



Improving Students' Speaking Ability by Using Storytelling Method at Grade XI SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan

Delfina Fadilah Harahap¹, Shoufi Nisma Dewi², Rahmat Huda³, Paisal Khodri Siregar⁴, Nabila Nurhaliza Ali⁵, Salma Awae⁶

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Muhammadiyah Tapanuli Selatan, Padangsidempuan, Indonesia

⁵Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia, Malaysia

⁶Ban Yaning School, Thailand

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Abstract

This research aims to identify the improvement of students' speaking ability through the implementation of the Storytelling Method among eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan. The study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, involving a purposive sample of seven students from class XI-8 who underwent a multi-stage screening process including placement tests and interviews. Quantitative data were collected using pre-test and post-test speaking assessments, while qualitative insights were obtained via semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the Paired Samples T-Test for numerical scores and Thematic Analysis for interview transcripts. The findings revealed a statistically significant enhancement in oral proficiency; the mean score rose from 62.28 in the pre-test to 77.71 in the post-test, reflecting an average gain of 15.43 points and a percentage increase of 24.77%. Qualitative analysis indicated that the storytelling approach successfully mitigated psychological barriers such as anxiety and low confidence. Consequently, the research concludes that the Storytelling Method is a highly effective pedagogical tool for improving students' speaking skills.



Corresponding Author: Dewi, shoufi.nisma@um-tapsel.ac.id

1. Introduction

Language serves as a sophisticated system of conventional vocal signs through which humans examine, communicate, and interact within a given culture. It is essentially a medium for interaction, characterized by arbitrary vocal symbols that allow individuals to share ideas and feelings. In the globalized era, English has solidified its position as a primary international language. In Indonesia specifically, English has been the first foreign language taught in secondary schools since 1946, reflecting nearly eight decades of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Despite this long history, mastery of the language remains a significant hurdle, particularly in the realm of oral communication.

Among the four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing speaking is often identified as the most challenging active skill. Unlike receptive skills, speaking happens in real-time, requiring the speaker to simultaneously manage ideas, vocabulary, and grammar while ensuring clear pronunciation. Cameron (2001) defines speaking as the active use of language to

express meanings so that others can make sense of them. It is an essential yet difficult competency because it requires orientation and fluency in spontaneous interaction. For students in English education, mastering speaking is crucial for engaging in meaningful real-life interactions.

However, a significant gap exists between the theoretical importance of speaking and its practical implementation in classrooms. Speaking is frequently neglected or taught through ineffective methods such as recitation, which fails to develop the authentic skills needed for fluency. According to Ur (2012), common challenges in teaching speaking include students' shyness, inhibition, fear of criticism, and the tendency to use their mother tongue (L1) because it feels safer. Furthermore, students often struggle with inadequate vocabulary, grammatical stumbling blocks, and imperfect pronunciation. These technical and affective barriers contribute to low participation and high anxiety during oral activities.

To address these challenges, the Storytelling Method emerges as a powerful pedagogical tool. Storytelling is an interactive and enjoyable activity that establishes meaningful settings for instruction. Historically used to instill societal values, storytelling in education facilitates faster language acquisition because it presents language contextually. It encourages active participation, imagination, and creativity while integrating all four language skills. From a communicative perspective, storytelling functions as "Talk as Performance," where talk is used to transmit information before an audience in a structured, monologic format. This method allows students to focus on the impact they have on the listener, fostering holistic development in fluency, pronunciation, and coherence.

The necessity of this intervention is particularly evident at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan. Observations and previous research by Sihombing (2024) and Tussyaripah (2015) confirm that Grade XI students at this institution face persistent difficulties in speaking. Many students remain hesitant and silent when asked to express ideas, and those who attempt to speak often struggle with significant pauses, incorrect pronunciation, and grammatical errors. The prevailing teacher-centered methods and reliance on textbook exercises have failed to motivate students to speak authentically. Consequently, there is an urgent need to implement a solution-oriented approach like the storytelling method to create a supportive and less intimidating environment.

By implementing storytelling, this research aims to identify, classify, and describe various grammatical errors, thereby constructing students' awareness of standardized English rules while simultaneously building their self-confidence. This study focuses on "Talk as Performance" through individual storytelling monologues to bridge the gap between students' receptive understanding and their productive oral output. Based on this context, the primary aims of this research are to identify and measure students' speaking ability before using the Storytelling Method and to evaluate the improvement in their speaking ability after the implementation of this method at Grade XI SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Multi-Faceted Nature and Challenges of English-Speaking Ability

Speaking is defined as the active use of language to express meanings, enabling others to make sense of them in real-time. Unlike receptive skills like listening, speaking is a productive and spontaneous process where the speaker must simultaneously manage ideas, vocabulary, and grammar. It is widely considered a difficult skill because it requires high orientation and fluency, particularly in pronunciation. Mastery of this skill is essential for English language students, as it allows them to produce comprehensible input and engage in meaningful interactions within real-

life situations. When students possess this ability, they can express feelings and ideas directly, making it the most natural form of communication.

To evaluate this complex skill, researchers often view speaking ability as a "recipe" consisting of five key ingredients: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and pronunciation. Grammar provides the structural foundation for effective engagement in discussions, while vocabulary proficiency allows for precision in choosing words based on context. Delivery is equally critical; clear pronunciation is necessary to avoid misunderstandings, and fluency ensures the conversation flows naturally without excessive hesitation. Ultimately, when these elements are integrated, the goal of comprehension is achieved, where the message is fully received and understood by the listener. The synthesis of these aspects forms the benchmark for determining the quality of a student's oral production.

Despite its importance, speaking is frequently neglected and presents significant psychological and technical hurdles for learners. Common problems include shyness and inhibition, where students fear criticism or making mistakes in front of peers. Technically, students often struggle with inadequate vocabulary, grammatical "stumbling blocks," and imperfectly learned pronunciation. Furthermore, a lack of opportunities to practice English in the classroom and an input-poor environment outside the school contribute to low participation. These challenges create a critical gap between the curriculum's goals and the students' actual performance, necessitating alternative teaching methods that foster a supportive and less intimidating learning environment.

2.2 Theoretical Framework and Pedagogical Functions of the Storytelling Method

The storytelling method is an interactive and modern instructional approach designed to increase enthusiasm for language learning by presenting lessons through narratives. It is a natural human activity used to express feelings, opinions, and life events. Pedagogically, storytelling serves as a low-cost yet effective tool because it does not require expensive technology; the teacher and students act as the primary medium through actions and body language. This method creates a calmer, more comfortable atmosphere that allows students to develop their imagination while acquiring new language faster through contextual presentation.

In terms of communicative functions, storytelling uniquely bridges the gap between transactional and interactional talk. At a transactional level, students transfer specific information such as plots, characters, and moral messages. Simultaneously, the interactional function is engaged as students use intonation and expression to build a connection with their audience and maintain involvement. Furthermore, storytelling aligns with the concept of "Talk as Performance," which is monologic in nature and emphasizes the impact of the speech on the listener. By following a clear narrative structure (opening, conflict, climax, and conclusion), students learn to organize their ideas coherently for an audience.

The primary strength of the storytelling method lies in its ability to facilitate the implicit acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. Through immersive experiences, students absorb linguistic structures naturally, often without the stress of active memorization. It integrates the development of all four language skills while encouraging active participation and verbal proficiency. While teachers may face challenges such as managing large classes or limited lesson time, the benefits of storytelling in boosting linguistic diversity and student motivation make it a promising solution for overcoming the hesitation and low participation observed in conventional, teacher-centered classrooms.

2.2 Synthesis of Empirical Evidence and Identification of Research Gaps

Recent empirical studies consistently support the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing oral proficiency across various educational levels. Research conducted at SMAN 1 Batulayar demonstrated that storytelling not only increased quantitative test scores but also improved qualitative indicators such as student activeness and self-confidence. Similarly, studies using classroom action research in junior high schools found significant score improvements, noting that the technique helped students become braver and more enthusiastic. These patterns indicate that storytelling effectively addresses both the linguistic aspects of speaking and the psychological barriers, such as the fear of making mistakes.

A notable recent study by Pakpahan et al. (2025) highlighted that storytelling enhanced eighth-grade students' natural fluency and expressive body language due to the anxiety-reducing nature of peer interaction. However, a common thread in existing literature is the focus on either purely quantitative results or classroom action research within junior high school settings. This highlights a research gap regarding the application of the storytelling method at the Senior High School level (Grade XI) using a more comprehensive mixed-methods approach. While previous studies at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan confirmed that students face difficulties in speaking, they primarily focused on identifying the problem rather than testing a specific longitudinal solution.

The current research addresses this gap by utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to provide "soul" to the numerical data. Unlike studies that only provide "cold" mathematical outcomes, this investigation seeks to explain why and how the improvement occurs by exploring students' internal motivations and feelings through qualitative interviews. By integrating objective pre-test/post-test data with subjective student perceptions, this study aims to provide a more robust and persuasive conclusion regarding the success of storytelling in a senior high school context, thereby offering practical insights that go beyond simple effectiveness figures.

3. Method

This research employs a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, which is utilized not merely as a technique for combining two types of data but as a strategic research philosophy to present a complete narrative regarding the success of the Storytelling method. The design follows a specific workflow where quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to explain, elaborate on, and give meaning to the initial numerical findings. This approach constructs two mutually reinforcing layers of evidence: an objective layer focused on measurable outcomes through pre-test and post-test scores, and a subjective layer that explores the "soul" of the data students' internal feelings, motivations, and challenges. The integration of these layers ensures a robust conclusion, as the numerical increase in scores is contextualized by students' perceptions of feeling more confident and motivated.

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan for the 2025/2026 academic year. The target population consisted of all 332 Grade XI students across ten classes. A systematic three-stage sampling process was implemented to select a representative and information-rich sample. First, Class XI-8 (33 students) was purposively selected because it had the lowest average

English grades, identifying it as the group most in need of intervention. Second, a placement test focused on basic grammar and vocabulary was administered to screen students based on the school's Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) of 75. Students scoring between 50 and 69, categorized as "Poor" to "Fair," were identified as eligible for the study. Third, a selection interview was conducted with seven students who met the criteria to ensure they possessed the necessary willingness and oral responsiveness to participate in the entire intervention process. Although quantitatively small, this sample of seven students is methodologically accountable for an explanatory sequential design where data depth is prioritized over size to explain the "why" behind the results.

The instruments for data collection were designed to capture both linguistic competence and affective factors. The primary quantitative instrument was a structured monologue speaking test administered as both a pre-test and a post-test. Students were required to tell a story about a memorable experience, specifically focusing on the theme of an "Idol," which was chosen for its universal relevance and ability to motivate the use of descriptive vocabulary and past tenses. These performances were assessed using a detailed scoring rubric adapted from Brown (2004) and Harris (1969), evaluating five core components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were utilized to explore students' self-perceptions, strengths, weaknesses, and their internal thought processes during the learning experience. Primary data consisted of the spoken narratives and interview transcripts, while secondary data included researcher field notes and observations to provide contextual understanding.

The implementation of the Storytelling Method followed a four-step technique: modeling and topic introduction, guided practice, collaborative feedback, and individual performance assessment. Initially, the researcher modeled the activity by sharing a personal story about a favorite idol to emphasize descriptive vocabulary and coherent structure. Students then participated in guided practice to build confidence, followed by sessions where the researcher and peers provided constructive feedback on pronunciation and clarity. The final assessment involved individual storytelling performances that were audio-recorded for detailed linguistic analysis. This structured preparation time was crucial in allowing students to organize their thoughts, thereby reducing the common problems of shyness and inhibition.

Data analysis was conducted in two distinct stages aligned with the mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics to calculate the mean, standard deviation, and range of scores for both the pre-test and post-test. To determine the statistical significance of the improvement, a Paired-Samples T-Test was performed, with a p-value threshold of less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) indicating a significant effect. Qualitative analysis followed the Thematic Analysis method, involving data familiarization, initial coding of statements related to student experiences, and the grouping of codes into overarching themes such as "Increased Motivation" or "Linguistic Anxiety". In the final integration stage, the qualitative themes were used to explain the statistical findings, providing a 360-degree picture of the intervention's effectiveness by combining real behavior, measurable competence, and internal understanding.

4. Results

The findings of this research are presented through an integrated analysis of quantitative performance and qualitative perceptions gathered during the intervention. The quantitative data, derived from pre-test and post-test scores, provide empirical evidence of the students' linguistic

progress, while the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews offer a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to this improvement.

4.1 Quantitative Results

The initial assessment of the seven students in Class XI-8 revealed a baseline speaking proficiency that was largely characterized by hesitation and structural inaccuracy. In the pre-test, the students achieved a mean score of 62.28, which falls into the "Fair" category. Individual performances varied, with the highest scores being 68 (achieved by Evrilia and Naqwa) and the lowest being 56 (achieved by Wenni). A closer look at the pre-test components shows that many students struggled significantly with grammar and fluency. For instance, Monica, Fadilah, Syahryal, and Wenni all scored a 2 in fluency, indicating that their speech was very hesitant with frequent pauses. Similarly, Syahryal and Wenni demonstrated a very limited vocabulary range, scoring only 2 in that specific category.

Table 1. Range Category of Speaking

Range Score	Category	Level of Ability
80 - 100	Excellent	Good mastery of the subject
70 - 79	Good	Average mastery
60 - 69	Fair	Needs improvement
50 - 59	Poor	Limited mastery
0 - 49	Very Poor	Very limited mastery

Table 2. Comparative Summary of Pre-test and Post-test Outcomes

Variable	Pre-test Results	Post-test Results	Net Improvement
Mean Score	62.28 (Fair)	77.71 (Good)	+15.43 Points
Mastery Achievement	14.3% (1 of 7 students)	100% (7 of 7 students)	+85.7%
Highest Score	68	80	+12 Points

Following the storytelling intervention using the "Idol" theme, a post-test was conducted to evaluate progress. The results demonstrated a remarkable shift in proficiency. The mean score rose to 77.71, moving the group into the "Good" category. Remarkably, 100% of the sample showed an increase in their individual scores. Four students (Fadilah, Evrilia, Naqwa, and Syahryal) reached an "Excellent" level with a score of 80. The most significant individual improvement was observed in Wenni, whose score jumped from 56 to 76 (+20 points), and Syahryal, who also gained 20 points. Statistical analysis using the percentage change formula indicates an overall improvement of 24.77% in speaking ability across the sample.

4.2 Component-Wise

The effectiveness of the Storytelling Method is most visible when analyzing the specific components of speaking:

a. Fluency and Confidence:

Fluency showed one of the most drastic improvements. In the pre-test, four out of seven students scored a 2 (Fair) due to excessive pausing. In the post-test, students like Fadilah and Wenni made a leap to a score of 4 (Very Good), indicating much smoother delivery. This

change suggests that the "Talk as Performance" aspect of storytelling, which involves structured preparation, successfully reduced the cognitive load during speech production.

b. Vocabulary Expansion

The requirement to describe an "Idol" forced students to move beyond basic language. Syahryal's progress in vocabulary from a score of 2 to 5 (Very Clear/Rich) is a testament to this. Students were motivated to seek out specific adjectives like "talented," "inspiring," or "humble" to convey their personal admiration, thereby enriching their lexical resource implicitly.

c. Grammar in Context

In the pre-test, students often struggled with sentence structure. However, the narrative nature of storytelling required the consistent use of past tenses to describe memories related to their idols. This contextual practice led to better control over subject-verb agreement and tense consistency, as seen in the post-test scores where most students reached a score of 4 in grammar.

d. Pronunciation and Comprehension

While comprehension was already relatively high in the pre-test (mostly score 5), pronunciation saw steady growth. The collaborative feedback sessions allowed students to refine their articulation, moving from "fairly clear" to "clear with minor errors".

4.3 Qualitative Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews provides the "story behind the numbers." Three major themes emerged that explain the success of the intervention:

a. Overcoming Affective Filters

Almost all students are admitted to high levels of "Speaking Anxiety" initially. Fadilah described speaking in front of the class as "nerve-racking". However, as the intervention progressed, students reported feeling more relaxed. Keygo noted that while he was nervous at first, he later became more confident. This aligns with the theory that storytelling creates a safer, less intimidating environment for language production.

b. Preference for Student-Centered Learning

The interviews revealed a clear preference for active methods. Monica and Wenni emphasized that games, group discussions, and student-centered learning were more effective than monotonous teacher-centered explanations. The Storytelling Method met this demand by placing the student in the role of the "performer" or "protagonist" of the lesson.

c. Relevance of Content

The choice of "Personal Experience" and "Idols" as topics was crucial. Monica shared how English helped her "dream bigger," while Naqwa saw English as a tool for future career goals, such as joining the police or working abroad. This personal connection acted as an intrinsic motivator, encouraging students to overcome their linguistic limitations to share something meaningful.



Figure 1. Speaking test process

5. Discussion

The results of this study strongly support the theories proposed by Elkhimry (2022) and Lucarevski (2016), which suggest that storytelling facilitates faster language acquisition through contextualized input. By engaging in "Talk as Performance," students at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan were able to practice monologue skills and speech organization coherently.

The drastic improvement observed in low-achieving students, such as Wenni, confirms that the structured preparation time inherent in the storytelling technique modeled by the researcher is a powerful antidote to the "shyness and inhibition" identified by Ur (2012). When students have the opportunity to organize their thoughts and receive collaborative feedback before a final performance, the fear of making mistakes is significantly mitigated.

Furthermore, the data suggests that the storytelling method successfully bridged the gap between input and output. While students understood the language (high comprehension scores), they previously lacked the confidence or technical skill to produce it. Storytelling "elicited" this oral language in a structured way. In conclusion, the integration of quantitative leaps in scores and qualitative shifts in attitude proves that the Storytelling Method is not only an effective linguistic tool but also a psychological one, fostering a holistic improvement in the speaking abilities of eleventh-grade students.

6. Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive data analysis and the subsequent discussion, several pivotal conclusions are drawn regarding the implementation of the Storytelling Method to enhance students' speaking ability at SMA Negeri 4 Padangsidempuan. First, the quantitative evidence demonstrates a significant and measurable improvement in students' oral proficiency. This is clearly reflected in the increase of the mean score from a baseline of 62.28 in the pre-test to 77.71 in the post-test, representing a significant gain of 15.43 points. This statistical leap indicates a shift in the students' general proficiency from the "Poor" category, characterized by limited vocabulary and frequent grammatical errors, to the "Good" category. Furthermore, the intervention proved universally beneficial within the sample, as 100% of the students experienced a score increase, with the majority successfully exceeding the school's Minimum Completeness Criteria (KKM) of 75.

Second, the Storytelling Method effectively addressed specific linguistic components, most notably fluency and vocabulary expansion. By engaging in "Talk as Performance," students were able to move beyond halting speech to a more continuous flow, utilizing richer descriptive adjectives prompted by the personal relevance of the "Idol" theme. Third, the qualitative findings confirm that the method successfully mitigated deeply rooted affective barriers. The structured nature of storytelling, combined with collaborative feedback, transformed the classroom from an intimidating environment into a supportive space where students felt less anxious about making mistakes. Consequently, storytelling serves as a vital pedagogical bridge between students' receptive understanding and their productive communicative competence.

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