The role of storytelling in language learning: A literature review

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Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of human communication, and much has been said in the literature about its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool in the development of language skills in first (L1) language, and also in a foreign or second language (L2), regardless of learners' age or background (e.g. Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer & Lowrance, 2004; Cameron, 2001). Furthermore, storytelling is even claimed to be more effective in language teaching than traditional teaching materials, such as textbooks. Indeed, studies generally believe that effectiveness of storytelling relies on the fact that it is fun, engaging and highly memorable, raising learners' interest in listening to stories, as well as in speaking, writing and reading about them (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012, Kim, 2010; Wajnryb, 2003). However, the studies in the literature generally lack specifics such as how exactly the effects of storytelling were measured or what specific skills are benefited from the use of storytelling, for example. Furthermore, the vast majority of the studies do not investigate any potential negative impact of the use of storytelling on language learning, giving us the impression that it is a pedagogical instrument that only brings a positive contribution to L2 learning. This literature review aims to provide an overview about what empirical studies say about the effects of storytelling on the development of language skills in L2, how storytelling compares to other teaching methods in its effectiveness, and 3) identify gaps in the current literature that should be addressed by future research. Addressing these questions will provide researchers and teachers with a clearer understanding about the role of storytelling in the language classroom, and, consequently, help them improve their teaching skills.
Keywords: stories; storytelling; language skills; improvement; traditional teaching methods

Preamble

One month before I moved to Canada to start my PhD studies in Linguistics, in one of my language classes, in Brazil, I decided to tell my students a story for the first time, in order to see how they would respond to it. For this experience, I decided to choose the most challenging class I had, whose students had frequent behavioural problems and showed a lack of interest in participating in classroom activities and in learning languages, in order to investigate what the impact would be. I decided to tell my students a fictitious story, that presented values (i.e. trustworthiness and honesty) and emotions (i.e. love and hate). While I was telling my students the story, I noticed that all of them were attentively listening

to the story. In addition, after I finished telling the story, some of my students started to ask questions about it, and others demonstrated a strong interest in telling their own stories, based on similar experiences they had gone through. At that moment, I perceived that storytelling had a strong power to hold students' attention and encourage them to actively participate in oral and written activities related to the story they heard. I then started wondering whether the use of storytelling in the L2 classroom would also have a positive impact on helping students develop their language skills. This literature review has therefore offered me the opportunity to investigate the existing empirical evidence on the role and impact of storytelling in developing students' language skills in L2.

1 Introduction

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of human communication, being used for entertainment, and for the promotion of education and cultural values. Furthermore, it is considered to be a very effective pedagogical instrument in the development of language skills in first (L1) language, and also in a foreign or second language (L2), regardless of learners' age or background (e.g. Isbell et al., 2004; Cameron, 2001). Indeed, storytelling is claimed to be more effective in language teaching than traditional language teaching methods, through the use of textbooks, as it is said to work on language skills in a fun, engaging and contextualized manner, consequently raising learners' interest in listening to stories, as well as in speaking, writing and reading about them (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012, Kim, 2010). Moreover, storytelling is claimed to be very memorable to learners, helping them learn and retain vocabulary, grammatical structures and pronunciation (e.g. Wajnryb, 2003). But is there empirical evidence on such effectiveness of storytelling in the enhancement of language skills specifically in L2? What do studies say about the effectiveness of storytelling activities, compared to other language L2 teaching activities that do not use storytelling? Do studies report any negative impacts of the use of storytelling in the L2 classroom?

This literature review aims to investigate what empirical studies say about the effects of storytelling on the development of language skills in L2, and look for answers to questions such as why storytelling is used in the language classroom, how it is used, who tells stories to whom, and also whether studies refer to any negative impact storytelling may have on L2 learning. Addressing these questions will provide researchers and/or teachers with evidence on the role of storytelling in L2 learning, and enable them to improve and expand their pedagogical skills. The works to be reviewed here will focus on the effects of storytelling on L2 child and adult learners from different L1 backgrounds and of different age groups, for the purpose of verifying the impact of storytelling on these types of learners, who represent a large and increasing number of learners all over the world. This review also aims to compare the effects of different types of stories (i.e. stories about personal experiences, fictitious stories, folk tales) and different story formats (i.e. paper-based storytelling, and digital storytelling) on

L2 learning, in order to try to identify which ones have been most effective in the teaching of L2 and why. The aim will be to discuss the findings of studies which use different types of research designs (i.e. qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), for the purpose of examining the challenges posed, and the outcomes suggested by such designs. The argument presented is that while storytelling may have a positive impact on L2 learning, there may be aspects of storytelling and indeed potential negative impacts that have not yet been fully explored. Based on the existing evidence in the literature, this review will address the following questions:

1. Does storytelling improve L2 learners' receptive (listening and reading) and productive (writing and speaking) skills?
2. How does storytelling compare to other teaching methods in its effectiveness?
3. What kinds of gaps are there in the current literature that should be addressed by future research?

The review will start by providing some working definitions for storytelling and outlining the different types of stories and story formats that have been used in the L2 classroom (Section 2). The review will then analyze and discuss what qualitative and quantitative empirical studies say about the effects of storytelling on the development of L2 learning (Section 3), offer suggestions for future research (Section 4), and provide conclusions on the importance of storytelling (Section 5).

2   Storytelling: Definitions, types and formats

This section will discuss working definitions for storytelling, as well as the types of stories and story formats used in the L2 classroom, for the purpose of defining the terms and parameters to be used in this review of the literature.

2.1   Definitions

Researchers in the field of language teaching generally define storytelling in terms of how it works or what it does to promote communication between storytellers and story listeners. For example, Dyson and Genishi (1994) suggest that storytelling is a process where a teller uses a narrative structure, vocalization, and/or dramatic and mental imagery to communicate with an audience, who also uses mental imagery to provide the teller with verbal and non-verbal feedback. Likewise, Hsu (2010:7) defines storytelling as "the use of voice, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and interaction to connect a tale with listeners". A tale is created through the interaction between the storyteller and the audience. Thus, while the storyteller uses his/her voice and gesture to convey a story, the audience physically reacts to it by either squinting, staring or smiling, providing the storyteller with feedback on how storytelling is being received.

In terms of content or substance, storytelling is defined by McDrury and Alterio (2003) as:

> Uniquely a human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit. Stories enable us to come to know these worlds and our place in them given that we are all, to some degree, constituted by stories (p.31).

An apparent contradiction seems to be found in the above definitions. Although Hsu's definition limits storytelling to an oral activity, the definition presented by McDrury and Alterio seems to offer room for other types of stories as well. This review will refer to storytelling as a creative human experience that allows us to refer to ourselves, to other people, to cultures in general, and also to real or imaginary worlds, through the language of words. In addition, this review will refer to storytelling as a process where a teller uses a narrative structure, vocalization, and/or dramatic and mental imagery to communicate with an audience, who also uses mental imagery to provide the teller with verbal and non-verbal feedback. This definition will be used in this review, because it includes form and content aspects of storytelling, and summarizes the key elements shared across the language literature.

Some researchers consider storytelling to be a different activity from reading aloud, whereas others do not make such distinction. Groeber (2007), Mello (2001) and Wang and Lee (2007), for instance, argue that, in storytelling, the teller focuses on the main message(s) of the story, and is free to use language improvisation, vocalization, mimetic action and his/her creativity to convey a story message to his/her audience. However, during the process of reading aloud a reader reads aloud the exact words in a given story or presents a memorized text to the audience. Nevertheless, most studies do not distinguish between these two forms of storytelling (e.g. Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011; Speaker, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004; Huang, 2006; Elkkiliç & Akça, 2008), and use storytelling as a broad term, which includes reading aloud. Like most studies in the literature, this review will consider reading aloud as part of a storytelling activity. Although in reading aloud a reader is expected to speak the exact words in a given story or present a memorized text to the audience, he/she can still use elements such as mimetic action and creativity to convey a story message to an audience, making the supposed differences between storytelling and reading aloud very slight. In order to verify whether there is a significant difference between storytelling and reading aloud, to justify a formal distinction between them, further research is needed to compare the effects of storytelling and reading aloud on the same group or similar groups of L2 learners. Such research would verify how learners respond to these two different storytelling approaches. In the absence of such evidence, the definition of storytelling used here will include reading aloud activities.

2.2   Story types and formats

Researchers use different types of stories and story formats to investigate the role of storytelling in the development of skills in L2. Differences in story types and formats play an important role in showing how L2 learners respond to the differences and, consequently, in helping teachers and/or researchers have a clear understanding on whether the story type or format used in the classroom matters and why. For example, with respect to story types, Huang (2006) studied the use of fairytales (stories that contain magic, fairies) to investigate the role of storytelling in English in the enhancement of the speaking skills of a group of young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In contrast, Cary (1998) used one fable (a short story that uses animals that talk or behave like humans as characters, to convey a moral), one fairytale, and two folktales (tales that are part of a culture or tradition and are orally told) to investigate the impact of storytelling on the development of the language skills of child learners of Spanish as a foreign language. Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott (2011) studied the impact of the use of stories of personal experiences on the development of learners' language skills in English as a Second Language. Likewise, Ko, Schallert, & Walters (2003) focus on the use of stories of personal experiences as storytelling tasks. That different studies have used different kinds of stories is a factor that must be taken into account when analyzing how learners respond to storytelling, and also in showing us the ways in which such different types of stories impact L2 learning and why.

With respect to story format, although studies widely agree that stories, in general, play a role in facilitating the improvement of language skills in L2, there is a lack of research comparing the effectiveness of printed and digital story formats on the development of L2 skills in a particular group of subjects. Indeed, even studies that use more than one type of story (e.g. Cary, 1998) do not analyze or discuss whether there was a particular type of story that was more effective and why. This would be important to show language teachers and/or researchers which type(s) of stories work best in a particular context, and with what kinds of learners (i.e. child learners, adult learners).

In addition to the more traditional printed stories and the use of oral stories (with no reference to printed texts), digital stories are also currently being used in the L2 classroom. Indeed, digital storytelling consists of computer-based programs that offer learners the opportunity to create their own stories through the use of spoken narratives, in which learners may even record stories using their own voices, visuals, soundtracks, and other types of technologies to share a story that is usually (but not necessarily) based on personal experiences or memories (Normann, 2010; Zheng, Yang, Zhaig, Wang, Sun & Xue, 2011). Furthermore, digital storytelling is claimed to be a motivating, efficient and interactional pedagogical tool, enabling learners to share their stories and provide one another with feedback on their content or performance in a fun and engaging manner (Porter, 2005; Sadik, 2008; Yang & Wu, 2012). Thus, the use of digital stories has also become a common procedure in studies examining the effects of

storytelling on the language learning process. Despite the fact that digital storytelling is considered to have a positive impact on language learning, through the engaging and technologically-advanced digital resources it offers (e.g. Skinner & Hagood, 2008; Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006), traditional printed-format stories are claimed to be as effective as digital stories in the development of language skills. In other words, the value of storytelling in promoting the development of L2 learners' language skills is assumed to not be much influenced by the story format (i.e. printed and digital) used in the classroom.

The next section will analyze and discuss what questions qualitative and quantitative studies have investigated, and their findings, about the effects of storytelling on L2 learning. The aim of the following section will be to explore what kinds of empirical evidence on the feasibility and impact of different kinds of storytelling are available to teachers and researchers working with L2 learners. It will be followed in section 4 by a discussion of the gaps left by these studies, and potential areas for future research.

3 What do we know about the role of storytelling in the development of L2?

There is a considerable number of studies which investigate the effects of storytelling on the development of receptive and productive skills in L2 (e.g. Ajibade & Ndububa, 2008; Brown & Hirata, 2007; Cameron, 2001; Costenaro, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Hughes, 2009; Rachmawaty & Hermagustiana, 2010; Peck, 1989; Speaker et al., 2004; Sue & Bayley, 2005; Wajnryb, 2003; Wright, 2007), as well as on the development of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in L2 (e.g. Bardon-Harlig, 1995; Beaken, 2009; Madros, 2010; Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova and Láng, 2008; Wajnryb, 2003). Oral narratives are held to "divide text into tone units, identify tonic syllables on significant information, identify information that is already known and therefore non-prominent, identify points where the storyline changes direction - where the high fall (new information) or the fall-rise (familiar information, but with a new viewpoint) should be used" (Beaken, 2009, p.349). Thus, storytelling is claimed to help young learners become aware of rhythm and intonation features (Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova & Láng, 2008).

This section will review a range of qualitative and quantitative empirical studies, which may not be directly comparable as they use varying methods, participants of different age groups (i.e. child and adult learners) and from a variety of L1 backgrounds. Notwithstanding their differences, I will assess what kinds of insights these studies offer into the role of storytelling in the development of L2 language skills. I will start by reviewing studies which investigate the role of storytelling in the development of specific subsets of language skills, such as reading and speaking, and then I will examine studies which focus on the role of storytelling in developing the four language skills (reading, listening, reading and writing) as a whole.

3.1   Storytelling and the development of specific language skills

Some studies have focused on whether storytelling plays a role in developing specific sets of skills in L2, such as reading and speaking. To illustrate, Hsu (2010) performed a ten-week quantitative study on the role of English storytelling instruction in the development of speaking skills of a group of twenty-five grade five and twenty-five grade six elementary school students, who are native speakers of Taiwanese and study English as a foreign language. This small-scale study included one experimental group and one control group. The experimental group received instructions through the use of storytelling activities, as well as through access to an English textbook. The control group, however, only received instructions through the same English textbook. Both groups were pre-tested and post-tested with regards to their oral language complexity. No significant differences were found between the groups during the pre-test. However, in the post-test, the experimental group was shown to produce longer, more complex oral sentences in L2 than the control group. Hsu (2010) suggests that this happened because, during the study, learners did not only passively listen to stories, but also had the opportunity to retell the stories they heard, and practice the new vocabulary and sentence structures introduced to them. However, Hsu does not say what exactly he means by "more complex oral sentences" or what such sentences consist of. Therefore, it is not possible to know whether learners were assessed in terms of use of more advanced grammatical structures and/or vocabulary and whether their pronunciation and oral fluency, for instance, were also taken into account. Since Hsu does not focus on learners' oral grammatical accuracy or on their oral fluency, the term "more complex oral sentences" is vague and therefore limited in its use to language teachers and researchers.

Hsu's (2010) view on the importance of encouraging learners to be storytellers to promote the development of their oral skills in L2 is also shared by other researchers in the field. To illustrate, in another small-scale study, Afrilyasanti and Basthomi (2011) carried out qualitative research to investigate the role of digital storytelling in the enhancement of five grade eight EFL learners' oral production, focusing on their opinions regarding digital storytelling, as well as the quality of their digital storytelling production. The subjects attended seven meetings after school hours, although the length of each meeting is not specified. The researchers found that the learners were able to present their stories intelligibly and also through a smooth, spontaneous speech flow. By telling and retelling their stories, learners had many opportunities to practice their pronunciation. Furthermore, learners could assess their own fluency by listening to their recorded voices, although the study does not explain how exactly learners assessed their fluency and whether they received any descriptors or orientation from their teacher on how to self-assess their oral fluency level. Afrilyasanti and Basthomi also observed that the use of digital storytelling in the classroom motivated learners to voluntarily ask questions in class, respond to oral discussions, and introduce new topics during EFL classes. These authors

concluded that digital storytelling encourages learners to actively participate in speaking activities during their L2 learning process, helping them improve their vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. The study by Afrilyasanti and Basthomi does not address the question of whether storytelling activities had any negative impact on the development of oral production of any of subjects or even on the instructor during the study. Such information would be important to detect whether there are any specific areas or issues that need further attention from L2 teachers.

Besides investigating the effects of storytelling on the development of speaking skills, researchers have also investigated the role of storytelling in helping L2 learners develop their reading skills. For example, Huang (2006) performed a significant quantitative study on the effects of Contextualized Storytelling Approach (CSA) on the development of reading comprehension of a group of seventy-two EFL learners in Taiwan. CSA uses different types of extralinguistic resources such as objects, body language, music, sound effects, and visuals, to mention a few, to facilitate comprehension of language learning. The study consisted of comparing the performance of three different groups of twenty-four grade six learners each (two experimental groups and one control group), in terms of reading comprehension and word recall. The first group (control) was exposed to text-only stories; the second group was exposed to illustrated written stories, and the third group first listened to stories and then was exposed to illustrated written texts of the stories they had listened to. The results of the study showed that the third group outperformed the other two groups in its ability to retell stories, suggesting that CSA helped learners improve their language comprehension. Nevertheless, it is not possible to know what exactly in CSA plays a primary role in promoting L2 learners' reading comprehension. Is it the use of prompts in CSA, the oral stories or a combination of both? This issue needs to be further investigated. Nonetheless, Huang's study suggests that the use of illustrations helps facilitate and positively impacts L2 learners' reading comprehension.

Similarly, Chang (2010) investigated the effectiveness of storytelling on the development of the reading skills and story recall of a group of fifty-two grade five native speakers of Taiwanese who studied English as a foreign language, by comparing two different teaching approaches that use storytelling: the teacher-mediated storytelling approach (TMSA) and the computer-mediated storytelling approach (CMSA). In the TMSA, the researcher told the participants a story, interacting with them by using flashcards to teach vocabulary. After telling the story, the researcher briefly reviewed it with the participants, before they were exposed to a questionnaire and tests. In the CMSA, the researcher pre- taught the key vocabulary that would be found in the story, and then orally presented the story to the participants. After the presentation, the participants read the story, and explored the interactive features available on the computer. They then answered a questionnaire that focused on learners' preferences and views of the efficiency of the TMSA and CMSA approaches, and did the reading comprehension and the story recall tests. Learners were assessed in two different moments: the first

experiment took place on December 15th and 18th 2009, and the second experiment was carried out on March 23rd and 26th 2010. Results from the analysis of the questionnaire showed that, although learners liked both approaches, they believed that the CMSA was more effective in facilitating the improvement of their language skills. In the first experiment, the TMSA group scored higher than the CMSA group in story comprehension, whereas in the second experiment, which took place around thirteen weeks later, the CMSA group outperformed the TMSA in reading comprehension and story recall. The second experiment used exactly the same procedures as the first experiment. Although such results suggest that increasing exposure to CMSA has a positive impact on the improvement of such performance, it is not clear whether the better performance of the CMSA group in the second experiment occurred due to learners' longer exposure to the CMSA approach, whether it was due to the fact that learners, in both groups, generally had a personal preference for the CMSA approach or even whether both exposure and preference to CMSA played a role.

As well as these studies that focus on the impact of storytelling on specific L2 language skills such as speaking, listening and reading, researchers have also investigated the relationship between storytelling and the development of language skills as a whole, as described in the following section.

3.2   Storytelling and the development of language skills as a whole

A range of empirical studies investigates the effects of storytelling on the development of receptive and productive language skills as a whole. For instance, Kim (2010) performed a six-week study to investigate the role of storytelling in the development of language skills of adult learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), and also the impact of learners' interest in learning ESL on the enhancement of their language skills. Five undergraduate and graduate learners, at basic English level, were used as participants in this small-scale study. The study was conducted twice a week (one hour per session), and data were collected and analyzed qualitatively (i.e. questionnaires, oral interviews and field notes), and also quantitatively. Learners were exposed to different types of stories, such as fables, folktales and stories on personal experiences, and were given the opportunity to not only to listen to stories, but also to read stories aloud, answer oral and written questions about the stories they heard, as well as write and orally tell their own stories to their classmates and instructor. Results of the study showed that storytelling was an effective pedagogical instrument in improving the language skills of learners who demonstrated interest and pleasure in participating in storytelling activities, whereas little progress was observed in learners with no or little interest in storytelling. Kim noticed that two out of the five participants in his study did not enjoy storytelling activities, and that these learners had a lower English proficiency level, when compared to the participants who demonstrated a strong interested in storytelling. Indeed, during the study, the participants with a lower English proficiency level showed a lot of stress in having to tell stories and frustration at not being able to satisfactorily cope with what they were being asked

to do in class. Despite the fact that the study suggests that the stress experienced was caused by the learners' lower English proficiency level, it is possible that stress may have also been caused by the way storytelling was conducted in class. In sum, Kim's (2010) study demonstrates that storytelling may play an important role in helping learners improve their language skills in L2 but also that it may not help learners much if storytelling is not delivered at an appropriate language level to learners, causing them stress, frustration and lack of interest in storytelling activities.

Likewise, Atta-Alla (2012) carried out a seven-week study to investigate the role of storytelling in enhancing the language skills of a group of forty male and female ESL adult learners, between thirty and fifty years of age, who had used English as a foreign language (EFL) for six to twelve years. During the study, the learners were told fifteen different types of stories, including folktales and picture book stories, which contained repeated patterns, such as rhymes, and the repetition of words and sentences. After listening to stories, learners participated in different oral and written communicative activities which aimed to offer them the opportunity to work on receptive and productive skills. Learners were encouraged to write their own stories and retell them to their peers and to their teacher, for instance. Post-test results showed that learners demonstrated higher test results in the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) than in the pre-test, suggesting that storytelling plays a role in enhancing such skills. Nevertheless, the study by Atta-Alla (2012) presents some methodological challenges that need clarification before further conclusions can be drawn. For instance, the study does not state how long learners were exposed to storytelling activities or the total length of the study. In addition, the claim on the importance of storytelling in improving language skills relies on the results of a three-hour test on the four language skills. In other words, although learners participated in different oral and written storytelling activities, their performance was only assessed through a post-test. In order to have a broader view of the importance of storytelling in enhancing the four language skills in L2, learners should also be assessed through other methods, such as continuous classroom activities, and have the results of their three-hour test compared to their performance in the classroom activities.

The studies by Kim (2010) and Atta-Alla (2012) offer empirical evidence on the importance of storytelling in promoting the development of receptive and productive language skills, by providing learners with the opportunity to actively work on such language skills in a fun and engaging manner. Furthermore, Kim's (2010) study also speaks to the potentially negative impact that storytelling may have on L2 learning. However, despite the suggested importance of storytelling, the negative impact of storytelling on L2 learning still needs to be further investigated and properly addressed in the literature. Indeed, the vast majority of the studies in this area provide us with a 'rosy' picture of the role of storytelling in developing L2 learning, giving us the impression that it is a pedagogical instrument that only brings a positive contribution to L2 learning. Some of these issues will be addressed in section 4, below.

Having looked at the language skills that storytelling is claimed to improve, questions still remain as to why and how storytelling improves such skills. Empirical studies claim that storytelling improves language skills for three main reasons: because the use of stories is highly motivating; because they provide learners with comprehensible input; and because they promote social interactions. The following sections will evaluate these claims in turn.

3.3   Storytelling as a motivating tool

Storytelling is considered to be an effective instrument to boost learners' motivation to learn languages (e.g. Wajnryb, 2003; Wright, 1995), increasing their active participation in the language learning process. According to Wajnryb (2003), the content and meaning of stories are powerful enough to engage learners in the learning process, helping them improve their skills in L2. Similarly, Wright (1995) claims that storytelling increases learners' interest in listening and reading stories, playing an important role in improving their listening and reading skills in L2. Storytelling is, therefore, considered to be a powerful instrument to motivate learners to learn languages by engaging and encouraging them to actively participate in the language learning process.

This issue was examined in one of the most recent studies in the field. Yang and Wu (2012) carried out a significant, one-year quasi-experimental study of the effects of digital storytelling (DST) on the motivation of one hundred and ten grade ten EFL learners in Taiwan and on the improvement of their language skills in EFL. The participants were divided into an experimental group and a comparison group. Although both groups were pre and post-tested, and also exposed to the same language contents, assessment tasks and instructor, they used different teaching strategies. The experimental group was exposed to DST activities, through which learners were encouraged to actively participate in the language learning process, using creative thinking in the production of oral and written language. In contrast, the control group was mostly exposed to textbook readings and the listening of lectures on PowerPoint slides. Data were collected and analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, through questionnaires, tests and descriptive statistical analysis.

Results indicated that the participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group in all three groups of variables measured: learning motivation, creative thinking and language skills and features (listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary). Indeed, Yang and Wu suggest that DST played a very important role in improving learners' motivation and language skills by providing them with opportunities to work on language skills actively and creatively, through the use of modern and engaging digital resources. Moreover, learners exposed to DST were encouraged to use language in meaningful contexts, related to their personal experiences. Yang and Wu's study has made a substantial contribution to the literature, as it investigated the effects of DST on the motivation of a large number of L2 learners (n= 110), for a long period of time

(1 year), and by using mixed (qualitative and quantitative) research design.

In a smaller scale study, Elkkiliç and Akça (2008) conducted research on the role of storytelling in motivating a group of Turkish child learners to learn EFL. Twenty-one grade four elementary learners participated in this study. They were asked to read a series of statements in a questionnaire, and choose the statements which best reflected their opinion. In addition, they were asked open-ended questions regarding their reason(s) for studying EFL (in order to determine whether they were being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to learn English), the activities they like doing in their classes, as well as the activities that they do not enjoy doing. According to Schunk (2008), extrinsic motivation occurs when a learner is motivated to do something for an external reward, such as higher grades or a job promotion, whereas intrinsic motivation refers to one's desire to participate in an activity, solely for the pleasure in doing the activity itself.

In Elkkiliç and Akça' study, most participants reported to enjoy the storytelling activities in their EFL classes, and learn something new from the stories they had been exposed to. Results indicate that learners perceive storytelling as an important motivational tool in EFL learning. Although learners' opinions on the importance of storytelling in motivating and helping them improve their language skills in L2 is important to teachers and researchers to show what learners' views are, it may not reflect how learners actually react or respond to storytelling activities in the classroom. Thus, in order to confirm whether learners' opinions are in agreement with the actual way they respond to storytelling activities, the kind of study carried out by Elkkiliç and Akça could also provide learners with storytelling activities and evaluate their motivation level during such activities. Such evaluation could be carried out through classroom observations, for example. We could then compare the findings of the questionnaire on learners' views to the classroom observations. This comparison would provide language teachers and researchers with more reliable, comprehensive conclusions on the role of storytelling in enhancing learners' motivation and language learning.

Taken together, these two studies seem to support the claims on the effectiveness of storytelling in motivating learners to learn L2 and in enhancing their receptive (i.e. reading and listening) and productive (i.e. speaking and writing) skills, by providing learners with the opportunity work on the referred language skills in fun, meaningful and engaging activities. Besides helping L2 learners develop their language skills as a motivating tool, storytelling is also claimed to help learners improve their language skills through social interactions, as assessed in the next section.

3.4 Storytelling and the development of language skills through social interactions

Researchers generally believe that storytelling plays an important role in the development of language skills in L2, by promoting social interactions and mutual

collaboration in the L2 classroom (e.g. Wajnryb, 2003). For example, storytelling is claimed to encourage learners to interact with each other by listening to and telling stories to each other and by reading each other's stories, in addition to encouraging them to interact with their teachers. Such interactions, which offer learners the opportunity to receive support from their teachers and also from classmates who may have a slightly higher knowledge of the L2 being studied, are also considered to help learners work within their current and potential level of development, or their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (e.g. Ko, Schallert & Walters, 2003; Ryokai, Vaucelle & Cassell, 2003). As regards ZPD, it is a concept created by Vygotsky, and defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Thus, by interacting with teachers and/or more skilled peers, learners are believed to develop their language skills more satisfactorily than they would have done had they worked alone.

In terms of empirical studies, Li and Seedhouse (2010) carried out research to investigate the role of storytelling in the development of oral interactions in elementary learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Taiwan. The study compared learners' interactions in standard EFL classes (with the support of a textbook) to story-based classes. Two teachers from two different elementary schools participated in this two-month study. Each of them worked with a different class (aged 10) of 30 to 35 learners each. Twenty-six lessons were recorded and transcribed. Li and Seedhouse found an increase in oral production and expression of different language functions with the use of story-based lessons as compared with standard lessons, which could be due to an increase in interest and motivation to participate in story-based lessons, as evidenced by an increase in the learners' spontaneous oral interactions during these classes. Li and Seedhouse also reported that story-based lessons were more efficient in expanding learners' vocabulary when compared to standard lessons. The study by Li and Seedhouse seem to suggest that storytelling is an effective pedagogical tool in promoting social interactions in the L2 classroom, and also in developing different language areas, such as oral production and vocabulary.

Similarly, in a very short study, Ryokai et al. (2003) investigated whether interactions with a slightly more skilled partner in the target L2 during a storytelling activity play a role in helping twenty-eight 5-year-old learners enhance their language skills. The study used a female virtual peer (Sam), who looked like a 6-year-old child. This virtual peer was projected on a screen behind a castle, and interacted with the learners, by telling them stories and encouraging them to tell their stories as well. The virtual peer gradually used more advanced linguistic expressions during the storytelling, and her responses were controlled by a researcher who stayed behind the screen. The session lasted about fifteen minutes. Ryokai et al. (2003) noticed that the participants who played with Sam told stories using language structures and vocabulary similar to those used by the virtual peer. Although the results from this study suggest that interactions with

slightly more skilled interlocutors enhance learners' language skills, further research needs to be conducted before conclusions are drawn, as this study was conducted for only fifteen minutes. Therefore the study by Ryokai et al. does not provide any follow-up on whether the claimed benefit of using a virtual partner in storytelling activities to promote the development of language skills in L2 would sustain for a longer period. Moreover, in a fifteen-minute study it is hard to know whether the development of learners' skills occurred because they were exposed to a nice and different kind of peer, whether it was because of the use of storytelling, or whether learners were benefited by both (i.e. the quality and kind of interactions with the virtual peer, and the use of storytelling).

Results of the studies by Li and Seedhouse and Ryokai et al. suggest that storytelling helps learners improve their language skills, by increasing their social interactions in the classroom. In addition, some researchers have claimed that storytelling enhances L2 learners' language skills by providing them with comprehensible input, as discussed in the following section.

3.5 Storytelling as a tool to provide comprehensible input

Researchers generally agree that storytelling creates ideal language learning conditions, because it provides learners with *comprehensible input* (e.g. Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2002, Hendrickson, 1992; Wajnryb, 2003). Wajnryb, for instance, claims that "the text of the story provides the potential for comprehensible input, that is language that is within the range of access of the learner" (p.7). Some empirical studies have investigated the role of storytelling in providing learners with comprehensible input and facilitating the development of skills in L2.

For example, Cary (1998) performed a qualitative study on the effectiveness of a Contextualized Storytelling Approach (CSA) in facilitating the comprehension of English, which was the participants' L2, as well as in impacting the quantity of L2 speaking in a group of twelve elementary Latino learners, whose L1 was Spanish. Three English-Spanish bilingual classrooms were analyzed during a period of four weeks. Data were collected through observations, field notes, recorded dialogues between the researcher and the three participant teachers, and through recorded informal dialogues between the teachers and the learners. Four traditional stories were selected for the study. Props, costumes, music, movement, and sound effects, as well as synonyms and paraphrasing, role-playing, and teacher-facilitated post-story discussion were used to promote comprehension of the oral stories. The results obtained showed that CSA increased learners' comprehension of L2. Indeed, Cary observed that learners were engaged to attentively listen to stories, which facilitated their comprehension. Furthermore, the quantity of L2 speaking was also increased after exposure to CSA stories. Despite the fact that the findings from Cary's research are limited by the lack of a control group, the study makes an important contribution to the literature, by showing that CSA facilitates learners' comprehension and also develops their listening and speaking skills in L2. The use of a control group would play a

relevant role in Cary's study, since it investigates the effects of a pedagogical instrument (CSA) on learners' comprehension and speaking skills in L2.

A further study on the role of storytelling in providing learners with comprehensible input was performed by Isbell et al. (2004) compared the effects of storytelling and reading aloud activities on the improvement of story comprehension of thirty-eight 3 to 5 year-old children during a 12-week study. The study used 2 groups: the first group was exposed to storytelling activities, whereas the second was exposed to reading-aloud activities. As mentioned in section 2, in storytelling the teller improvises what he/she will orally say, while in a reading aloud activity the story reader reads aloud the exact words of a given story or presents a memorized text to his/her audience. Results showed that although the storytelling group outperformed the reading aloud group in story retelling, and the reading aloud group outperformed the storytelling group in the development of a wordless picture book story, both storytelling and reading aloud played an important role in providing learners with comprehensible input. Indeed, storytelling and reading aloud are fun, engaging and meaningful tasks, providing learners with a clear understanding of the meanings they convey.

Clearly there is a large range of literature in the field that addresses the impact of storytelling on L2 learners. Despite the methodological (i.e. research design, type of story and story format) differences found across the reviewed empirical studies in section 3, all of the reviewed studies suggest that storytelling is a very important pedagogical tool in facilitating the development of specific sets of language skills in L2, such as speaking, listening or reading, as well as receptive and productive skills as a whole. The next section summarizes the conclusions that can be drawn from this range of reviewed studies.

3.6   The effectiveness of storytelling: Some conclusions

The studies discussed here show differences and similarities in the way they investigate the role of storytelling in developing L2 language skills. For example, the great majority of the empirical studies use children as subjects and, therefore, it may give us the impression that storytelling is most effective when used with children than in adults. Nevertheless, storytelling is also reported to be an effective pedagogical instrument to help adult learners enhance the learning of an L2 (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012; Kim, 2010). Although studies explore things in different ways, some common threads can be seen across their findings, such as the importance of encouraging learners to actively participate in the language learning process by not only to listening to stories but also by discussing them and telling their own stories in class. Indeed, learners' active participation in storytelling activities is held to help learners develop their language skills in L2, since it promotes motivation to learn a second/foreign language and social interaction in the L2 classroom.

Despite their wide range of approaches, and the use of different types of stories (e.g. fables, fairy tales, stories about personal experiences) and story

formats (paper-based, oral and digital), few studies investigate the impact of different types of stories and story formats within the same group of learners, to verify how they compare in their effectiveness to improve language skills in L2. This is one example of an important gap in the literature, and one that needs further clarification. However, there are other areas that also require further investigation. The next section offers some suggestions for future research, based on the gaps found in this review.

4   Suggestions for future research

In undertaking this review, some gaps have been identified in the literature on the impact of storytelling on L2 learning. Such gaps fall into six main themes: 1) L2 learners' age groups; 2) learners' L1 background; 3) the negative impact storytelling may have on the improvement of L2 skills; 4) the role of storytelling in the development of oral grammatical accuracy in L2; 5) lack of specifics on the effects of storytelling on the development of pronunciation in L2; 6) the impact of storytelling on the curriculum and also on L2 teachers.

First, the vast majority of studies on the role of storytelling in the development of language learning investigate its effects on children (e.g. Afrylyasanti & Basthomi, 2011; Li & Seedhouse, 2010; Speaker et al. 2004; Tsou et al., 2006), a more rounded picture of the effects of story telling on L2 skills would take into account a much broader age rage. Consequently, there should be further research on the effects of storytelling on the enhancement of teenage and adult learners' foreign/second language skills.

Secondly, most of the reviewed studies use monolingual groups of language learners (learners with the same L1) and data were collected in L2 learners' countries of origin. This allows us to conclude that such studies give us a limited view of the role of storytelling in the development of language learning. In order to have a more comprehensive evaluation of its role in language learning, it would be relevant to investigate the effects of storytelling on multicultural language groups and in their target language countries. For example, it would be important to investigate the relationship between storytelling and the improvement of oral grammatical accuracy using adult multicultural groups.

Thirdly, with respect to story types and formats, since the great majority of the studies in this area only show storytelling as positively impacting on the development of language skills in L2, it would be relevant to investigate whether and how storytelling might negatively impact on L2 learning. For instance, could the theme of a story or how the story is told negatively affect L2 learning? If so, in what ways and why? Would two groups of L2 learners present any difference in the development of their skills in L2 if each of these groups were exposed to a different story format, type of story and/or story contents? In fact, no studies compare the effectiveness of the different types of stories and story formats used in storytelling activities on the development of L2 skills. For example, none of the reviewed studies investigates whether there is a particular type of story (e.g.

folktale, fairy tale, personal experience) or story format (e.g. oral, paper-based or digital) that impacts more positively on the development of L2 skills than another. In fact, the studies solely suggest that the referred story types and formats are all effective in helping L2 learners improve their language skills.

Fourthly, with respect to language skills, although studies have suggested that storytelling enhances learners' grammar abilities (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Hsu, 2010) while others report that storytelling improves speaking skills (Cary, 1998; Li & Seedhouse, 2010), it seems that there are currently no studies that have evaluated the relationship between storytelling and the development of oral grammatical accuracy. This is certainly a gap that requires further investigation, as grammatical accuracy is considered to play an important role in oral communication (Lee, C., 2009; Spratt, Pulverness, & Williams, 2011), and therefore future studies are warranted in order to study this relationship. Furthermore, evaluation of the effects of different types of narratives on the development of oral grammatical accuracy is also warranted. In particular, it would be important to investigate whether monolingual and multicultural groups of language learners perform differently depending on the type of narrative employed. Research in the area would be very informative to language teachers, mainly in the selection of the optimal contents and formats of stories to be used in storytelling activities during their L2 classes. Moreover, it would be relevant to conduct comparative studies on the effects of different types of narratives on the development of learners' receptive and productive skills. This type of research would be particularly important in helping teachers in the selection of the types of narratives they can use in their language classrooms.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the studies that refer to the effect of storytelling on the improvement of oral skills, claiming that storytelling improves pronunciation in L2, do not specify what exactly they mean by '*improve* pronunciation', or what they mean by 'pronunciation'. For example, does 'improve' mean that learners develop a more 'native-like' pronunciation? Does storytelling develop pronunciation at segmental level (i.e. the pronunciation of segments in a word), at suprasegmental level (i.e. word syllable stress, sentence intonation) or at both? Such specifics would be important to show language teachers, for example, in which pronunciation areas the use of storytelling is effective. Finally, based on the gaps found in the reviewed studies, the suggested future research will make an important contribution to clarifying important aspects, regarding the role of storytelling as a pedagogical instrument to help L2 learners effectively improve their language skills in L2.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for L2 teachers, given that language teachers are supposed to teach a variety of language topics and usually have little time to cover them all, how impactful is storytelling on the L2 curriculum and those who teach it? To illustrate, how much time do L2 teachers need to spend on learning storytelling techniques and getting prepared to adequately use storytelling in the L2 classroom? How much preparation time is required from teachers to prepare storytelling activities and implement them in the L2 classroom? How much investment in teacher training programs would be

necessary to enable teachers to appropriately use and explore storytelling techniques in the classroom? These questions address specific and relevant issues of crucial interest to L2 teachers who may wish to incorporate storytelling into their curriculum.

5   Conclusions

This literature review provided an overview of the importance of storytelling in language learning by presenting and discussing several qualitative and quantitative studies that investigated the role of storytelling during language learning, particularly in L2 learning. Overall it can be concluded on the basis of these studies that storytelling is an effective pedagogical instrument to enhance learners' language skills in L2. For example, storytelling is suggested to help L2 learners enhance their language skills, because it offers them opportunities to work on specific sets of language skills (i.e. reading, listening and speaking) or work on receptive and productive skills as a whole, through meaningful and contextualized activities. Furthermore, the reviewed studies suggest that encouraging learners to be storytellers plays a very relevant role in promoting language learning, by encouraging them to actively participate in the learning process. Studies also suggest that storytelling promotes the development of language skills in L2, because it boosts learners' motivation to learn a second or foreign language, promotes social interactions among learners and between learners and teachers in the L2 classroom, helping learners keep within their ZPD, and also provides them with comprehensible input. Indeed, the reviewed studies suggest that storytelling plays an important role in facilitating comprehension because stories are highly contextualized, through the use of illustrations, verbal repetitions and/or body language, for instance, and also because they are fun and engaging.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the previous section, the role of storytelling in developing L2 language learning needs to be further investigated, as the literature lacks studies on whether storytelling may negatively impact on language learning. For example, studies do not explore whether the type of story, the story format, or the way storytelling activities are developed in class affect learners' performance in L2 and the development of their language skills. Moreover, studies do not assess whether storytelling has any negative impact on language teachers and on the L2 curriculum by demanding a considerable amount of preparation time and investment on the training of teachers to appropriately use and explore storytelling techniques in the classroom. Research exploring potential drawbacks in the use of storytelling would certainly benefit language teachers and the literature in general, by offering a comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the role of storytelling in the development of L2 language skills.

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