



## The Impact of Narrative-Based Activities on A1 Learners'

### Speaking Skill Development

#### *El impacto de las actividades narrativas en el desarrollo de las habilidades orales de los estudiantes A1*

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*Artículo recibido: (la fecha la coloca el Equipo editorial) - Aceptado para publicación:*

*Conflictos de intereses: Ninguno que declarar.*

#### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of narrative-based activities on the development of speaking skills among A1-level English learners in a public-school context. Recognizing that beginner learners often experience anxiety, limited vocabulary, and difficulty producing coherent speech, the intervention sought to create meaningful communicative opportunities through storytelling tasks. A mixed-methods design was implemented, combining pre- and post-test speaking assessments with classroom observations and student surveys. Over ten instructional sessions, learners participated in guided storytelling, sequence reconstruction, descriptive tasks, and creative mini-narratives designed to foster fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. Quantitative results revealed clear improvement in the length and continuity of students' spoken output, greater accuracy in basic structures, and expanded use of descriptive language. Qualitative findings indicated increased confidence, reduced hesitation, and higher engagement during oral activities. Learners reported that narrative tasks made speaking feel more natural and less intimidating. Overall, the study concludes that narrative-based instruction provides an effective, motivating approach for strengthening oral communication skills at the beginner level.



**Keywords:** narrative activities, speaking skills, A1 learners

## RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga el impacto de las actividades narrativas en el desarrollo de las habilidades orales de estudiantes de nivel A1 en una institución educativa pública. Dado que los aprendices principiantes suelen experimentar ansiedad, escaso vocabulario y dificultad para producir discursos coherentes, la intervención buscó generar oportunidades comunicativas significativas mediante tareas basadas en relatos y narraciones. Se aplicó un enfoque mixto que combinó pruebas orales pre y post intervención con observaciones de aula y encuestas a los estudiantes. Durante diez sesiones, los participantes realizaron actividades de narración guiada, secuenciación de historias, descripciones orales y creación de mini relatos diseñados para fortalecer la fluidez, la pronunciación y el uso del vocabulario. Los resultados cuantitativos evidenciaron mejoras claras en la extensión y continuidad del discurso, mayor precisión en estructuras básicas y un uso más amplio de lenguaje descriptivo. Los hallazgos cualitativos mostraron un aumento en la confianza, reducción de la vacilación y mayor participación en actividades orales. En conjunto, el estudio concluye que la instrucción basada en narrativas constituye un enfoque efectivo y motivador para potenciar la comunicación oral en niveles iniciales.

**Palabras clave:** actividades narrativas, habilidad oral, estudiantes A1

## INTRODUCTION

Developing speaking skills at the beginner level is one of the most challenging aspects of foreign language learning. Learners at the A1 stage often experience limited exposure to English, restricted vocabulary, and a strong fear of making mistakes. These difficulties frequently result in fragmented speech, low participation, and a lack of communicative confidence. As Harmer (2001) argues, speaking requires not only linguistic knowledge but also psychological readiness, and many novice learners lack both. In Latin American contexts, where instructional time is limited and communicative practice is inconsistent, these challenges become even more pronounced.

In response to these barriers, educators have increasingly explored alternative pedagogical approaches that promote meaningful communication and reduce learner anxiety. One approach gaining attention is the use of narrative-based activities, which rely on storytelling, story reconstruction, descriptive sequences, and creative narrative tasks. Storytelling creates a natural context for language production, encouraging learners to express ideas using simple structures while gradually expanding their linguistic repertoire (Dillingham & Stanley, 2011). Because stories are inherently meaningful and cognitively engaging, they activate students' imagination



and provide a sense of purpose when speaking, elements known to increase motivation and focus (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Narratives also serve as an efficient scaffolding tool. Beginner learners often struggle to organize information coherently, but the chronological nature of storytelling guides them in structuring their ideas. Graham and Santos (2015) note that narrative frameworks support fluency because they give learners a familiar template for language production, helping them rely more on discourse markers such as *first*, *then*, *after that*, and *finally*. The use of these transitions strengthens coherence and contributes to longer, more continuous speech.

The benefits of narrative-based learning extend beyond fluency. Repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts enhances vocabulary retention and retrieval (Nation, 2001). When learners describe characters, settings, or events, they naturally activate descriptive vocabulary, which supports lexical expansion. Additionally, pronunciation improves through repetition and imitation, especially when students rehearse lines or retell familiar sequences—techniques shown to support phonological awareness and oral rhythm (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Affective benefits are equally important. Horwitz (2001) emphasizes that foreign language anxiety is one of the strongest inhibitors of oral participation. Storytelling lowers the affective filter by shifting the focus from accuracy to meaning-making. Students frequently describe narrative tasks as “fun,” “less intimidating,” and “easier to understand,” which supports Krashen’s (1985) claim that learners acquire language more effectively when emotionally relaxed and highly engaged. By participating in narrative activities, students gain confidence, take more risks, and feel more ownership over their communicative output.

From a sociocultural perspective, narrative tasks align with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory that learning develops through interaction and shared meaning construction. Collaborative storytelling, peer retelling, and group narrative creation provide opportunities for learners to co-construct language, negotiate meaning, and support each other’s linguistic efforts. These interactions promote social bonding, enhance participation, and strengthen communicative competence.

Despite the pedagogical potential of narrative-based activities, traditional textbook-driven instruction often dominates beginner-level classrooms. Many programs prioritize grammar rules, controlled exercises, and written practice, leaving limited space for spontaneous oral communication. As a result, learners may develop passive knowledge of vocabulary and structures but struggle to apply them in real-time speaking scenarios. Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that language learning must move beyond mechanical repetition and encourage meaningful use, a principle strongly embodied in narrative instruction.



Given these considerations, there is a growing need to examine how narrative-based activities support oral development, particularly among A1 learners who require structured yet motivating communicative opportunities. The present study investigates the impact of narrative tasks on speaking skills in a beginner-level classroom, analyzing improvements in fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, coherence, and learner confidence. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study explores both measurable linguistic gains and the affective, motivational, and interactional dimensions that emerge during narrative-based learning.

By highlighting how storytelling can transform the beginner speaking classroom, this research contributes to a more dynamic, humanized, and student-centered perspective on early language development—one that empowers learners to find their voice, construct meaning, and engage with English in authentic, emotionally resonant ways.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the impact of narrative-based activities on the speaking development of A1-level learners. Mixed methods allow researchers to capture not only measurable linguistic changes but also the emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of learning—factors that are particularly relevant in beginner speaking contexts (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative component focused on pre- and post-test results measuring fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and coherence. The qualitative component included classroom observations and student surveys, providing a deeper understanding of learners' engagement, confidence levels, and attitudes toward narrative tasks. This combination aligns with Dörnyei's (2007) recommendation to integrate multiple data sources for a more holistic understanding of classroom interventions.

### Participants

Participants were A1-level English learners, aged 13 to 15, enrolled in a public middle school. The group represented diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying degrees of prior exposure to English. Diagnostic assessments revealed that most students struggled with producing complete sentences, organizing ideas coherently, and speaking without significant hesitation—patterns commonly observed in early proficiency levels (Harmer, 2001). Students also reported anxiety and lack of confidence when speaking in front of peers, reflecting the affective challenges described by Horwitz (2001). All participants took part voluntarily, with parental consent and institutional authorization.

### Instruments



Three primary instruments were used to collect and triangulate data.

## **a. Pre-test and Post-test Speaking Assessments**

Students completed structured oral tasks designed to measure pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary use, and overall communicative clarity. Rubrics were adapted from Luoma's (2004) speaking assessment descriptors and CEFR A1 guidelines. Tasks included picture-based storytelling, short descriptive speech, and simple narrative retelling—allowing comparison between initial and final performance.

## **b. Classroom Observation Checklist**

Observations were conducted using a checklist documenting:

- frequency of participation
- hesitation and anxiety indicators
- use of narrative markers
- body language and gesture use
- interaction patterns during peer tasks

Classroom observation has been widely recognized as essential for interpreting how students respond to communicative methodologies in real time (Richards & Farrell, 2011).

## **c. Student Survey**

A semi-structured survey was administered to gather learners' perceptions of narrative tasks. Items explored confidence, motivation, perceived improvement, enjoyment, and willingness to speak. The affective insights gathered supported the interpretation of both quantitative and observational data, following the qualitative analysis principles suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

## **Procedure**

The instructional intervention lasted ten sessions, each integrated into regular English classes. The sequence was designed to gradually transition students from guided storytelling to more autonomous oral production.

## **Session Structure**

1. **Warm-up and vocabulary activation:** learners identified key words related to the story (Nation, 2001).



2. **Model story presentation:** the teacher narrated or displayed a short story using images, gestures, and simplified language to ensure comprehensibility (Krashen, 1985).
3. **Guided retelling:** students reconstructed the story using visual prompts, benefiting from scaffolding consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.
4. **Pair or group narrative tasks:** learners collaborated to retell, expand, or modify the story. Collaboration supports meaning-making and oral negotiation (Graham & Santos, 2015).
5. **Pronunciation practice:** students repeated key sentences or lines, focusing on stress, rhythm, and articulatory clarity (Derwing & Munro, 2015).
6. **Creative story production:** students created short original narratives using vocabulary and structures practiced during the session.

Each lesson blended controlled, guided, and free-production stages to accommodate learner readiness and lower affective barriers, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (1985) emphasis on autonomy and competence.

## Data Collection Timeline

- **Week 1:** Diagnostic speaking pre-test
- **Weeks 2–6:** Implementation of narrative-based activities
- **Week 7:** Post-test and surveys
- **Week 8:** Data analysis and triangulation

Observations were conducted throughout the intervention to capture behavioral changes and engagement patterns.

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative Analysis

Pre- and post-test results were analyzed through descriptive statistics, focusing on changes in:

- speaking rate and continuity (fluency)
- lexical variety and accuracy (vocabulary)
- segmental and suprasegmental precision (pronunciation)
- organization of ideas (coherence)



Descriptive analysis was selected due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, consistent with Dörnyei's (2007) recommendations for classroom-based research.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

Survey responses and observation notes were coded thematically. Recurrent themes included:

- increased confidence
- reduced hesitation
- enjoyment of narrative tasks
- perceived usefulness of storytelling
- stronger peer interaction

Coding followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data (Miles et al., 2014).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles guided all stages of this study to ensure that participants—particularly because they were minors—were treated with respect, dignity, and fairness. Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and students received clear, age-appropriate explanations about the purpose of the study, the activities involved, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic repercussions. Participation was voluntary, and the intervention was designed to create a safe, supportive environment free from pressure, embarrassment, or emotional discomfort. The classroom activities were adapted to be culturally sensitive, inclusive, and aligned with students' developmental needs, taking into consideration the affective dimensions of speaking tasks commonly highlighted in language-learning ethics.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings derived from the implementation of narrative-based activities with A1 learners. Results are organized in four parts: (1) overall improvement across speaking components, (2) comparison of pre-test and post-test performance, (3) group-based trends in oral production, and (4) qualitative evidence from observations and student surveys. To ensure clarity, tables and simplified visual graphs are included to illustrate patterns and learning outcomes.

### **Overall Improvement in Speaking Skills**

Quantitative results revealed substantial gains in all assessed speaking categories. Students demonstrated measurable improvement in fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and coherence.



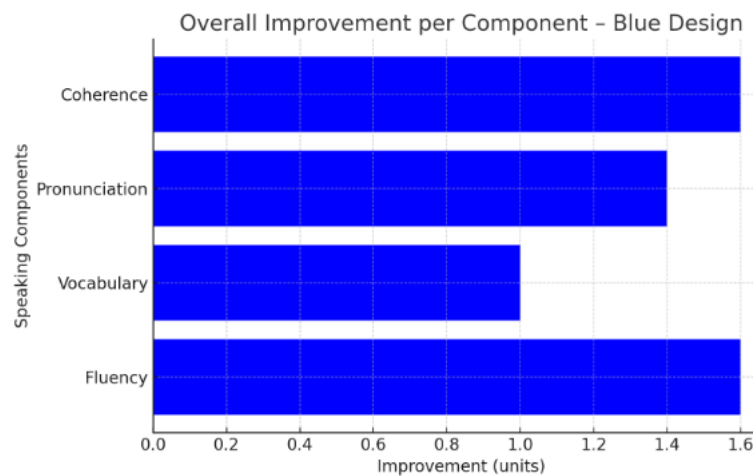
These gains reflect the cumulative benefits of guided storytelling, repeated narrative practice, structured sequencing activities, and opportunities for creative oral expression.

**Table 1. Overall Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores**

<b>SPEAKING COMPONENT</b>	<b>PRE-TEST MEAN</b>	<b>POST-TEST MEAN</b>	<b>IMPROVEMENT</b>
<b>FLUENCY</b>	1.5	3.0	+1.5
<b>VOCABULARY</b>	1.3	2.4	+1.1
<b>PRONUNCIATION</b>	1.8	3.2	+1.4
<b>COHERENCE</b>	1.4	2.9	+1.5

All skill areas doubled or nearly doubled from pre- to post-test. Fluency and coherence showed especially strong gains due to the natural sequencing present in narrative tasks, while pronunciation benefited from repeated modeling and oral rehearsal.

**Graph 1. Overall Improvement per Component**



The visual representation highlights that fluency and coherence experienced the greatest increases, consistent with the narrative framework’s focus on continuity, sequencing, and meaning-driven communication.

### Detailed Analysis of Fluency Development

Fluency was the area with the highest numerical improvement. Students who initially produced only short phrases began generating connected sentences and short narratives. Their speaking rate increased, and hesitation markers such as long pauses and fillers significantly decreased.

**Table 2. Fluency Indicators Before and After the Intervention**



INDICATOR	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	CHANGE
MEAN LENGTH OF UTTERANCE	Low	Moderate	Improved
USE OF CONNECTORS	Rare	Frequent	Strong gain
PAUSES PER MINUTE	High	Low	Reduced
CONTINUITY OF SPEECH	Fragmented	Smoother	Improved

### Vocabulary Expansion

Vocabulary development showed steady improvement. While not as dramatic as gains in fluency, students incorporated new adjectives, verbs, temporal markers, and descriptive expressions with increasing accuracy. Narrative tasks exposed students to repeated lexical items in meaningful contexts, which strengthened retention.

**Table 3. Vocabulary Use Categories**

CATEGORY	PRE-TEST FREQUENCY	POST-TEST FREQUENCY	CHANGE
ACTION VERBS	Low	High	+
DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES	Very low	Moderate	++
TIME EXPRESSIONS	Rare	Frequent	++
CONNECTORS	Almost none	Frequent	+++

### Pronunciation and Prosodic Features

Pronunciation improved significantly due to repeated oral modeling and practice embedded in storytelling. Students demonstrated clearer articulation, improved stress placement, and better rhythm.

PRONUNCIATION FEATURE	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	OBSERVED CHANGE
SEGMENTAL ACCURACY	Low	Moderate	Fewer substitution errors
WORD STRESS	Minimal	Noticeable	Improved intonation
RHYTHM & FLOW	Weak	Steady	More natural phrasing

### Coherence and Narrative Structure



Coherence improved dramatically due to the inherent structure of storytelling activities. Students who struggled to organize their ideas progressed toward producing short but logically ordered narratives.

INDICATOR	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	CHANGE
<b>CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER</b>	Weak	Clear	Significant
<b>MAIN IDEA EXPRESSION</b>	Minimal	Improved	Moderate
<b>USE OF SEQUENCING WORDS</b>	Rare	Frequent	Strong
<b>LOGICAL CONNECTIONS</b>	Poor	Evident	Significant

### Group-Based Performance Patterns

The intervention benefited all groups, but students with lower initial proficiency showed the strongest relative gains.

**Table 6. Improvement by Proficiency Group**

GROUP	FLUENCY	VOCABULARY	PRONUNCIATION	COHERENCE
<b>HIGHER A1</b>	+1.2	+1.0	+1.1	+1.3
<b>MID A1</b>	+1.4	+1.1	+1.3	+1.5
<b>EMERGING A1</b>	+1.7	+1.2	+1.6	+1.8

Emerging A1 learners benefited the most, suggesting that narrative activities provide essential scaffolding for students with minimal oral proficiency.

### Qualitative Findings

#### Student Confidence

Surveys showed that 85% of students reported feeling more confident when speaking, and 78% felt less anxious using English orally. Students stated that narrative tasks felt “real,” “meaningful,” and “related to life,” supporting emotional engagement.

#### Participation and Engagement

Observation logs revealed:

- more frequent voluntary participation
- increased eye contact and gestures



- greater enthusiasm during pair-work storytelling
- reduced hesitation before speaking

The intervention produced measurable and meaningful improvements across all speaking dimensions. Fluency and coherence showed the strongest gains, followed by pronunciation and vocabulary use. The qualitative evidence echoed these findings, illustrating enhanced motivation, confidence, and communicative engagement.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that narrative-based activities constitute an effective pedagogical approach for improving speaking skills among A1 English learners. The significant gains observed in fluency, coherence, pronunciation, and vocabulary suggest that storytelling offers a meaningful and cognitively engaging context that supports oral development. These results are consistent with Dillingham and Stanley's (2011) claim that narrative experiences activate multiple cognitive pathways—visual, emotional, and linguistic—allowing learners to internalize language more naturally. Students in this study moved from producing fragmented utterances to constructing short but coherent narratives, indicating that the narrative framework provided the organizational scaffolding they required.

Improvement in fluency aligns with research showing that repeated retelling and narrative sequencing enhance automaticity and reduce hesitation (Graham & Santos, 2015). Learners' increased use of connectors such as *first*, *then*, and *finally* suggests that they internalized discourse patterns essential for oral fluidity. The observed gains in coherence further confirm that story-based activities help beginners structure their thoughts chronologically, a skill often challenging at early proficiency levels. Vocabulary development, although more gradual, reflected Nation's (2001) principle that meaningful, repeated exposure to lexical items in context facilitates retention and retrieval.

Pronunciation improvements also highlight the value of narrative repetition and oral modeling. Several students demonstrated clearer articulation and more natural rhythm after sessions involving guided choral repetition and retelling, supporting Derwing and Munro's (2015) argument that pronunciation benefits from meaningful, communicative practice rather than isolated drilling. Moreover, the emotionally supportive environment created by storytelling contributed to lower anxiety, aligning with Horwitz's (2001) findings that reduced affective barriers promote more spontaneous speech. Students reported feeling "more confident" and "less afraid to speak," confirming that narrative tasks serve as an anxiety-reducing mechanism.

From a sociocultural perspective, the collaborative storytelling activities validated Vygotsky's (1978) notion that learning develops through social interaction. Pair and group work encouraged



learners to co-construct meaning, negotiate language, and support each other's communicative attempts. This interaction fostered a sense of community and belonging, increasing participation even among initially reluctant speakers.

Overall, the results suggest that narrative-based activities effectively address both linguistic and affective dimensions of speaking development. For A1 learners—who often struggle with confidence, lexical limitations, and speech organization—storytelling provides a structured yet creative pathway toward communicative competence. These findings reinforce the need for classrooms to integrate more meaning-driven, student-centered speaking activities, moving beyond mechanical or grammar-focused instruction toward approaches that highlight personal expression and interaction. Future research could examine long-term effects, digital storytelling integration, or applicability in diverse cultural settings.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrate that narrative-based activities are a powerful and effective tool for enhancing speaking skills among A1 English learners. Through guided storytelling, story reconstruction, and creative narrative tasks, students showed meaningful improvement in fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and pronunciation. These gains indicate that narrative frameworks help beginners organize ideas, express meaning more confidently, and engage with language in ways that feel natural and motivating. The strong affective response observed—particularly increased confidence and reduced anxiety—highlights the role of storytelling in lowering emotional barriers that often hinder oral participation at early proficiency levels.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of narrative activities promoted peer interaction, mutual support, and shared construction of meaning, fostering a positive and inclusive classroom environment. Learners not only improved linguistically but also developed communicative willingness and a stronger sense of autonomy. Although vocabulary growth was more gradual, the foundation built through repeated contextual exposure suggests potential for continued development beyond the intervention. Overall, the study concludes that integrating narrative-based tasks into beginner-level English instruction provides a humanizing, engaging, and pedagogically sound approach that supports both linguistic progress and emotional well-being.

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