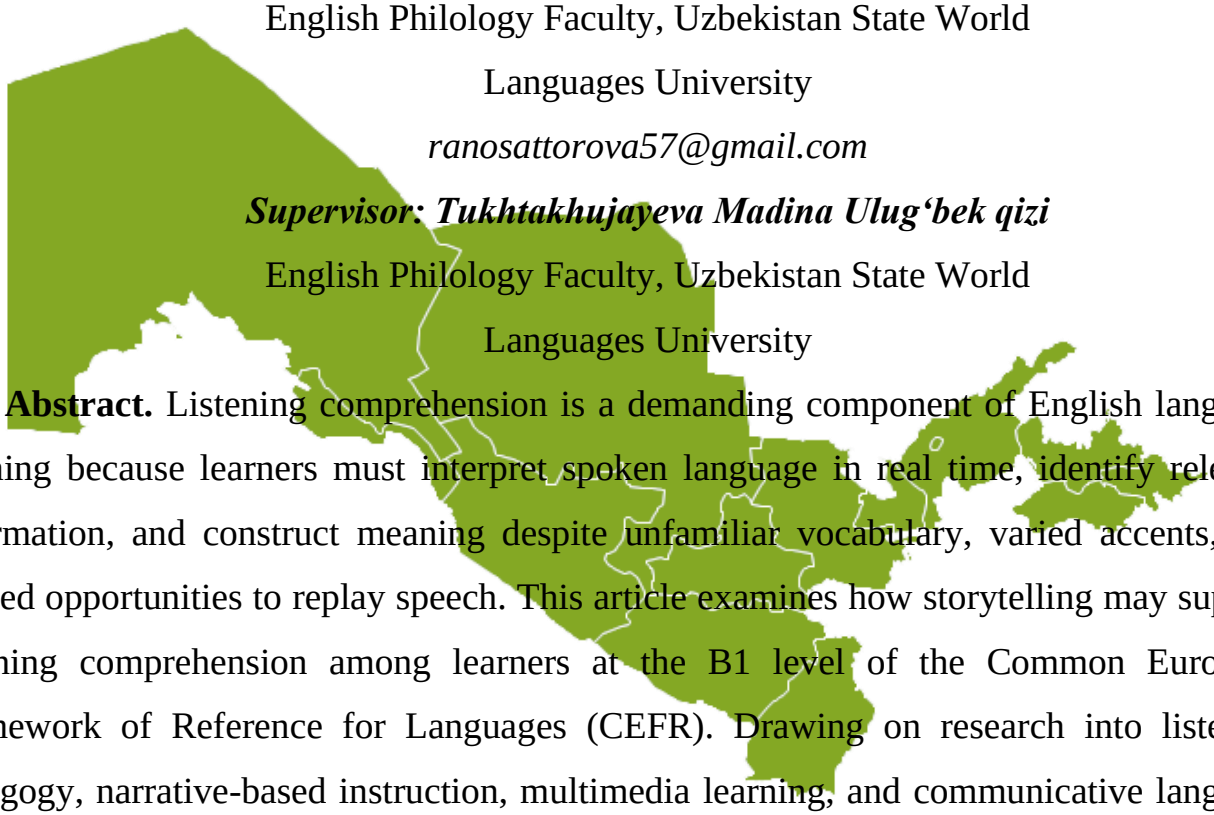

Abstract. Listening comprehension is a demanding component of English language learning because learners must interpret spoken language in real time, identify relevant information, and construct meaning despite unfamiliar vocabulary, varied accents, and limited opportunities to replay speech. This article examines how storytelling may support listening comprehension among learners at the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Drawing on research into listening pedagogy, narrative-based instruction, multimedia learning, and communicative language teaching, it argues that stories can provide a coherent context in which learners practise predicting, identifying main ideas, following event sequences, and inferring meaning from context. The article distinguishes the learner group, instructional content, and teaching procedures, and proposes a classroom sequence combining pre-listening prediction, purposeful listening, selective replay, and post-listening retelling. It is a literature-based discussion rather than a report of a newly conducted experiment; therefore, no original test results or causal claims are presented. The article concludes that carefully selected stories are a promising, adaptable resource for B1 listening lessons when their linguistic demands, length, and support are matched to learners’ needs.

Keywords: storytelling; listening comprehension; B1 learners; English as a foreign language; narrative-based instruction; listening strategies

Introduction

Listening is not simply a matter of hearing words. Learners need to recognise sounds, segment the speech stream, connect words to meanings, interpret grammar and discourse, and use context to build an overall understanding. These processes occur quickly, and a listener may lose the thread of a message after missing only a few words. For learners who study English mainly in the classroom, the challenge can be intensified by limited exposure to varied voices and authentic spoken interaction.

Storytelling offers one possible way to make listening practice more purposeful. A story usually has a setting, characters, a sequence of events, and a problem or change that listeners want to understand. This structure gives learners a reason to listen beyond answering isolated comprehension questions. It can also activate prior knowledge and help listeners anticipate what may happen next. However, stories do not automatically improve listening: a text that is too long, culturally unfamiliar, or linguistically dense may increase cognitive load rather than support comprehension.

This article explores the question: How can storytelling be used to support English listening comprehension among B1-level learners? The discussion focuses on learners who can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters but may still struggle with connected speech, unfamiliar expressions, and details. The aim is to connect learner needs, instructional content, and teaching decisions, while offering a practical sequence that teachers can adapt and evaluate.

Literature review

The CEFR describes language proficiency through communicative activities and illustrative descriptors rather than through grammar knowledge alone. At B1, learners are generally expected to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar topics encountered in work, study, leisure, and everyday life (Council of Europe, 2020). This is a useful planning reference, not a claim that all learners at the same level have identical

strengths. A B1 group may include learners who follow a familiar topic comfortably but find reduced forms, unfamiliar accents, or rapid turn-taking difficult.

For this reason, listening lessons should identify the specific task learners need to perform. Listening for gist, locating a particular detail, following a sequence, recognising a speaker’s attitude, and inferring an unfamiliar word are related but distinct outcomes. A lesson becomes more manageable when the teacher selects one or two principal outcomes and chooses a story that gives learners a genuine opportunity to practise them.

Narratives provide a meaningful frame for spoken language. Listeners can use knowledge of common story patterns—such as a goal, an obstacle, and a resolution—to form predictions and connect events. When a character misses a bus, for example, the listener may anticipate a change of plan; that prediction can help organise subsequent information. The story context also gives vocabulary a communicative purpose, so learners encounter words as part of an unfolding situation rather than as disconnected items.

Storytelling can also support attention and motivation. A clear narrative question, such as why a character makes a particular decision, encourages learners to listen for meaning. Yet motivation should not be treated as proof of comprehension. Students may enjoy a story while missing important details, so teachers need to combine engagement with observable listening tasks.

Listening pedagogy commonly distinguishes between bottom-up processing and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing involves recognising sounds, words, grammatical signals, and phrases. Top-down processing involves using context, background knowledge, and expectations to interpret the message. Effective listening lessons can help learners coordinate both processes rather than relying entirely on guessing or word-by-word decoding (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Storytelling is well suited to this balance. Before listening, learners can predict events from a title or a small set of images. During listening, they can identify the main problem and arrange events in order. On a second listen, they can focus on details such as a time, reason, or change of plan. After listening, retelling or summarising asks learners to

reconstruct the message in their own words. These stages make the listening purpose explicit and allow learners to notice what they understood and what remains unclear.

Digital stories may combine narration with images, captions, music, and sound effects. Such resources can be useful when visual information clarifies the setting or supports interpretation. Nevertheless, each additional element should have a clear instructional function. Decorative images, continuous subtitles, or loud sound effects may distract learners from spoken language. A recent quasi-experimental study of online digital storytelling with younger EFL learners reported better authentic-listening outcomes and engagement than conventional audio-based activities, while also noting that the single-site design limits generalisation (Wang, Zheng, & Zhang, 2026). This evidence is relevant but not directly transferable to every B1 context: the participants, age group, instructional setting, and materials differ from those in many university or adult classes.

Earlier work has also explored adapting listening texts into digital-story formats. Tanrıkulu (2020), for example, reported an action-research project that included B1-level learners and used digital stories during listening lessons. Taken together, such studies make storytelling a reasonable approach to investigate, but they do not establish that every type of story, for every learner group, will produce the same effect.

The proposed learners are B1-level students of English as a foreign language in a secondary, college, or university setting. The approach assumes that learners can understand familiar everyday language when it is delivered clearly, but may need support with connected speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and longer stretches of spoken discourse. Before selecting materials, a teacher should check learners’ interests, prior knowledge, confidence, listening habits, and access to audio equipment. These are factors to investigate rather than stereotypes to assign to an entire class.

The primary content is listening comprehension, with a focus on four outcomes: (1) identifying the main idea and purpose of a story; (2) recognising key details; (3) sequencing events and identifying cause-and-effect relationships; and (4) using context to infer the meaning of selected unfamiliar expressions. Depending on the story, learners may also

notice discourse markers such as first, later, because, although, and finally. The CEFR B1 level should guide the overall communicative demand, while the actual language load must be checked against the learners’ demonstrated abilities.

The approach combines communicative language teaching with strategy-focused listening instruction. The story is selected for a clear narrative arc, familiar or accessible subject matter, and a manageable length—approximately two to four minutes as a starting point, adjusted after a class-level needs check. The first listen is for overall meaning, not for every word. A second listen addresses selected details, and a final activity requires learners to reconstruct or discuss the story. This sequence makes listening purposeful and gives learners more than one route into the meaning without turning the lesson into a transcript-reading exercise.

The following sequence is a practical proposal that can be used in a 45–60-minute lesson. Timing should be adjusted to the class size and the difficulty of the story. Introduce the title, a short situation, or one relevant image. Ask learners to predict who the characters might be, where the story takes place, or what problem could occur. Pre-teach only a small number of essential words whose absence would prevent comprehension. Avoid explaining the entire story in advance, because learners need a reason to listen. Play or read the story once without interruption. Give learners one broad question, such as “What is the main problem?” or “What is the story mainly about?” Ask them to compare answers in pairs before a brief whole-class check. The purpose is to establish the overall meaning and reduce the pressure to understand every expression. Provide a focused task: choose the correct reason, complete a simple event sequence, identify which statement is true, or note two details that explain the character’s decision. Replay the story, or selected sections, if appropriate. Learners should listen for evidence rather than guess from the answer options alone. The teacher can ask, “Which part helped you decide?” to encourage attention to spoken clues. Discuss a small number of difficult phrases or connected-speech features that affected comprehension. Use short excerpts rather than translating the entire story. Where suitable, learners compare what they heard with a brief transcript after the listening tasks

have been attempted. This order helps maintain listening as the central activity while still allowing form-focused learning. In pairs, learners retell the story using four or five prompts, a sequence of pictures, or a simple beginning–problem–response–ending framework. A partner checks whether the main events are included and whether their order makes sense. Learners may then discuss a character’s choice or suggest a different ending. Retelling is not a substitute for a listening test, but it provides evidence of what learners have retained and how they organise meaning. Ask learners to identify one strategy that helped them: predicting, listening for key words, noticing sequence markers, using context, or replaying a difficult section. An exit ticket can include the main idea, one supporting detail, and one listening difficulty. The teacher can use these responses to select the next story and decide whether further practice is needed.

To evaluate the approach responsibly, teachers should measure the intended listening outcomes rather than relying only on student enjoyment or confidence. A simple classroom evaluation could use a short listening task before and after a teaching sequence, with comparable but not identical stories. Each task might assess gist, detail, sequencing, and contextual inference. Questions should be checked for clarity, and the audio should be similar in length, speed, accent familiarity, and linguistic difficulty.

A small-scale study could compare a storytelling group with a group receiving the same amount of listening practice through non-narrative audio. Both groups should have similar starting proficiency, teaching time, and assessment conditions. If random assignment is not feasible, the article or report should describe the limitations of using intact classes. Results should include sample size, descriptive statistics, the scoring method, and an appropriate analysis. Learner interviews or reflection logs could help explain which parts of the approach were useful, but self-reports should be interpreted alongside listening scores.

No such classroom experiment has been conducted for this article. Consequently, the procedure above is a proposed method for teaching and future evaluation, not a claim that a particular percentage of improvement has already been observed. A future study could test whether story-based instruction leads to greater gains than a suitable comparison condition

and whether any gains persist over time.

Discussion

The main pedagogical argument is that storytelling can connect listening strategies to a meaningful communicative purpose. The narrative structure gives learners a reason to predict and organise information; staged listening allows them to focus first on global meaning and then on selected details; and retelling makes comprehension visible to both learners and teachers. These features are consistent with accounts of listening as an active, strategic process (Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

The approach nevertheless requires careful design. A story that contains too many unfamiliar words can overload working memory. Visuals may support comprehension when they clarify a location, object, or action, but they should not reveal every answer before learners listen. Captions can be helpful during later analysis, although continuous captions during the first listen may shift attention from auditory processing to reading. Teachers should therefore decide when to use visuals, transcripts, and replay according to the learning outcome.

Learner differences also matter. Some students may benefit from a slower first exposure or a shorter story, while others may need practice with natural speed and less predictable vocabulary. Differentiation can include optional word banks, different levels of detail in the listening questions, or pair support during retelling. These supports should make the task accessible without removing the core listening challenge.

Finally, storytelling should be treated as one resource within a balanced listening curriculum, not as a replacement for conversations, announcements, interviews, instructions, and other spoken genres. Stories are especially useful for sequencing and causal inference, but learners also need to understand practical information and spontaneous interaction. A varied programme is more likely to prepare B1 learners for the range of listening tasks described in the CEFR.

Conclusion

Storytelling offers a plausible and adaptable way to support English listening

comprehension among B1-level learners because it combines meaningful spoken input with narrative structure, prediction, focused listening, and retelling. The proposed lesson sequence addresses who is being taught, what listening skills are targeted, and how instructional decisions can respond to learner needs. Research on digital storytelling provides encouraging evidence in some EFL contexts, but differences in age, setting, materials, and study design mean that claims should remain measured. Teachers are encouraged to select level-appropriate stories, make each listening stage purposeful, assess comprehension directly, and use learner feedback to refine instruction. Further classroom research with transparent methods and appropriate comparison groups is needed to determine the size and durability of any benefits for B1 learners.

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