

Article

How Storytelling Supports EFL Speaking Development among Chinese Primary Pupils: Evidence from Proficiency, Motivation, and Anxiety

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Abstract: This study explored how storytelling-based instruction supported the speaking development of Chinese primary school pupils in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. A qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design was used so that the study could move beyond outcome comparison and examine how pupils experienced storytelling lessons in classroom practice. The research was conducted in a public primary school in China and involved four intact Grade 5 classes (N = 160), including two experimental classes that received storytelling-based instruction and two control classes that followed regular textbook-based teaching. Qualitative data came from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with nine purposively selected pupils, while quantitative data were drawn from pretest and posttest speaking assessments and questionnaires on motivation and anxiety. The qualitative analysis showed that storytelling-based instruction appeared to support speaking through several connected classroom processes. These included multimodal support that helped pupils understand and organise language, embodied and creative activities that encouraged expressive use, peer rehearsal that reduced the pressure of speaking, stronger engagement with lesson content, and a greater sense of ease during oral participation. Pupils also described noticeable changes in their own speaking, especially in fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and confidence. The quantitative results were broadly in line with these patterns: compared with the control group, the experimental group performed better on the posttest speaking measures, reported stronger motivation, and showed lower anxiety. The findings suggest that storytelling can support young EFL learners' speaking not simply by making lessons more enjoyable, but by changing how classroom participation is organised. In this study, storytelling created conditions in which speaking became easier to understand, more purposeful, and less intimidating for primary school pupils.

Keywords: Storytelling Pedagogy; Young EFL Learners; Speaking Development; Qualitative-Dominant Mixed Methods; Primary English Education; China

1. Introduction

English occupies an important place in contemporary Chinese compulsory education, not only as a school subject linked to future academic and professional opportunities, but also as part of broader efforts to modernise education and strengthen international engagement [1,2]. Recent curriculum reform has further shifted expectations for English teaching. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) place greater emphasis on meaningful language use, activity-based learning, and the development of core competences rather

than the accumulation of isolated vocabulary and grammar alone [1]. In practical terms, this policy direction calls for classroom approaches that can help learners use English in context, participate more actively, and develop communicative ability in ways that are appropriate for their age and stage of learning [1,2].

Within this context, storytelling has attracted growing attention as a potentially valuable approach to English teaching. In EFL education, storytelling broadly refers to the use of stories and narrative contexts to organise language learning so that learners encounter and use English through events, characters, actions, and meanings rather than through disconnected linguistic items [3,4]. Longstanding work in language education has suggested that stories can provide memorable contexts for vocabulary learning, repeated exposure to patterned language, and strong motivational support for young learners [3,5]. Narrative has also been viewed more broadly as a fundamental way in which people organise experience and construct meaning [4]. For primary classrooms, this matters because stories can do more than make lessons enjoyable: they can structure attention, guide participation, and give learners meaningful reasons to listen and speak [6].

Storytelling also fits well with current curriculum priorities in China. Because stories naturally embed language in situations, intentions, and consequences, they are well suited to contextualised and interaction-rich teaching. In classroom practice, story-based work can create opportunities for pupils to predict events, retell sequences, describe characters, discuss actions, and participate in role-based communication. Such activities may support not only language learning but also imagination, perspective-taking, and classroom engagement [3,5,6]. Recent scholarship in EFL primary education similarly argues that storytelling should be understood not simply as an entertaining supplement, but as a participatory pedagogical practice that can support linguistic, cognitive, and social development [6].

The broader empirical literature also points in a promising direction. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of oral narrative interventions in second language learning found a medium-to-large overall effect on language outcomes, with especially notable benefits for L2 speaking [7]. In the Chinese context, a recent systematic review showed that empirical research on storytelling in English language education has expanded over the past decade, particularly in primary and secondary settings [8]. That review also identified a wide range of themes, including curriculum integration, materials adaptation, stakeholder perceptions, and learner outcomes, while noting recurring challenges such as limited teacher preparation, resource constraints, and mismatches between storytelling activities and curricular aims [8].

Even so, an important gap remains. Much of the existing literature suggests that storytelling can be beneficial, but less attention has been given to how such benefits are actually experienced and mediated in classroom practice, especially in Chinese primary EFL settings [8]. Many studies are oriented toward intervention outcomes, local classroom applications, or broad pedagogical advocacy. As a result, the field still needs more classroom-grounded evidence showing how storytelling is enacted, how pupils respond to it, and what kinds of interactional and affective processes may help explain why speaking development appears to be supported in some contexts [8].

This explanatory gap is particularly important in relation to speaking. In many EFL classrooms, speaking is difficult to develop because it depends not only on linguistic knowledge, but also on learners' willingness to participate, their sense of confidence, the availability of scaffolded speaking opportunities, and the emotional climate of the classroom [9,10]. Storytelling appears relevant here because it may provide pupils with something meaningful to talk about, reduce the pressure of producing language without support, and create more engaging and less threatening conditions for oral participation. Recent work on digital storytelling likewise suggests that narrative-based activity may be associated not only with speaking development, but also with changes in self-regulation and speaking anxiety [11]. Taken together, these studies suggest that storytelling may support speaking partly by reshaping the conditions under which learners are willing and able to speak [9,11].

The present study addresses this issue through a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design conducted in Chinese primary school classrooms. Rather than asking only whether storytelling-based instruction is associated with better outcomes, the study focuses more closely on how pupils experience storytelling-based lessons and how classroom processes appear to support speaking development in practice. The qualitative strand is therefore primary: it is used to examine learner experience, classroom participation, and perceived mechanisms. Quantitative data on speaking proficiency, motivation, and anxiety are included in a supplementary role to examine whether the direction of measurable change is broadly consistent with the qualitative interpretation.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese primary school pupils experience storytelling-based English lessons in relation to their speaking development?

RQ2: What classroom processes and learner-perceived mechanisms appear to explain how storytelling-based instruction supports pupils' speaking development?

RQ3: To what extent do the quantitative findings on speaking proficiency, speaking motivation, and speaking anxiety corroborate the qualitative findings?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

- (1) To explore how Chinese primary school pupils experience storytelling-based English lessons in relation to their speaking development.
- (2) To identify the classroom processes and learner-perceived mechanisms that appear to support speaking development through storytelling-based instruction.
- (3) To examine whether the quantitative results on speaking proficiency, speaking motivation, and speaking anxiety support the qualitative patterns identified from classroom observations and pupil interviews.

These objectives are pursued primarily through qualitative analysis of classroom observations and pupil interviews, with quantitative speaking, motivation, and anxiety data used as corroborative support.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Storytelling as a Pedagogical Framework in EFL Education

Storytelling has long been viewed as a meaningful educational resource because it organises learning through sequence, imagery, and emotional significance rather than through isolated forms alone [4,12]. In EFL education, stories provide connected contexts in which vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and meaning are encountered together, which can make language more comprehensible and memorable for young learners [3,5,13]. Story-based teaching may therefore function not only as a motivational tool, but also as a way of structuring how language is presented, interpreted, and reused in classroom interaction [6,13]. Related work on graphic narrative materials likewise suggests that the pedagogical value of narrative resources depends not simply on their appeal, but on careful material selection and culturally appropriate pedagogical framing [14].

Recent research supports this view. Reviews suggest that storytelling can enhance comprehension, engagement, and communicative use of the target language [7,15]. In primary EFL settings, it has also been described as a participatory pedagogy that links language learning with imagination, interaction, and meaning making [6]. In the Chinese context, storytelling has become increasingly visible in English education, especially in primary and secondary classrooms, although more classroom-based evidence is still needed to show how it works in practice [8].

Overall, the literature suggests that storytelling should be understood not simply as an enjoyable supplement, but as a pedagogical framework that may shape how learners encounter and use English. However, existing studies have more often established its general value than examined its classroom processes in depth [8].

2.2. Storytelling and Speaking Development

Speaking development requires more than knowledge of words and rules. Learners need opportunities to retrieve language, organise meaning, and speak with enough support and confidence in real time [16]. For young EFL learners, this is especially demanding because participation opportunities are often uneven and classroom conditions strongly affect willingness to communicate [17].

Storytelling appears relevant because it gives learners meaningful content to speak about. Instead of answering isolated prompts, pupils may retell events, describe characters, predict plot developments, or speak from within a role. Such activities can support oral production by linking speech to narrative content and discourse structure [4,18]. Storytelling may therefore help learners move beyond short display responses toward more sustained and purposeful speaking.

Empirical studies point in the same direction. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis reported a medium-to-large overall effect of oral narrative interventions on second language learning, with particularly notable benefits for speaking [7]. Other studies have shown that storytelling and retelling can support oral performance in EFL contexts [19,20], while narrative task research suggests that picture-supported tasks can provide useful conditions for

oral production [17,21]. Digital storytelling studies likewise indicate that multimodal storytelling may strengthen engagement and spoken participation [11,22,23].

In China, related research on story-based and picture-book pedagogy also suggests that narrative materials can support classroom language learning [16,24–27]. However, much of this work remains focused on broad pedagogical value or outcome claims. Less attention has been paid to how pupils experience story-based speaking tasks and how classroom processes may explain speaking development in practice [8].

2.3. Storytelling, Motivation, and Anxiety

Speaking in EFL classrooms is shaped not only by linguistic ability but also by affective factors such as motivation and anxiety [9,10,28]. Learners are more likely to participate when tasks feel interesting and manageable, whereas fear of mistakes or negative evaluation may reduce willingness to speak [9,10].

Storytelling may influence both. Stories can generate curiosity, emotional involvement, and imaginative engagement, which may strengthen learners' attitudes toward English and increase participation [15,29,30]. Digital storytelling research also suggests that narrative-based work can support willingness to communicate [23].

At the same time, storytelling may reduce anxiety by making speaking more supported and less threatening. When pupils rehearse in groups, speak as characters, or rely on visual and narrative support, oral participation may feel safer [10]. Recent research on digital storytelling similarly indicates that narrative-based activity may be associated with improved speaking and reduced anxiety [11].

Thus, storytelling may matter not only because it is enjoyable, but because it can make speaking feel more purposeful, manageable, and affectively safe. This makes motivation and anxiety important to the present study as conditions through which speaking development may be supported.

2.4. The Chinese Primary School Context

The Chinese primary school context gives relevance to this study. Current curriculum policy emphasises meaningful language use, competency-oriented learning, and activity-based instruction [1,2]. This policy direction creates space for approaches that support participation and communicative use rather than rote learning alone [1,2]. Storytelling is potentially well suited to this shift because it situates language in context and encourages interaction around characters, actions, and events.

At the same time, classroom realities in China make it important to examine not only whether storytelling is useful, but how it operates under ordinary school conditions. Story-based and picture-book approaches have attracted growing practitioner interest in primary English education [25–27], yet the China-focused review by Zheng et al. [8] shows that the field still lacks enough classroom-grounded evidence on how storytelling is enacted and experienced across school settings.

This gap is especially important in primary EFL classrooms, where teacher scaffolding, peer interaction, and pupils' affective responses strongly shape participation. The Chinese primary school setting therefore provides an important context for examining how storytelling-based instruction may support speaking development in practice.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four related perspectives: comprehensible input, socially mediated learning, output-oriented language use, and narrative/emodied cognition [31].

Krashen's work helps explain how storytelling may support speaking by making input more comprehensible through pictures, repetition, gesture, and familiar story structure, while also lowering affective barriers to participation [32]. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective highlights the role of mediation, scaffolding, and interaction, suggesting that teacher modelling, peer support, and collaborative rehearsal can help learners perform beyond their independent level [33,34]. Task-based and output-oriented perspectives further suggest that story-based tasks can push learners to express meaning, notice gaps in their language resources, and refine spoken output through repeated communication [35,36]. Finally, narrative and embodied perspectives indicate that young learners may benefit when language is linked to action, imagery, role-play, and shared experience rather than treated as an abstract form alone [4].

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that storytelling may support speaking development through cognitive support, social mediation, meaningful output, and affective safety. In the present study, they serve as an

interpretive framework for understanding how pupils experienced storytelling-based lessons and how those experiences appeared to relate to speaking development.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model showing how storytelling-based instruction supports young EFL learners' speaking development through STA enactment, proximal classroom mechanisms, learner mediators, and speaking-related outcomes.

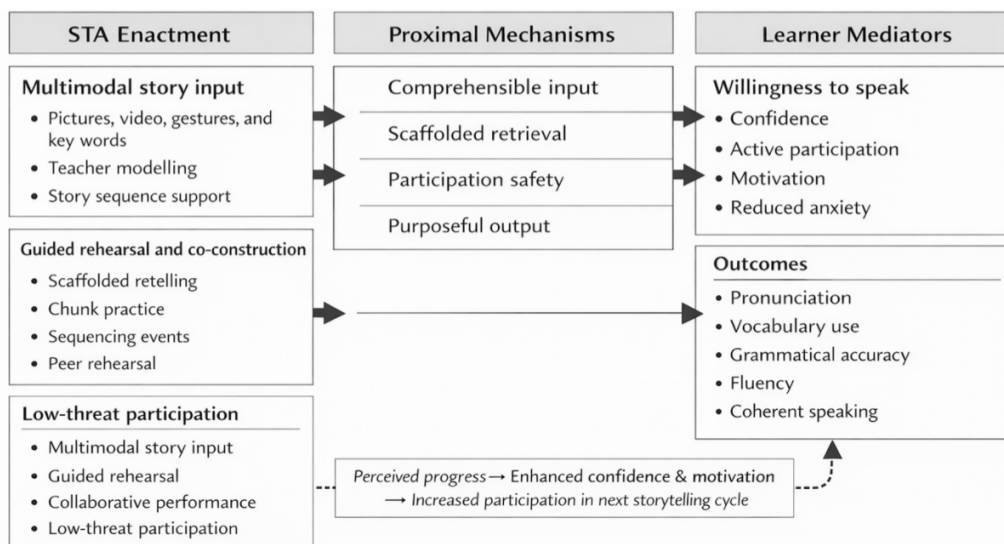


Figure 1. Conceptual model of how storytelling-based instruction supports speaking development, motivation, and anxiety reduction.

The conceptual model illustrates how storytelling-based instruction supports young EFL learners' speaking development through four interrelated pathways: (1) multimodal scaffolding, which makes language more comprehensible and manageable; (2) embodied and creative expression, which connects speech to action, imagination, and performance; (3) collaborative participation, which creates social support and opportunities for rehearsal; and (4) affective engagement, through which heightened motivation and reduced anxiety make oral participation more likely and more sustainable.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design to investigate how storytelling-based instruction appeared to support young EFL learners' speaking development in Chinese primary classrooms [37,38]. The study was designed as qualitatively dominant because its central aim was explanatory rather than purely outcome-oriented. More specifically, it sought to understand how pupils experienced storytelling-based lessons, what classroom processes appeared to support speaking development, and how these processes related to pupils' motivation and anxiety, while using quantitative data in a supplementary role to examine whether the direction of measurable change was broadly consistent with the qualitative interpretation [37,38].

A mixed-methods design was considered appropriate because neither a solely quantitative nor a solely qualitative approach could adequately address these aims [37,38]. Quantitative data could indicate whether post-intervention differences were observed in speaking proficiency, motivation, and anxiety, but could not by themselves explain how these patterns were produced in classroom practice. Qualitative data, in contrast, could capture pupils' experiences, classroom participation, and teacher-mediated support in greater depth, but could not on their own show whether those patterns were accompanied by measurable outcome differences. For this reason, the qualitative strand was prioritised and the quantitative strand was used as corroborative support [37,38].

Integration was built into the design from the outset [37,38]. The qualitative strand focused on learner experience, classroom processes, and perceived mechanisms, whereas the quantitative strand examined whether

changes in speaking, motivation, and anxiety converged with those classroom-based accounts. The design therefore treated the two strands as connected parts of a single explanatory inquiry rather than as parallel and unrelated components [37,38].

The study was guided by three research questions: (1) how Chinese primary school pupils experienced storytelling-based English lessons in relation to their speaking development; (2) what classroom processes and learner-perceived mechanisms appeared to explain how storytelling-based instruction supported speaking development; and (3) to what extent the quantitative findings on speaking, motivation, and anxiety corroborated the qualitative findings. Taken together, these questions positioned the study as an explanation-oriented mixed-methods inquiry into how storytelling functioned in practice [37,38].

3.2. Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a public primary school in one region of China during the second semester of the 2025 academic year. The participants were 160 Grade 5 pupils from four intact classes (approximately 11–12 years old), with two classes in the experimental group ($n = 80$) and two in the control group ($n = 80$). The use of intact classes reflected the school's normal timetable arrangement and helped preserve the natural classroom setting of the intervention, thereby supporting ecological validity in classroom-based research [38]. To protect institutional anonymity, the school location is reported only at a broad regional level. Across the four classes, pupils were broadly comparable in age, grade level, and learning background, and had all begun formal English study in Grade 3.

Both groups were taught by the same frontline English teacher, which reduced variation associated with teacher differences across conditions. The teacher was fully qualified in the PRC, had an English-education-related academic background, and had extensive experience in primary English teaching and school-based professional development. Grade 5 was selected because pupils at this stage are expected to move beyond isolated words and short responses toward more sustained and meaningful oral production, while many still show uneven confidence in speaking English [3,6].

For the qualitative strand, nine pupils from the experimental group were selected for semi-structured interviews after the intervention. Selection combined voluntary participation with purposive variation sampling so that the interview data would reflect a range of learner profiles rather than only the most fluent or enthusiastic pupils [37,38]. The sample therefore included relatively shy learners, lower-achieving learners, more active participants, and pupils who appeared to respond differently to story-based activities. Although the qualitative sample was relatively small, it was considered adequate for the present study because the qualitative strand served a focused explanatory purpose rather than a statistically representative one. The study was conducted in a relatively homogeneous setting, the research questions were narrow and classroom-based, and the interview data were supplemented by classroom observations, lesson-video records, and field notes. Under these conditions, the dataset was judged sufficient to identify recurring patterns in how storytelling-based instruction was experienced and perceived in this context. The aim of the qualitative strand was therefore not statistical generalisation, but the development of a context-bound explanation grounded in variation across participants and triangulation across data sources [37,38].

3.3. Intervention

The intervention lasted approximately 13 weeks. The experimental group received storytelling-based English lessons organised under the Storytelling Teaching Approach (STA), while the control group followed regular textbook-based English instruction covering the same broad curriculum content. The intervention was designed to align with the pedagogical emphasis on meaningful language use, activity-based learning, and communicative participation encouraged in current English education policy in China [1,2].

The STA lessons included story listening, video viewing, guided retelling, collaborative reconstruction, role-play, dubbing, choral speaking, prediction, and creative adaptation. Multimodal supports such as visuals, gestures, story maps, masks, and teacher modelling were used to make participation more comprehensible and manageable. These features are consistent with research suggesting that story-based pedagogy can support language learning by contextualising input, increasing engagement, and creating meaningful opportunities for oral production [3,6,13,35,36].

The control group followed a more conventional instructional sequence involving vocabulary explanation,

grammar instruction, reading, and controlled exercises. Although both groups worked with comparable curricular content, the pedagogical logic differed. The control condition relied more heavily on explanation and controlled practice, whereas the STA condition organised English learning around narrative meaning, social participation, and repeated opportunities for supported speaking [3,13].

3.4. Data Collection

Four sources of data were used.

First, quantitative speaking data were collected through a speaking test aligned with the Cambridge English: A2 Flyers framework. The analytic dimensions included pronunciation, vocabulary usage, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and overall speaking proficiency. These dimensions were selected to capture multiple aspects of oral performance rather than relying on a single global score.

Second, questionnaire data were collected to assess motivation and anxiety. Motivation dimensions included motivational intensity, desire to learn English, attitudes toward learning English, and general motivation, drawing on established work in second language motivation research [28,29]. Anxiety dimensions included communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and general anxiety, informed by influential work on foreign language classroom anxiety [9,10].

Third, classroom observations were conducted in the experimental group. Two formal observations, supported by field notes and lesson video, were used to document student engagement, interaction patterns, teacher scaffolding, and the implementation of storytelling-based instruction. In the present study, the observation data were used mainly to contextualise the interview accounts and to support triangulation, rather than to serve as a stand-alone basis for broad claims about classroom process [33,34,37].

Fourth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine selected pupils. The interview questions explored how pupils experienced the storytelling lessons, which activities they found helpful or difficult, whether they felt nervous when speaking, and whether they believed their speaking had changed during the intervention. Semi-structured interviewing was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to access learner experience while retaining enough flexibility to probe pupils' responses in age-appropriate ways [37,38].

3.5. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis [37,38]. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant lesson-video records were first reviewed repeatedly to build familiarity with the dataset. Initial codes were then generated to capture recurring patterns in pupils' experiences, classroom participation, emotional responses, and perceptions of speaking development. Related codes were grouped into broader categories, which were subsequently refined into candidate themes. These candidate themes were then checked against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence, sufficient evidential support, and clear distinctions between themes [37,38]. During this process, examples that did not fit the dominant pattern were also revisited in order to avoid overgeneralised interpretation.

The qualitative analysis was both descriptive and explanatory. It aimed not only to summarise what pupils reported, but also to identify what classroom processes and learner-perceived mechanisms appeared to support speaking development. The final themes were therefore developed through iterative movement between individual excerpts, classroom records, and the emerging overall interpretation [37,38].

The quantitative strand was analysed using the statistical procedures established in the larger study. Pretest and posttest results for the experimental and control groups were compared across speaking, motivation, and anxiety measures in order to identify between-group differences following the intervention. In the present article, these quantitative findings were treated as supplementary rather than decisive. Their role was to examine whether the direction of measurable change converged with the qualitative account developed from the classroom-based data [37,38].

3.6. Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher's positionality was considered throughout the qualitative strand. As an English language education researcher interested in storytelling-based pedagogy and young learners' speaking development, the researcher was sensitive to classroom interaction, learner affect, and scaffolding, but also recognised a possible ten-

dency to notice positive moments in storytelling lessons. To reduce this risk, storytelling was treated not as an assumed effective method but as a classroom practice requiring empirical examination. During data collection, the researcher observed participation, recorded field notes, reviewed lesson-video records, and conducted pupil interviews using age-appropriate, non-leading prompts. During interpretation, interview accounts were repeatedly compared with observation notes and video evidence, including examples that did not fully fit the emerging themes.

3.7. Validity, Reliability, and Qualitative Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to strengthen validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. First, content validity was established before the main study through expert review and Content Validity Ratio (CVR) analysis. The speaking test materials were reviewed by five experts, the Teacher Speaking Assessment Rubric was reviewed by five experts, and the motivation and anxiety questionnaires were reviewed by a panel of six experts. Across the retained items, the CVR value reached 0.714, indicating that the instruments were judged suitable for retention and aligned with the study aims.

Second, the reliability of the speaking assessment was examined through inter-rater agreement. Independent scoring by two trained raters produced Cohen's kappa coefficients of 0.844 for Pronunciation, 0.905 for Vocabulary Usage, 0.817 for Grammatical Accuracy, and 0.810 for Fluency. Agreement for the Total Score was 0.628, indicating substantial overall agreement. These results suggest that the speaking-rating procedure demonstrated acceptable to strong scoring consistency.

Third, the questionnaire measures were examined for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The Motivation Questionnaire showed excellent reliability for the total scale (alpha = 0.976), with strong subscale reliabilities for Motivational Intensity (alpha = 0.936), Desire to Learn English (alpha = 0.945), and Attitudes toward Learning English (alpha = 0.928). The Anxiety Questionnaire likewise showed excellent reliability for the total scale (alpha = 0.975), with strong internal consistency for Communication Apprehension (alpha = 0.929), Test Anxiety (alpha = 0.934), and Fear of Negative Evaluation (alpha = 0.941). These results indicate that the questionnaires were sufficiently reliable for use as supplementary quantitative measures.

At the mixed-methods level, interpretive validity was strengthened through integration. Quantitative findings were used not as detached proof, but as corroborative evidence to assess whether measurable changes in speaking, motivation, and anxiety were broadly consistent with the classroom processes and learner accounts identified qualitatively [37,38].

For the qualitative strand, trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, classroom observations, lesson-video records, and field notes. Themes were retained only when supported by more than one participant or data source and when they could be located within the wider classroom record. Dependability was supported by using a consistent analytic procedure across the dataset, including repeated reading, initial coding, category development, theme refinement, and comparison of candidate themes against the full dataset. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive checking, comparison of positive and less typical cases, and attention to whether interpretations were grounded in pupils' accounts and classroom evidence rather than in the researcher's prior assumptions.

3.8. Integration of the Qualitative and Quantitative Strands

Integration occurred at three points [37,38]. First, it was built into the design, because the quantitative variables of speaking, motivation, and anxiety were selected in direct relation to the classroom experiences explored qualitatively. Second, integration occurred during analysis, when each qualitative theme was examined against the relevant posttest pattern in order to identify convergence, complementarity, or explanatory reinforcement. Third, integration occurred in interpretation, where the quantitative findings were used to corroborate and qualify the qualitative explanation rather than replace it [37,38].

The logic of the study was therefore interpretive rather than parallel. The qualitative strand provided the main account of how STA functioned in practice, while the quantitative strand offered outcome-level evidence indicating whether this account was broadly reflected in measurable learner change. This approach is consistent with qualitatively driven mixed-methods research, in which numerical findings strengthen, rather than displace, process-based explanation [37,38].

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the relevant institutional procedures before data collection began. Permission was also secured from the participating school. Because the participants were primary school pupils, written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and pupil assent was secured in age-appropriate form prior to participation. Pseudonyms or anonymised identifiers were used in transcripts and reporting to protect confidentiality [37,38].

3.10. Terminology Note

In this article, speaking is used as the primary construct label because it most directly refers to learners' productive spoken language ability as a skill, process, and performance domain. The term oral is reserved mainly for pedagogical or assessment contexts, such as oral practice, oral participation, and oral assessment. The term spoken is used more narrowly to describe the form or output of language, as in spoken English or spoken interaction. This distinction is maintained for terminological consistency throughout the article.

4. Findings

4.1. Overview of the Integrated Findings

Consistent with the qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design, the findings are presented with the qualitative strand as the main explanatory framework and the quantitative strand as corroborative evidence. The analysis suggests that storytelling-based instruction did not simply provide pupils with more speaking practice. Rather, it appeared to reshape the classroom conditions under which speaking became more comprehensible, more engaging, and less threatening.

The six themes are analytically related. The first three concern the classroom processes through which storytelling-based instruction supported participation; the next two concern pupils' affective responses; and the final theme concerns pupils' own perceptions of speaking-related change. Together, these themes help explain why the experimental group showed stronger posttest performance in speaking, higher motivation, and lower anxiety than the control group.

The quantitative findings broadly converged with this interpretation. The two groups were comparable at pretest across speaking, motivation, and anxiety. At posttest, however, the experimental group outperformed the control group on pronunciation, vocabulary usage, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and overall speaking proficiency. The experimental group also reported stronger motivation and substantially lower anxiety. In the present study, these statistical patterns are interpreted as outcome-level support for the classroom processes and learner accounts identified qualitatively rather than as stand-alone proof of causation.

Because this was a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods study, the numerical results are reported selectively to contextualise and corroborate the qualitative themes, rather than to shift the main emphasis of the findings to statistical comparison. As shown in **Table 1**, the experimental group performed better than the control group on all posttest speaking measures.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Multimodal Scaffolding Made Speaking More Comprehensible and More Manageable

A strong pattern across the interview and observation data was that pupils experienced story-based lessons as easier to follow because language was supported through multiple channels. Pictures, gestures, videos, story maps, props, and plot structure helped pupils understand English before and during speaking tasks.

S5, a lower-achieving learner, described a particularly important shift. She said that in previous English classes she often felt that English was too difficult and that she was not capable. In the story class, however, she "understood everything because the teacher used gestures and pictures," and for the first time she felt, "I can do this too." This comment suggests that scaffolding did not merely improve comprehension; it also changed the learner's sense of self-efficacy.

S3 similarly emphasised that the cartoon version of Little Red Riding Hood helped her understand the story before reading and made the lesson more engaging than textbook instruction. She also explained that pictures helped her remember vocabulary such as woodcutter, because the word was linked to a clear visual scene in the story.

Table 1. Pretest and posttest speaking results for the control and experimental groups.

Variable	Group	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Key Posttest between-Group Result
Pronunciation	CG	2.875 (0.778)	3.780 (0.927)	U = 2533.0, Z = -2.385, $p = 0.017$
	EG	2.870 (0.787)	4.090 (0.703)	
Vocabulary Usage	CG	2.881 (0.764)	3.680 (0.911)	U = 2119.5, Z = -3.865, $p < 0.001$
	EG	2.870 (0.770)	4.130 (0.679)	
Grammatical Accuracy	CG	2.938 (0.769)	3.780 (0.941)	U = 2572.5, Z = -2.237, $p = 0.025$
	EG	2.940 (0.752)	4.070 (0.745)	
Fluency	CG	2.819 (0.739)	3.840 (0.882)	U = 2485.0, Z = -2.569, $p = 0.010$
	EG	2.810 (0.735)	4.120 (0.704)	
General Speaking Proficiency	CG	11.513 (1.723)	14.320 (2.604)	U = 2012.0, Z = -4.069, $p < 0.001$
	EG	11.490 (1.775)	15.330 (2.521)	

Note: CG = control group; EG = experimental group. Pretest between-group differences were non-significant across all speaking variables.

S9 drew attention to the role of the story map. She liked the visual sequencing of beginning, middle, climax, and ending because it “helped [her] clear [her] mind.” This points to an important aspect of scaffolding: support was not only lexical but also organisational. The story map gave learners a structure for extended output.

Observation data supported these accounts. Pupils were seen following visuals closely, responding to teacher prompts, and inferring meaning through context and gesture. Taken together, these data suggest that storytelling-based instruction reduced cognitive load by making input and speaking tasks easier to process. This theme also helps explain why the experimental group showed stronger posttest performance in vocabulary usage, fluency, and overall speaking proficiency.

Analytically, this theme suggests that the speaking gains observed in the quantitative strand may be understood partly through the reduced cognitive burden created by multimodal support. The numerical improvement in vocabulary usage and fluency therefore gains meaning when read alongside pupils’ accounts of being able to understand, remember, and organise story language more easily.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Embodied and Creative Expression Expanded Pupils’ Expressive Range

A second theme was that storytelling allowed pupils not only to hear language but also to enact it. Role-play, gesture, dubbing, dramatic voice, and physical performance appeared to support meaning-making, memory, and spoken expression.

S1 explained that he remembered the word scream because he acted it out in the story, while S8 reported that he finally understood the difference between push and pull after physically performing the action in role-play. These accounts suggest that embodiment made language less abstract and easier to retain. For other pupils, storytelling also created space for expressive practice. S4 described dubbing as helpful because it required repeated attention to voice and timing, while S6 valued the opportunity to adapt the story creatively and add humorous lines of his own.

Observation data reinforced this pattern. In one lesson, pupils changed the ending and added new dialogue, turning speaking from simple repetition into imaginative extension. This theme suggests that storytelling supports speaking not only through comprehension but also through expressive and performative use. It also offers a plausible explanation for the experimental group’s posttest advantages in pronunciation, fluency, and overall speaking performance.

4.1.3. Theme 3: Peer Collaboration and Rehearsal Created Social Safety for Speaking

A third theme concerned the role of peer support. Many pupils described group rehearsal, peer prompting, and collaborative performance as important reasons why they were able to speak more confidently.

S1 said he felt safe during the performance because classmates stood beside him and could whisper help if he forgot a word. S3 similarly said she felt less nervous because she was “not alone on the stage,” and because a peer had helped correct her pronunciation before the performance. S2 also emphasised the value of rehearsal, noting that by the time she spoke in front of the class, she had already practised and felt prepared.

These accounts suggest that rehearsal functioned as a form of social buffering rather than as practice alone. Pupils were not required to speak publicly without preparation; instead, they moved gradually from supported interaction to performance. Observation notes supported this interpretation, showing pupils assigning roles, help-

ing each other with pronunciation, and applauding group performances. Stronger learners also benefited. S6 described helping quieter classmates and feeling proud when the group performed well, suggesting that collaboration supported both scaffolding and leadership.

This theme helps explain why storytelling-based speaking tasks were often experienced as manageable rather than threatening. It also provides context for the lower anxiety levels and stronger speaking outcomes observed in the experimental group at posttest.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Narrative Engagement Increased Motivation by Making English Worth Speaking

A fourth theme was that storytelling increased motivation not simply because it was “fun”, but because it gave pupils reasons to care about what they were saying. Many pupils contrasted story lessons with textbook dialogues, which they described as flat or uninteresting.

S2 said that in previous classes, he sometimes felt sleepy, whereas stories made him want to know what would happen next. S7 reported that she felt sorry for Little Red Riding Hood and wanted to warn her, which made her listen closely and engage with the lesson. Other pupils described different motivational routes. S5 said prediction activities made her want to speak because she was curious about the ending. S8 was motivated by PK-style competition and wanted his group to win. S1 enjoyed performing for classmates, while S6 valued the chance to change the story creatively.

These accounts suggest that storytelling activated several forms of motivation at once, including curiosity, empathy, competition, performance identity, and creative ownership. This theme aligns closely with the posttest motivation results, where the experimental group showed stronger gains across motivational intensity, desire to learn English, attitudes toward learning English, and general motivation. The motivation results are summarised in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Pretest and posttest motivation results for the control and experimental groups.

Variable	Group	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Key Posttest between-Group Result
Motivational Intensity	CG	3.330 (0.331)	3.500 (0.419)	U = 2235.5, Z = -3.323, p = 0.001
	EG	3.370 (0.349)	4.005 (0.399)	
Desire to Learn English	CG	3.462 (0.311)	3.490 (0.391)	U = 1932.5, Z = -4.358, p < 0.001
	EG	3.475 (0.280)	4.063 (0.408)	
Attitudes toward Learning English	CG	3.430 (0.334)	3.497 (0.451)	U = 2141.5, Z = -3.634, p < 0.001
	EG	3.448 (0.353)	4.068 (0.456)	
General Motivation	CG	3.408 (0.188)	3.496 (0.243)	t = 6.139, df = 145.719, p < 0.001
	EG	3.431 (0.209)	4.045 (0.260)	

Note: CG = control group; EG = experimental group. Pretest between-group differences were non-significant across all motivation variables.

4.1.5. Theme 5: Meaning-Focused Participation and Role Protection Reduced Speaking Anxiety

A fifth theme concerned anxiety reduction. Several pupils contrasted story-based speaking with ordinary classroom speaking, which they described as more stressful because it involved sudden exposure, public correction, or fear of mistakes.

One mechanism was role protection. S1 said that when he wore the wolf mask, classmates were looking at the wolf rather than at him, which reduced self-consciousness. S3 made a similar point, saying that speaking in role felt safer than speaking as herself. A second mechanism was the feedback style. S4 said she felt less nervous because the teacher let pupils finish speaking before correcting them. S9 also noted that when the teacher did not interrupt her immediately after a small mistake, she could continue without freezing. A third mechanism was collective participation. S7 liked choral speaking because everyone spoke together, while S8 described PK-style speaking as exciting rather than embarrassing.

Together, these accounts suggest that storytelling reduced anxiety by shifting attention away from error avoidance and toward shared meaning-making. This pattern converges strongly with the quantitative findings, which showed substantially lower communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and general anxiety in the experimental group at posttest. The anxiety results are summarised in **Table 3**.

This theme provides a qualitative explanation for the lower anxiety scores reported by the experimental group. Rather than indicating anxiety reduction as an isolated outcome, the numerical pattern can be interpreted as reflect-

ing pupils' experience of role protection, delayed correction, collective participation, and meaning-focused speaking. This pattern should not be understood as complete or uniform; rather, pupils' accounts suggested that anxiety decreased mainly when role support, rehearsal, peer assistance, and delayed correction were available.

Table 3. Pretest and posttest anxiety results for the control and experimental groups.

Variable	Group	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Key Posttest between-Group Result
Communication Apprehension	CG	4.003 (0.357)	4.015 (0.341)	U = 54.0, Z = -10.782, $p < 0.001$
	EG	3.978 (0.326)	2.870 (0.344)	
Test Anxiety	CG	4.090 (0.340)	4.117 (0.347)	U = 40.0, Z = -10.826, $p < 0.001$
	EG	4.120 (0.327)	2.790 (0.379)	
Fear of Negative Evaluation	CG	4.103 (0.337)	4.110 (0.344)	U = 26.0, Z = -10.878, $p < 0.001$
	EG	4.107 (0.370)	2.780 (0.377)	
General Anxiety	CG	4.096 (0.191)	4.081 (0.201)	U = 0.0, Z = -10.939, $p < 0.001$
	EG	4.068 (0.192)	2.813 (0.206)	

Note: CG = control group; EG = experimental group. Pretest between-group differences were non-significant across all anxiety variables.

4.1.6. Theme 6: Pupils Perceived Real Improvement in Fluency, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, and Discourse

The final theme concerned pupils' own sense that their speaking had changed in concrete ways. Their comments referred not only to confidence, but also to more specific dimensions of speaking.

S2 explained that she had previously given only short answers, but now felt able to speak in longer lines because she understood the meaning more clearly. S5 described vocabulary learning through stories as easier because "words have friends," suggesting that story-based input helped her remember lexical chunks rather than isolated items. S6 emphasised prosody, saying he no longer read "like a robot" because different roles required different voices. S9 highlighted discourse organisation, explaining that she had learned to use sequencing expressions such as First, Then, Suddenly, and Finally.

These perceptions do not by themselves prove improvement, but they are consistent with the broader qualitative account and with the posttest speaking results. In this sense, the theme functions as a learner-level reflection of the same pattern identified quantitatively: storytelling-based instruction was associated with stronger performance in pronunciation, vocabulary usage, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and overall speaking proficiency.

4.2. Summary of the Integrated Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that storytelling-based instruction appeared to support speaking development through a connected set of classroom processes. Multimodal scaffolding made English easier to understand; embodied and creative activities supported expressive use; peer collaboration reduced the interpersonal risk of speaking; narrative engagement strengthened pupils' willingness to participate; and meaning-focused, role-based speaking reduced anxiety. Pupils' own accounts of speaking-related improvement were broadly consistent with these process-oriented themes.

The quantitative strand did not replace this qualitative explanation, but it strengthened it. The posttest advantages shown by the experimental group in speaking, motivation, and anxiety were broadly aligned with the classroom processes and learner perceptions identified in the qualitative data. For this reason, the findings of the present study are best understood as an integrated account of how storytelling-based instruction may have supported speaking development in this specific primary school context.

5. Discussion

This study examined how storytelling-based instruction appeared to support the speaking development of Chinese primary school pupils through a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design. Overall, the findings suggest that storytelling functioned not simply as an enjoyable classroom activity, but as a structured pedagogical approach that reorganised the conditions for speaking in the classroom. The qualitative findings indicate that pupils' speaking was supported through multimodal scaffolding, embodied and creative participation, collaborative rehearsal, stronger narrative engagement, and reduced anxiety during oral tasks. The quantitative findings on speaking, motivation, and anxiety broadly corroborated this interpretation [7, 11].

A central point emerging from the study is that storytelling appeared to support speaking by giving pupils

meaningful content and structure for oral participation. Rather than speaking in response to isolated prompts alone, pupils spoke within a narrative framework that provided characters, actions, and sequences to talk about. This seemed to make speaking more manageable and purposeful, especially for learners with limited confidence or linguistic resources. In this sense, storytelling-based instruction may be understood as a form of pedagogical scaffolding that supported both comprehension and oral production [3,18,32].

The findings also highlight the importance of embodiment and performance. Role-play, dubbing, gesture, and dramatic expression appeared to help pupils connect language with action, voice, and imagination. For young learners, this is important because speaking is often easier when language is linked to concrete experience rather than treated as an abstract form alone [4,6]. In the present study, embodied participation seemed to support not only understanding, but also expressive use of English.

A further contribution of the study lies in showing that peer collaboration mattered to speaking development. Group rehearsal, peer prompting, and shared performance appeared to reduce the interpersonal risk of speaking and gave pupils time to prepare before public participation. This was especially important in a primary EFL setting, where willingness to speak can be strongly shaped by fear of error or embarrassment [9,10,17]. Storytelling-based instruction therefore appeared to support speaking not only by providing language-rich tasks, but also by making participation more socially manageable.

Motivation and anxiety should be interpreted within this broader process-based account. In this study, they were not treated as detached outcomes, but as affective conditions through which speaking became more or less likely to occur. Pupils' accounts suggest that stories increased participation because they made classroom English more interesting, meaningful, and worth speaking, while role-based and meaning-focused activities reduced some of the pressure associated with oral performance [9–11,23,29]. From this perspective, stronger motivation and lower anxiety formed part of the pathway through which storytelling appeared to support speaking.

The quantitative findings were broadly consistent with this interpretation. The experimental group showed stronger posttest results in speaking proficiency, higher motivation, and lower anxiety, which aligned with the classroom processes identified in the qualitative data [7,11]. However, because this was a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods study conducted in a single school, these results should be interpreted cautiously. The quantitative strand strengthens the plausibility of the qualitative account, but it does not by itself establish strong causal claims [37,38].

The study also contributes to the literature by shifting attention from broad claims that storytelling is beneficial to a more classroom-grounded explanation of how it may support speaking development in practice. Previous work has often reported positive outcomes, but has been less explicit about the processes through which such outcomes may emerge, especially in Chinese primary classrooms [8]. The present findings suggest that storytelling may be pedagogically valuable because it makes speaking more comprehensible, more participatory, and more affectively safe, rather than simply more enjoyable.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in one school over a limited instructional period, and the qualitative strand drew on a relatively small interview sample and a limited number of formal classroom observations. In addition, the observed patterns may have been shaped by contextual factors such as teacher implementation, story selection, and classroom culture. The findings should therefore be understood as context-bound explanatory patterns rather than as universally generalisable mechanisms.

Despite these limitations, the study has practical and research implications. Pedagogically, it suggests that storytelling-based instruction may be a productive way to support young learners' speaking when it is implemented as a structured, interactive, and meaning-focused classroom approach rather than as occasional entertainment. For research, the study points to the value of examining not only whether storytelling is associated with better outcomes, but also how it reshapes the classroom conditions under which learners become willing and able to speak [7,8].

6. Conclusion

This study examined how storytelling-based instruction appeared to support the speaking development of Chinese primary school pupils through a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods design. Taken together, the findings suggest that storytelling functioned not simply as an enjoyable classroom activity, but as a structured pedagogical approach that helped create more supportive conditions for speaking in the EFL classroom.

The qualitative findings indicate that storytelling-based lessons supported speaking through several interconnected processes: multimodal scaffolding made English more comprehensible, embodied and creative activities

supported expressive use, collaborative rehearsal reduced the interpersonal risk of speaking, and narrative engagement increased pupils' willingness to participate. At the same time, meaning-focused and role-based participation appeared to reduce anxiety and make oral production feel more manageable. In this sense, storytelling seemed to support speaking not through a single factor, but through a combination of cognitive, social, and affective support.

The quantitative findings on speaking proficiency, motivation, and anxiety broadly corroborated this interpretation. The experimental group's stronger posttest performance, higher motivation, and lower anxiety were consistent with the classroom processes and learner accounts identified qualitatively. However, in line with the design of the study, these quantitative findings should be understood as corroborative rather than independently decisive.

The study also contributes to the literature by offering a more classroom-grounded account of how storytelling-based instruction may support speaking development in Chinese primary classrooms. Its main value lies not only in reporting positive learner outcomes, but in showing how storytelling may reorganise classroom participation in ways that make speaking more meaningful, more supported, and less threatening for young learners.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in one school over a limited period, and the qualitative strand was based on a relatively small interview sample. The findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously and understood as context-bound rather than universally generalisable.

Even so, the study suggests that storytelling-based instruction may be a productive approach for supporting young learners' speaking when it is implemented as a structured, interactive, and meaning-focused pedagogy. Future research could extend this work by examining longer-term implementation across multiple school settings and by exploring whether similar classroom processes are evident in other EFL contexts.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.Z. and H.H.I.; methodology, L.Z. and H.H.I.; software, L.Z.; validation, H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; formal analysis, L.Z.; investigation, L.Z.; resources, L.Z.; data curation, L.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, L.Z.; writing—review and editing, L.Z., H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; visualization, L.Z.; supervision, H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; project administration, L.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from the pupils' parents or legal guardians prior to participation, and school-level permission was secured before data collection.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available because they involve minors and are subject to ethical and school-level restrictions. Aggregated data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional approval.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically

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