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Integrated Strategies for EFL Learning

Role-Play, Task-Based Teaching, Digital Storytelling, and Literary Connections

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Abstract:

Background: EFL learners need opportunities to make the link between their vocabulary knowledge, their interpretation of the text and their ability to speak. In a multilingual classroom there can be very little speaking practice and learners can be quite anxious about speaking even if they have the grammar. Literature and narrative are a rich source of material for communicative teaching.

Objective: To explore how role-play, task-based language teaching and digital storytelling can be combined to support speaking, vocabulary, engagement and literary interpretation, with a specific focus on Arab EFL learners in Israel.

Methods: A focused narrative synthesis was developed from the references provided for the article and a very limited search for recent reviews of communicative and digitally supported language teaching. No comprehensive database search, formal risk of bias assessment or statistical meta-analysis was carried out.

Results: The review literature that we found reports very positive results for role-play, task-based teaching and digital storytelling. Each of these approaches has a different pedagogical function (oral rehearsal, purposeful interaction, contextualised multimedia production). The literature available does not provide any comparative effect sizes and there is no evidence that a combination of the approaches is better than any one of them in isolation.

Conclusion: A Story–Task–Performance sequence is put forward as a classroom design framework. Teachers should scaffold the participation of their students, select texts that are culturally resonant, assess a range of speaking skills and ensure that all students have access to the digital tools they need. That said, we do need to do some longitudinal evaluation before we can make any real claims about the effectiveness of the approach.

Keywords: EFL; literature; speaking; vocabulary; role-play; task-based language teaching; digital storytelling; Arab learners.

Introduction

Speaking involves the learner having to juggle vocabulary retrieval, grammar, pronunciation, comprehension and interaction all in the same go. Knowledge of a language in writing does not necessarily equate to the ability to speak it confidently. Language teaching therefore has to provide learners with plenty of opportunities to go from knowing the language to actually using it in a meaningful way.

In a multilingual education context English is learnt in parallel with other language commitments. An Arab learner in Israel may well be using Arabic at home and in the community, Hebrew in the institutions and English for academic/professional purposes. That situation should not be seen as a deficit in any way as multilingual knowledge can actually be a resource for comparison, for interpretation and for the strategic use of language. The issue is simply that the opportunities for English language interaction will vary enormously from learner to learner and from institution to institution.

The reference set in question links together a number of different strands of scholarship. Assadi and Naamneh's work on Arabic criticism and modern Arabic poetry [3] offers a literary perspective on intertextuality, heritage and

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interpretation. The other studies [2,4- 7] provide a rather different angle, one that is very much concerned with role-play, digital tools, digital stories and speaking difficulties. The literary work should be of use in the conceptual discussion rather than be treated as experimental evidence of EFL improvement.

Role-play creates a simulated communicative situation. Task-based language teaching organises the lesson around an achievable outcome. Digital storytelling is the combination of language with images, sound and narrative structure. The recent reviews look at these approaches in isolation [8-10] but the integration of these approaches into the classroom will require consideration of the aims of the lesson, the readiness of the learners and how the learning will be assessed.

This review is asking how these strategies can be used to support speaking and vocabulary, how literature can be used to provide meaningful content and what practical safeguards are needed in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. It's proposing a sequenced framework rather than claiming that there is a single, universally applicable teaching approach.

Methods

Review Design

This is a focused narrative review. It draws together conceptual literary sources, user supplied pedagogical references and a selection of more recent review literature. The narrative approach enables discussion across the heterogeneous materials, though it does not offer the reproducibility or completeness of a systematic review. No pooled effect estimate is presented.

Source Identification

Searches considered role-play and EFL speaking, task-based instruction and speaking proficiency, digital storytelling and vocabulary, and technology supported language learning. Recent review sources were given priority in terms of contextual evidence. The seven requested sources were all retained even in the absence of independent checking of full publication metadata or the original findings.

The search was by no means exhaustive. There were no database specific search strings, no screening log, no duplicate removal counts and no record of the exclusion decisions. A PRISMA flow diagram and numerical study selection totals would therefore be inappropriate. The paper should not be described as a systematic review in any sense.

Synthesis and Evidence Boundaries

The synthesis groups the evidence by instructional function: contextual input, meaningful interaction, oral performance and implementation. Speaking, vocabulary, engagement and learner confidence are all treated as separate outcomes. An increase in enjoyment is not assumed to equate to an increase in vocabulary and an improvement in rehearsed performance is not assumed to demonstrate development in spontaneous speaking.

The article makes a clear distinction between the findings reported at the review level and the proposed applications in the classroom. Any local claims would require the reader to go back and inspect the original studies (sample, comparison, duration of intervention, instruments used, results etc). Any missing publication details in the reference list are explicitly noted rather than made up.

Table 1. Sources and evidence boundaries

Source category	Use in this review	Interpretive boundary
Literary scholarship [1, 3]	Conceptual basis for interpretation and adaptation	Not evidence of language-learning treatment effects
Requested local studies [2, 4–7]	Context and candidate empirical evidence	Original methods and findings require verification
Recent reviews [8–10]	Broader pedagogical context	Heterogeneity limits direct comparison
Proposed model	Classroom planning framework	Not an experimentally validated intervention

Results

Role-Play and Speaking

The role-play review that was located talks about improvements in speaking outcomes and points to the potential benefit of simulated interaction [10]. That would certainly support the view that role-play could be a very useful classroom activity. It would not in any way support the view that every role-play format is going to be beneficial to every learner though. The study designs and the instruments used to measure the outcomes would need to be looked at in more detail before any firm causal claims could be made.

Role-play gives the learner a communicative identity and a reason to respond. The interviewer has to ask relevant questions, the applicant has to give a response. It can be a very good opportunity for turn-taking, for clarification, for follow-up questions and for the use of the appropriate vocabulary in the right context. The value is in the interaction not the performance.

Prep can make participation far more manageable. The teacher could provide role cards, a short model, some useful expressions and plenty of time for rehearsal. Of course heavily scripted dialogue will tend to be all about memorisation. A good progression is from rehearsal with a lot of support through to exchanges which are only partly predictable so that the learners are actually adapting rather than just reproducing lines.

Anxiety in speaking should be tackled through the design of the classroom rather than simply assumed to go away. Rehearsal, flexible roles, supportive feedback and the option of not performing in front of the class at all can all go a long way to protecting learner participation. Assessment must not be used to equate a confident stage presence with greater language ability.

Task-Based Language Teaching

The most recent TBLT review looks at the relationship between task-based instruction and EFL speaking ability [9]. Its relevance is that it's all about organising language learning around authentic activity rather than just isolated practice. The Murad and Smadi reference provided is a relevant local candidate but you'll need to look at the original paper to see what their results actually were [5].

A task has to have some kind of meaningful outcome. Students may agree on a community project, they may rank a number of competing proposals, they may work to resolve an information gap or they may prepare an interpretive presentation. The outcome is what gives the task its purpose and is what enables the students to exchange information and negotiate meaning. A worksheet which is simply a series of grammatical substitutions is not a task-based worksheet just because you've got the students working in groups.

An effective sequence can incorporate preparation, task, reporting and reflection on language. In the preparation phase the students will look at the topic and the key vocabulary. The task itself is the one where they are actually engaged in producing the output. The teacher then deals with the issues that keep cropping up and will of course ask the students to repeat or improve upon the performance.

Task design should distribute the responsibility. Having information or rotating discussion roles will prevent one fluent learner from doing all the work. The teacher needs to be looking at who is contributing, who is asking the questions and who is getting the opportunity to clarify meaning. The patterns of participation are as important as the end product.

Digital Storytelling and Vocabulary

The most recent digital storytelling review provides a useful summary of the research into narrative based digital language teaching [8]. There is other relevant review literature on this topic which also points to very positive language learning outcomes, though the current article doesn't go on to calculate an effect size. It is important to distinguish between vocabulary gains and engagement with the multimedia.

Digital storytelling can bring word form, meaning, sound and context together. You can have learners come across some vocabulary as they're reading a narrative, then go on to rehearse that vocabulary as they're writing a script and then retrieve it again when they're doing the narration. It's all about the repeated use, but the amount you retain is going to be down to the quality of your attention and the quality of your subsequent retrieval rather than simply the presence of the image.

Learner generated stories can be a very effective way of making vocabulary selection purposeful. When students are telling a community story they have to select words which express sequence, place, emotion and perspective. Peer review can be used to assess whether a word actually conveys the meaning the student intended. A retelling later on without the script can then be used to see whether the vocabulary has actually become available to them.

The study supplied by Assadi, Murad and Wazwaz is directly about digital stories and vocabulary with Arab ESL students in Israel [7]. It's relevant to the remit of the review but the intervention details and effect sizes would need to be cross checked with the original paper prior to inclusion in an evidence table for submission.

Literature and Intertextuality

Literature lends an interpretive dimension to the communicative work. You can look at how the narrative constructs the events, how the characters are in conflict with one another in terms of values, how one text is in dialogue with another. The texts provided on Arabic intertextuality and modern poetry [3] do suggest a conceptual connection between tradition, textual dialogue and the present day. They are not to be cited as evidence that a particular EFL methodology leads to improved test scores.

An example of an activity would be to get the students to compare two very short, appropriately licensed texts on the same theme. They would be asked to look at the voice, the imagery and the point of view and then to produce their own response. The language task might be to explain the comparison, to justify their interpretation or to turn a scene into dialogue. Interpretation is the communicative purpose and English is the vehicle.

Cultural comparison needs to be done with care. Teachers mustn't just treat Arabic literature as a monolith or assume that the students all have the same beliefs and experiences. Students should be free to pick and choose from the themes and to refuse to say anything personal. Heritage can be a resource for learning without the students being in any way representatives of the whole community.

Table 2. Instructional opportunities and appropriate evaluation

Strategy	Instructional opportunity	Illustrative activity	Evidence needed
Role-play	Interactive oral practice	Interview a fictional character	Unscripted speaking assessment
TBLT	Purposeful negotiation	Agree on a shared interpretation	Task and individual performance
Digital storytelling	Contextual vocabulary retrieval	Narrate an original adaptation	Immediate and delayed vocabulary tests
Literary comparison	Interpretation and perspective	Compare narrative voices	Text-supported explanation rubric

Discussion

An Integrated Teaching Sequence

The Story–Task–Performance model proposes a link between input, interaction and oral production. The story provides the topic and the language. The task requires the learners to talk about or deal with something that is in some way connected to the story. The performance then gives them an audience and a reason to actually produce their output. It's a model of integration, not a model that is in any way superior.

For instance students might be given an original short narrative about a community disagreement. They identify the vocabulary for describing the problem, the reasons and the alternatives. The groups then go on to develop a viable solution and produce an explanation. In a role-play they take on the roles of various fictional stakeholders and respond to questions about the proposal.

The cycle should include reflection and transfer. Following performance the students should be able to identify the language they've used well and the language they didn't have. A subsequent task on a different topic can then be used to see whether the learning has in fact transferred. Without that transfer stage a very good performance can easily be one that's just reliant on a memorised script.

Scaffolding and Differentiation

Scaffolding should make the difficult task accessible without in any way taking away from the communicative purpose. The novice may require a lot of visual vocabulary support, a lot of sentence starters and shorter speaking turns. The more advanced learner can cope with competing viewpoints, with the more unpredictable questions and with less explicit language support. The teacher should of course be gradually withdrawing the support as the learner becomes more independent.

Pair and group work is also important. Mixed ability groups can be a good thing in that they provide peer support, but they can also lead to unequal participation. Roles can be rotated, there can be individual preparation time and short personal reporting tasks to help ensure that everyone has an opportunity. The teacher must not assume that quiet participation is a sign of lack of understanding.

Feedback can be broken down into a communicative and a linguistic phase. In the course of the interaction the teacher may well be more concerned with the understanding of the message and with getting on with the task. At a later stage, selected examples can be used to work on grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Publicly correcting every error is something which can actually interfere with the process of meaning making and will of course discourage learners from taking risks.

Digital Equity and Ethics

Technology supported teaching has to take into account access, connectivity, device sharing, accessibility and teacher workload. The digital tools article we were asked to consider is very much relevant to those issues in the context of Israeli Arab EFL [4]. We would need to check the specifics of the findings before we can go into any detail about the local barriers.

A low tech alternative to every essential digital activity. Students could make paper storyboards, record audio off line, present a series of printed images with narration. If the learning objective is vocabulary or speaking then they shouldn't be penalised for not having access to the more sophisticated editing software.

Privacy and ownership both need to be thought about right at the outset. Teachers need to get proper consent before recording and/or sharing any student voice, image or personal story. Students can of course use fictional characters and non-identifying material. Public posting of any kind should not be a prerequisite for successful participation. All texts and media should be copyright compliant.

Assessment and Interpretation

Assessment should be geared towards the target outcome. Speaking can be assessed in terms of intelligibility, fluency, interaction, vocabulary and task achievement. Vocabulary can be assessed in terms of recognition versus production and in terms of immediate performance versus delayed recall. Literary interpretation should be assessing the quality of the reasoning rather than the correctness of the interpretation.

Pre and post intervention tasks should be similar but not the same. Re-using the exact same scripted performance is a potential way of inflating the apparent improvement. Where possible recordings can be assessed by two trained raters who have no knowledge of when the performance took

place. Clear descriptors are of course essential to ensure fairness and to make the feedback more useful.

Self reports of confidence can be useful in conjunction with performance evidence, but should never be used in lieu of it. A student may be quite comfortable with the idea of not demonstrating any gains at all, or may in fact have improved but still be anxious. It's important to keep the affective and linguistic data separate so that you can get a proper picture of what has actually happened.

Table 3. An outcome-aligned assessment framework

Dimension	Suggested indicator	Collection method
Speaking fluency	Ability to sustain meaningful speech	Comparable recorded tasks
Interaction	Follow-up questions and clarification	Observation and transcript review
Vocabulary	Appropriate independent use	Productive tests and later retelling
Interpretation	Claims supported by textual evidence	Written or oral explanation
Confidence	Willingness and perceived comfort	Anonymous questionnaire
Equity	Access and participation distribution	Access survey and teacher log

Graphs and Figures



Figure 1. Proposed Story–Task–Performance sequence. This is an instructional framework, not an empirically validated causal model.

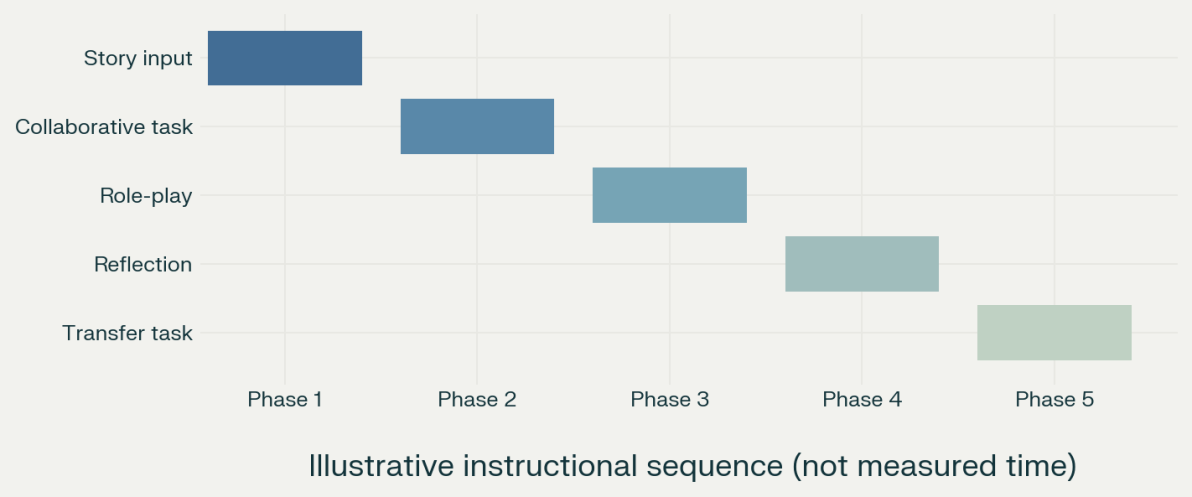


Figure 2. Illustrative lesson-sequence graph. Bar widths are schematic and do not represent effect sizes, scores, or empirical intervention durations.

Limitations and Research Priorities

This review has significant limitations. The source search was very limited, many of the records supplied were incomplete and the full text of each of the local studies was not independently assessed. There was no formal quality assessment of the studies and no synthesis of the numerical results. The discussion is therefore best viewed as supporting a cautious approach to pedagogical planning rather than as providing any strong comparative conclusions.

Future research should test the integrated instruction against clearly defined comparison conditions. The research should report on learner proficiency, class size, instructional time, teacher preparation, task materials and implementation fidelity. Equivalent teaching time is of particular importance in this respect as additional practice on its own could account for the apparent advantages if the intervention is receiving more teaching time.

Longitudinal work should look at delayed vocabulary retention, spontaneous speaking and transfer to new genres and contexts. It should also look at participation equity and whether the benefits differ by level of proficiency, access to technology or previous confidence in speaking. Qualitative interviews can be very useful in terms of getting at the learner's experience but must be read in conjunction with the performance data.

Research into the link between literary interpretation and language production is of particular value. It could look at whether an exercise involving the adaptation of a text or the comparison of different textual perspectives leads to a more sophisticated level of discussion than a standard 'comprehension' exercise. The measures used would have to be able to differentiate between interpretive sophistication and linguistic ability so that more sophisticated ideas aren't simply discounted due to language ability.

Classroom Implementation

Before you start a unit you need to have in mind one main speaking objective, a fairly limited vocabulary set and a narrative theme that is meaningful. You also need to know how the learners are going to demonstrate their progress and what the low tech alternatives are. Having clear goals in mind will prevent the unit from being all about decoration, performance and software editing.

Students need time to prepare, access to support and multiple opportunities to use the same language in different ways during the unit. A short reading, a collaborative decision, a role play and a reflective retelling can all be valuable experiences. Teachers can use their observation notes to inform the next lesson rather than simply waiting for the end of the unit to assess.

After the unit a new task should be one which invites the independent use of the target language. Learners can go on to compare early and later recordings, identify the strategies that have worked and set a realistic next goal. The teacher can then reflect on which students got involved, which supports were of any use and whether the outcomes were worth the amount of instructional time that was invested.

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