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Effects of Storytelling on Reading Comprehension Among Primary School Learners: A Mixed-Methods Study of Four Primary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of storytelling on reading comprehension among Grade 4 learners in four public primary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia: Mutambe, New Mandevu, Kasamba, and Emmasdale. Reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge in Zambia's primary education system, compounded by the transition from local-language to English-medium instruction in Grade 4. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test comparison of an experimental (storytelling) group and a control (traditional-instruction) group with semi-structured teacher interviews and classroom observations. The study involved 70 participants: 60 Grade 4 learners and 10 English teachers. Quantitative results showed marked gains following the storytelling intervention: literal recall improved by 45%, sequencing by 65%, and inferential reasoning rose from a pre-test mean of 15% to a post-test mean of 65%. Vocabulary comprehension scores rose from

28% to 72% (a net gain of 44%), and 82% of learners achieved mastery of newly introduced vocabulary. Overall, 83% of respondents agreed that storytelling improves reading comprehension, and 81.5% of respondents reported that storytelling was already used at least weekly in their classrooms. Qualitative data corroborated these findings, with teachers describing storytelling as creating a "mental map" that lowers reading anxiety and scaffolds comprehension for multilingual learners. The study concludes that storytelling is a culturally congruent, low-cost, and cognitively effective pedagogy consistent with Constructivist, Sociocultural, and Dual Coding theories of learning, but that it remains an informal enrichment activity rather than a systemically integrated instructional strategy. The study recommends that Zambia's Ministry of General Education formally incorporate storytelling into the National Literacy Framework, backed by structured teacher training and curated storytelling resources.

Keywords: Storytelling, Reading Comprehension, Primary Education, Vocabulary Acquisition, Lusaka District, Zambia

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is the cornerstone of academic achievement and cognitive growth for primary school learners, yet many learners in Zambia continue to face significant hurdles in meeting literacy benchmarks. National assessments conducted by the Examinations Council of Zambia, together with regional studies under the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, have consistently revealed low reading and comprehension scores among Zambian learners, raising concerns about the effectiveness of prevailing rote, teacher-centered instructional approaches (Adib, 2023) ^[1]. Despite a near-universal primary enrolment rate of 97.2% as of 2025, the Ministry of Education's 2025 Education Statistics Bulletin and the World Bank (2025) ^[48] report that learning poverty in Zambia remains critically high, with most learners unable to read and comprehend age-appropriate text by the end of primary school.

Storytelling is deeply rooted in African cultures as a traditional mode of knowledge transmission and cultural preservation (Al Nassar & Al Majidal, 2023) ^[3], and offers an interactive, participatory alternative to conventional reading instruction that can improve vocabulary acquisition, listening skills, and inferential reasoning (Prasetyo, 2020) ^[40]. Grade 4 represents a particularly critical juncture in the Zambian curriculum, as the medium of instruction shifts from local languages to English, creating a "pedagogical bottleneck" for learners still developing English proficiency. While narrative-driven instruction has been shown elsewhere to strengthen vocabulary retention and reading motivation (Rostina *et al.*, 2023; Balantekin, 2025) ^[42, 7],

storytelling in Zambian classrooms remains largely an informal "enrichment" activity rather than a structured, formally trained pedagogical strategy (Ministry of Education, 2025) ^[25].

This study therefore investigated the pedagogical efficacy of storytelling as an instructional strategy for enhancing reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition among Grade 4 learners at Mutambe, New Mandevu, Kasamba, and Emmasdale Primary Schools in Lusaka District. Specifically, the study pursued four objectives: (1) to examine the effects of storytelling on reading comprehension among primary school learners; (2) to identify the role of storytelling in enhancing learners' vocabulary acquisition and understanding of text content; (3) to explore teachers' perceptions and practices regarding storytelling as an instructional strategy; and (4) to propose evidence-based recommendations for integrating storytelling into literacy instruction. The findings are intended to inform the Ministry of General Education, teacher training institutions, school administrators, and the broader academic community on the potential of storytelling to serve as a culturally resonant and cognitively effective bridge between Zambian learners' oral traditions and formal, English-medium literacy instruction.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A growing body of international and regional research supports storytelling as a tool for developing linguistic ability and reading comprehension. Studies from Nigeria (Aremu & Onasanya, 2021; Eze & Okeke, 2020) ^[6, 12], Benin (Adjihouede *et al.*, 2023) ^[2], Malawi (Kamwendo, 2023; Mkandawire & Banda, 2021) ^[19, 26], and elsewhere in Southern Africa (Nkosi *et al.*, 2023) ^[33] report consistent gains in comprehension, vocabulary, and narrative understanding following storytelling interventions, while cross-national comparisons highlight divergent implementation models: indigenous-language storytelling in Nigeria versus curriculum-wide oral storytelling in the Philippines; digital storytelling workshops in South Africa versus folktale-based oral storytelling in Kenya; and teacher-led narratives in India versus learner-generated narratives in Finland. Within Zambia specifically, a smaller body of work (Chibwe, 2021; Zulu, 2022; Munyonga, 2023; Mbewe, 2024; Tembo, 2024; Kapenda, 2024) ^[10, 52, 28, 24, 44, 20] has begun to document storytelling's relevance to Lusaka's multilingual classrooms, but these studies are constrained by small sample sizes, short intervention periods, and predominantly qualitative designs that do not adequately measure comprehension gains or generalize across school settings (Amukusana, 2024) ^[5]. This gap in rigorous, mixed-methods evidence — particularly regarding curriculum integration, teacher training, and policy support — motivated the present study.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study draws on a multidisciplinary set of theories linking oral narrative to formal literacy development. Constructivist Theory (Piaget, 1936) ^[39] frames storytelling as a means by which learners construct new knowledge by integrating unfamiliar English vocabulary into existing narrative schemas. Vygotsky's (1978) ^[47] Sociocultural Theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development, positions the teacher as a "storytelling scaffold" who

provides the linguistic and emotional support learners need to reach comprehension levels they could not achieve unassisted — a mechanism especially relevant in Lusaka's multilingual classrooms (Kapenda, 2024) ^[20]. Krashen's (1982) ^[21] Affective Filter Hypothesis explains storytelling's motivational effect: by lowering anxiety and building confidence, storytelling reduces the affective barrier that otherwise blocks language acquisition during the transition to English instruction. Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1971) ^[38] offers a cognitive rationale for storytelling's effectiveness, proposing that the simultaneous engagement of verbal (spoken narrative) and non-verbal (mental imagery) channels leads to superior encoding and retention of new vocabulary compared to rote repetition. Finally, the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) ^[13] — which models reading comprehension as the product of decoding and language comprehension — underscores the study's rationale: while Zambian literacy reforms have emphasized phonics-based decoding, storytelling is positioned as the mechanism most capable of developing the underdeveloped "language comprehension" component of this equation.

These theories converge in a conceptual model in which storytelling (the independent variable) operates through intermediate mechanisms — learner engagement, narrative understanding, and teacher scaffolding practices — to produce measurable gains in the dependent variables of literal recall, inferential reasoning, vocabulary acquisition, and text understanding. This causal chain guided both the design of the storytelling intervention and the structure of the data collection instruments used in the study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (CPM), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously and then triangulated to produce a comprehensive account of storytelling's effects. The quantitative strand used a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design comparing an experimental group (storytelling-based instruction) with a control group (traditional instruction). The qualitative strand comprised semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations, analyzed thematically to explore teachers' perceptions and instructional practices.

3.2 Study Site, Population, and Sample

The study was conducted in four government primary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia — Mutambe, New Mandevu, Kasamba, and Emmasdale — selected for their diverse, multilingual learner populations and their representativeness of the resource constraints typical of Zambia's urban public education system. The target population comprised 240 individuals (220 Grade 4 learners and 20 English teachers) across the four schools. Using Yamane's (1964) formula for sample size determination at a 10% margin of error, a sample of 70 respondents was drawn: 60 Grade 4 learners (15 per school) and 10 English/literacy teachers (2–3 per school). Purposive sampling was used to select the schools, and simple random sampling was used to select intact Grade 4 classrooms and learners within each school, reducing selection bias and enhancing representativeness.

3.3 Intervention and Instruments

The storytelling intervention was delivered over six weeks, in 18 sessions of approximately 40 minutes each (three sessions per week). Each session comprised four components: (1) narrative presentation by a trained facilitator using culturally relevant, age-appropriate stories; (2) interactive engagement through prediction, questioning, and retelling; (3) guided comprehension tasks targeting sequencing, inference, vocabulary, and summarization; and (4) group reflection and discussion of themes and characters. Stories were drawn from local folktales and culturally familiar children's literature and were mapped to the Grade 4 Primary Literacy Programme syllabus used in Lusaka District.

Data were collected using standardized reading comprehension and vocabulary tests (administered as pre-tests and post-tests), semi-structured interview guides for teachers, and classroom observation checklists. Instrument validity was established through expert review by the research supervisor and language specialists, alignment with the Grade 4 curriculum, and attention to construct validity to ensure the storytelling intervention was distinct from traditional instruction. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study at a non-sampled school and computation of Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82 — above the conventional 0.70 threshold — indicating high internal consistency.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) summarized learner performance before and after the intervention, and a paired-sample t-test (significance level $p < .05$) was used to determine whether differences in comprehension scores were statistically significant. Qualitative data from teacher interviews and observation notes were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, with initial codes grouped into categories (e.g., teacher attitudes, learner engagement, story relevance, instructional challenges) that were refined into broader themes. Quantitative and qualitative findings were then triangulated to produce an integrated interpretation of storytelling's effects.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under the ethical oversight of the Rockview University Research Ethics Committee, with formal approval from the School of Post-Graduate Studies and permission from the District Education Board Secretary and school head teachers. Because the study involved minors, a two-tier consent process was followed: written parental consent was obtained, followed by child assent obtained in age-appropriate language, with learners informed that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without penalty. Participant anonymity was maintained through alphanumeric coding, and all physical and electronic data were securely stored and password-protected.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the 70 respondents, 60 (86%) were Grade 4 learners and 10 (14%) were English teachers. Among learners, 43% were aged 7–8 years and 43% were aged 9–10 years, and 92%

reported speaking a local language (predominantly Nyanja or Bemba) at home rather than English — underscoring the linguistic gap that storytelling was intended to bridge. Overall, 64% of respondents were female and 36% male, consistent with national trends of female predominance in lower-primary teaching in Zambia. Among the teacher respondents, 70% had five or fewer years of teaching experience and 30% had approximately a decade of experience, while 80% held a Diploma or higher academic qualification, including one Master's degree holder (Table 1).

Table 1: Academic Qualifications of Teacher Respondents (n = 10)

Qualification	Frequency (n)
Certificate	2
Diploma	4
Bachelor's Degree	3
Master's Degree	1
Total	10

4.2 Objective 1: Effects of Storytelling on Reading Comprehension

Storytelling produced consistent gains across all measured dimensions of comprehension. Literal recall (identification of basic facts) improved by 45% following the intervention, while sequencing ability — learners' capacity to organize and retell events in correct order — showed the largest gain, at 65%. The most pronounced improvement was recorded in inferential reasoning: prior to the intervention, only 9 of 60 learners (15%, pre-test mean) could correctly explain a character's motives, compared with 39 of 60 learners (65%, post-test mean) afterward (Table 2).

Table 2: Learners' Inferential Reasoning Scores, Pre- and Post-Intervention (n = 60)

Category	Mean Score (%)	Share of Total Improvement (%)
Pre-test (traditional instruction)	15	18.75
Post-test (storytelling)	65	81.25

Overall, 83% of respondents agreed that storytelling directly improves reading comprehension, and 77.2% of respondents (54 of 70) rated learners' resulting text understanding as "high" or "very high," compared with only 7.2% rating it "low" or "very low." Teachers attributed these gains to the "mental map" created by oral narration: as one teacher at New Mandevu Primary explained, learners no longer needed to search the text for answers because they had "seen" events unfold during the narration. Teachers at Mutambe and Kasamba Primary similarly reported that vocal characterization and gesture served as memory "labels" that helped struggling readers, including home-language speakers of Tonga and Nyanja, retain factual and sequential details without relying on translation.

4.3 Objective 2: Vocabulary Acquisition and Text Understanding

Vocabulary comprehension scores rose from a pre-intervention level of 28% to a post-intervention level of 72%, a net gain of 44 percentage points. Of the 60 learners, 49 (82%) achieved mastery of the five to eight target vocabulary words introduced during the storytelling sessions, while 4 learners (6%) remained engaged but

continued to struggle with retention, and 7 learners (12%) were largely passive or off-task during sessions (Table 3).

Table 3: Vocabulary Mastery and Engagement Levels Following the Storytelling Intervention (n = 60)

Performance Category	Learners (n)	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary mastered	49	82
Passive / off-task	7	12
Engaged but struggling	4	6

Teachers reported that vocabulary embedded within a narrative — for example, physically enacting a character's "terrified" reaction or "trudging" through mud — was retained and reused by learners in their own speech and writing weeks later, in contrast to word-list vocabulary, which was often forgotten by the following lesson. Teachers described this as a shift from passive word recognition to active vocabulary use, consistent with the "narrative anchor" effect predicted by Dual Coding Theory.

4.4 Objective 3: Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

Storytelling was found to be a well-established rather than sporadic classroom practice: 34.3% of respondents reported using storytelling several times per week, 28.6% reported weekly use, and 18.6% reported daily use — together indicating that approximately 81.5% of respondents used storytelling at least weekly. Only 18.5% reported occasional or rare use. Teachers characterized storytelling as a "cognitive bridge" that leveled the playing field for learners with diverse home-language backgrounds, and observed that the interactive, prediction-based nature of storytelling shifted learners from passive "word calling" toward active synthesis and comprehension of text.

4.5 Objective 4: Recommendations for Integrating Storytelling into Literacy Instruction

When asked to identify the most important strategies for integrating storytelling into literacy instruction, respondents most frequently cited increased teacher training through Continuous Professional Development (25.7%), followed by integrating storytelling into daily literacy lessons (22.9%), providing teaching aids such as storybooks and props (20.0%), encouraging active learner participation (17.1%), and developing structured storytelling lesson plans within the curriculum (14.3%) (Table 4).

Table 4: Respondent-Recommended Strategies for Integrating Storytelling into Literacy Instruction (n = 70)

Recommendation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Increase teacher training / CPD on storytelling	18	25.7
Integrate storytelling into daily literacy lessons	16	22.9
Provide teaching aids (storybooks, visual aids, props)	14	20
Encourage learner participation in storytelling	12	17.1
Develop structured storytelling lesson plans	10	14.3

5. Discussion

The findings provide strong empirical support for storytelling as an effective literacy pedagogy in the Zambian primary school context, consistent with the theoretical

framework guiding the study. The substantial gains in inferential reasoning (from 15% to 65%) align with Vygotsky's (1978) ^[47] concept of the Zone of Proximal Development: teachers functioned as "storytelling scaffolds," using voice, gesture, and questioning to enable learners to reach comprehension levels beyond what they could achieve through independent decoding of text. The vocabulary gains (28% to 72%) similarly support Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1971) ^[38], as learners who encountered new words through simultaneous verbal narration and enacted or visualized meaning outperformed those relying on rote, single-channel memorization.

Teachers' descriptions of reduced "reading anxiety" and increased willingness to participate are consistent with Krashen's (1982) ^[21] Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that storytelling's motivational and emotional engagement — rather than any change in decoding instruction per se — is a key mechanism behind the observed comprehension gains. This is further reinforced by the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) ^[13]: where Zambian literacy reforms have concentrated on phonics-based decoding, this study suggests storytelling is comparatively well suited to developing the underlying language-comprehension component that decoding instruction alone does not address.

These findings are broadly consistent with prior research from Nigeria, Benin, Malawi, and other Sub-Saharan African contexts linking storytelling to improved comprehension and vocabulary outcomes (Aremu & Onasanya, 2021; Adjihouede *et al.*, 2023; Kamwendo, 2023) ^[6, 2, 19], while extending this evidence base to Lusaka District's specifically multilingual, urban public-school context — an important contribution given prior local studies' reliance on small samples and short, largely qualitative designs (Amukusana, 2024; Chibwe, 2021) ^[5, 10]. Despite these positive outcomes, teachers' own reports that they rely on "trial and error" rather than formal training in storytelling pedagogy indicate that, notwithstanding its demonstrated effectiveness, storytelling remains an informally practiced enrichment activity rather than a systemically embedded component of Zambia's literacy curriculum — a gap most directly reflected in respondents' strong preference (25.7%) for expanded Continuous Professional Development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that storytelling is a foundational pedagogy well aligned with the cognitive development and cultural heritage of Grade 4 learners in Lusaka District. It functions as a linguistic bridge that supports durable vocabulary acquisition and deeper text understanding during the critical transition from local-language to English-medium instruction. However, despite high teacher confidence and widespread informal use across the four schools studied, storytelling remains an unsystematized "enrichment" tool, constrained by the absence of formal curriculum integration, limited teaching materials, and a lack of structured professional training.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that:

- The Ministry of General Education (MoGE) formally

recognize storytelling as an evidence-based literacy strategy within the National Literacy Framework.

- Colleges of Education introduce dedicated, practically oriented modules on narrative pedagogy and story-based assessment techniques.
- The Curriculum Development Centre develop a culturally curated "Zambian Storytelling Resource Pack" mapped to Grade 4 learning objectives.
- School administrators allocate dedicated, protected timetable slots for storytelling-integrated literacy instruction.
- In-service teacher training incorporate storytelling pedagogy to move practice from intuitive to theoretically grounded.
- Schools establish teacher communities of practice for sharing storytelling techniques and reflecting on outcomes.
- Education stakeholders explore broadcasting partnerships (e.g., with ZNBC) to extend storytelling-based literacy support into learners' homes.
- School inspection frameworks include storytelling-related quality indicators to monitor implementation.
- Development partners and NGOs fund storytelling-focused literacy interventions, particularly in under-resourced peri-urban areas.

6.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was limited to four government primary schools in Lusaka District and a single academic term, which constrains the generalizability of findings to rural or private-school contexts and limits conclusions about storytelling's long-term effects. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs tracking reading outcomes over a full school year, comparative studies contrasting urban and rural implementation, investigation of storytelling's role during mother-tongue instruction in Grades 1–3 relative to the Grade 4 transition to English, and evaluation of alternative teacher-training models for storytelling pedagogy.

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