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Research Paper

Creating Emotionally Safe EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Experiences with Storytelling as a Pedagogical Approach

Thinley Wangdi
School of Advanced Studies
Saint Louis University, Baguio, Philippines
William F. Perales Jr.[1]
School of Advanced Studies
Saint Louis University, Baguio, Philippines
Ringphami Shimray
School of Advanced Studies
Saint Louis University, Baguio, Philippines
Joselito C. Gutierrez
School of Advanced Studies
Saint Louis University, Baguio, Philippines
Mark B. Ulla
Center for Language Teaching and Learning
Walailak University, Thailand

Abstract

Emotions play a key role in language teaching and learning, affecting how students engage, participate, and succeed. Storytelling is one teaching method that has gained attention for creating positive classroom environments. Yet, there is not much research on how teachers view storytelling to boost emotional engagement and support language learning in EFL classrooms. This study looks at how Thai EFL teachers use storytelling to build

[1] Corresponding author: liamperales16@gmail.com

supportive learning spaces and help students develop their language skills. The researchers interviewed 11 university EFL teachers in Thailand. The results show that teachers see storytelling as more than just a way to present language. They believe it helps lower students' anxiety, increases motivation, and encourages active participation. Teachers also said that storytelling gives students meaningful ways to learn vocabulary and grammar, and helps them improve listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Storytelling was also seen to build stronger classroom relationships and a sense of community. This study points to storytelling as a teaching practice that connects emotional engagement with language development and discusses what this means for language teaching and teacher training.
Keywords: storytelling, emotion, foreign language emotion, EFL, Thailand

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1. Introduction

Both thinking skills and emotions shape how people learn languages (Plonsky et al., 2022). Recent studies in second language learning have paid more attention to emotions because they affect how students get involved, stay motivated, and develop their language skills (Shao et al., 2019). This is especially important in places like Thailand, where English is not used much in daily life. In these situations, students often feel more anxious and hesitant to use English, which can make them less likely to join in class and can hurt their learning (Kurakan, 2021). Because of this, creating emotionally supportive classrooms has become a key goal, since safe classroom environments are linked to better participation and higher academic achievement (Krauss et al., 2024; Roohani et al., 2020).

Storytelling can help create emotionally supportive classrooms. People have long valued it to communicate (Wallace, 2000), and it is now used more often in language teaching (Khodabandeh, 2018; Lucarevschi, 2016). In language classes, storytelling gives students rich, real-life language, letting

them learn new words, complex grammar, and cultural meanings (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022). Research shows that storytelling can help students develop language skills, get more involved, and improve reading and creativity (Gao et al., 2023; Khodabandeh, 2018; Lucarevschi, 2016). Stories can also help students connect what they learn to their own experiences and feelings, strengthening classroom interactions, lowering anxiety, and boosting motivation.

While many studies show that storytelling is valuable for language learning, most focus on student outcomes such as engagement, comfort, and language growth. Less research examines how teachers understand and use storytelling in their own classrooms. This is especially true in Thailand, where few studies look at teachers' views on storytelling (Khamsuk & Wanchit, 2021; Tachom, 2021; Tossa & Saihong, 2021). Some research suggests that many Thai English teachers have little training in using stories and may not feel confident about adding storytelling to their lessons (Panapob & Abhakorn, 2022). Also, because stories and literature are not a big part of many EFL programs, teachers may question whether storytelling is a practical or legitimate teaching method (Gabrielsen et al., 2019).

To address this gap, this study examines how Thai university EFL teachers view storytelling to create supportive classrooms and help students learn the language. The research is based on Positive Psychology, which highlights the importance of positive emotions in language learning (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). The study explores how teachers see storytelling's role in building supportive classroom environments and how factors like school expectations, curriculum limits, and personal beliefs affect their use of storytelling. By focusing on teachers' views and choices, the study shows how emotional, teaching, and institutional factors shape

storytelling use in Thai EFL classrooms. Therefore, this study asked the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers in Thailand perceive the role of storytelling in fostering emotionally safe learning environments for language learners?

2. How do EFL teachers view storytelling as a strategy for enhancing students' language skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotions in Language Teaching and Learning

Emotions are central to language teaching and learning because they shape how teachers teach and how learners engage with language tasks. Teaching is not purely a cognitive activity, as it is also a social and emotional practice in which teachers experience a wide range of feelings, including confidence, anxiety, enthusiasm, and frustration (Richards, 2022). These emotions influence teachers' instructional decisions, interactions with students, and approaches to classroom management. At the same time, learners bring their own emotional experiences into the classroom. Feelings such as excitement, curiosity, motivation, fear, and embarrassment influence their willingness to communicate, their readiness to take risks, and ultimately their learning outcomes (Richards, 2022). When positive emotions are present, learners are more likely to participate actively, explore language creatively, and develop greater autonomy. In contrast, negative emotions may discourage participation and reduce engagement (Wang & Derakhshan, 2025). For this reason, the classroom emotional climate plays a crucial role in language learning, and teachers often use strategies such as humor, collaboration, and supportive interactions to cultivate a trusting environment that supports learning (Richards, 2022). Emotions also influence teachers' professional development, as both novice and experienced educators navigate emotional

challenges while forming their professional identities and adapting to classroom realities.

Research in second language acquisition further highlights emotions' significant role in shaping learners' cognitive processes and learning behaviors. Emotions such as enjoyment, pride, anxiety, shame, and boredom influence how learners allocate attention, process linguistic information, and regulate their effort during language learning tasks (Shao et al., 2019; Soodman Afshar & Rahimi, 2014). Positive emotions, including enjoyment and pride, often enhance motivation and persistence, leading to stronger engagement and improved learning outcomes. These emotions broaden learners' perspectives and help them build psychological resilience that supports sustained learning (Shao et al., 2019). Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety, shame, and boredom may disrupt attention and reduce the cognitive resources available for language acquisition. Among these emotions, anxiety has received the greatest attention in language learning research. Although anxiety can occasionally motivate learners to exert greater effort, it is generally associated with lower participation and reduced achievement (Shao et al., 2019). These findings underscore the importance of considering emotional factors when designing teaching strategies and classroom environments that support effective language learning.

One of the most widely studied negative emotions in language classrooms is foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), which has been shown to significantly affect learners' willingness to communicate. Dewaele (2019) found that higher levels of FLCA strongly reduce students' readiness to engage in English conversations during class activities. In this study, FLCA accounted for approximately 30 percent of the variance in learners' willingness to communicate, making it the strongest negative predictor

among the examined variables. Learners who experience high anxiety often report feelings of nervousness, physical discomfort, and low confidence, which diminish their motivation to participate verbally. As a result, anxiety can create a restrictive emotional climate in which students hesitate to initiate or sustain communication in the target language. These findings highlight the importance of creating supportive and non-threatening classroom environments that reduce anxiety and encourage learners to participate more actively in language use.

Because emotions shape both engagement and participation, teachers play a critical role in establishing classroom environments that promote positive emotional experiences. Recent research has begun to explore how teachers understand and manage emotional dynamics in their teaching practice. For example, Zhang and Wang (2026) investigated Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of positive emotionality and how they regulate such emotions in their professional practice. Through semi-structured interviews with 34 Chinese EFL teachers, the study revealed that teachers view positive emotionality as a powerful force that generates other beneficial emotions such as motivation, enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm. These emotional states enhance classroom rapport, strengthen the learning atmosphere, and support professional commitment and teaching effectiveness. Teachers also demonstrated high emotional awareness in managing their own emotions. They reported using antecedent-focused strategies such as situation selection, cognitive appraisal, reflection, and attentional deployment to cultivate positive emotions before they emerge. After experiencing positive emotionality, teachers employed practices such as mindfulness, relaxation, and engagement in joyful activities to sustain these emotional states. These findings illustrate the importance of teachers'

emotional awareness and regulation in shaping classroom experiences and highlight the role of positive emotionality in effective language teaching.

2.2 Storytelling in Language Education

Within the growing discussion of emotions in language education, storytelling has gained attention as a teaching approach that can promote supportive and engaging classroom environments. Stories naturally invite learners into the learning process. They spark imagination, encourage participation, and open space for interaction among students (Dishari et al., 2025). One well-known example is the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) approach, which centers on building stories collaboratively with students rather than simply delivering them as fixed texts. In a year-long mixed-methods case study, Printer (2023) explored how co-created storytelling shaped students' emotional and motivational experiences in a French-language classroom with 9 secondary school learners. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the study examined how storytelling addressed learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings showed that when students helped shape the storyline, they felt a stronger sense of ownership and autonomy in the learning process. The accessible and meaningful language embedded in the stories also strengthened students' sense of competence, reducing frustration and helping them retain new language more effectively. At the same time, the collaborative storytelling process deepened classroom relationships, strengthening connections among students and between students and the teacher. Observations throughout the study revealed a classroom atmosphere marked by enjoyment, laughter, and active participation, suggesting that storytelling can meaningfully enhance both emotional and behavioral engagement.

Similar patterns appear in other educational contexts. Alkaaf (2017), for example, explored how storytelling developed story-writing skills among seventh-grade students in Oman. The study involved 120 learners from several schools in Salalah and five Arabic language teachers who implemented storytelling after completing a short training workshop. Using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the research found that more than 90% of students described storytelling as useful, enjoyable, and motivating. They also reported improvements in vocabulary, fluency, creativity, and confidence in writing stories. Teachers shared similar views, noting that storytelling encouraged active participation, deepened students' understanding of narrative structure, and made lessons more interactive than conventional teaching approaches. For both teachers and learners, storytelling appeared to support not only language development but also motivation and creative engagement.

Furthermore, research with younger learners points to similar benefits. Kirsch (2016), working with a Year 6 German class in a London primary school, showed how storytelling could support vocabulary learning in meaningful ways. Over two school terms, the teacher used stories such as The Very Grouchy Ladybug and Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten to reinforce known vocabulary and introduce new language. Students recalled and retained a considerable number of words and phrases from these stories. Some learners even remembered entire key sentences. This success was linked not only to the repetition found in stories but also to the teacher's use of expressive storytelling techniques, including gestures, mime, voice variation, props, and follow-up activities such as retelling and role-play. These practices created a learning environment where explicit instruction and incidental learning worked together. Grounded in a social constructivist perspective, the approach encouraged collaboration, autonomy, and sustained

engagement among learners. Although the study noted limitations, including the teacher's native speaker status and the difficulty of isolating the effects of individual texts, the findings highlight storytelling's potential as a powerful tool for supporting vocabulary learning and maintaining student interest in language lessons.

Thus, existing research demonstrates that emotions are fundamental to language learning and teaching. Learners' emotional experiences influence their engagement, participation, and achievement, while teachers' emotional awareness shapes the classroom climate and learning opportunities available to students. Storytelling, particularly when implemented through collaborative and interactive approaches, can cultivate positive emotions, reduce anxiety, and strengthen classroom relationships. However, while empirical studies highlight the benefits of storytelling for learners' emotional engagement, fewer studies have explored how language teachers themselves perceive storytelling as a strategy for promoting emotionally supportive learning environments. Understanding teachers' perspectives is therefore essential for examining how storytelling can be integrated effectively into language teaching practice.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Context

The storytelling pedagogy in this study refers to a slightly modified story-listening approach (see Mason & Krashen, 2020), based on Krashen and Mason's (2020) optimal input hypothesis, which posits that input (stories, in the context of this study) should be comprehensible, compelling, rich, and abundant. The storytelling in this study differs from the traditional approach to teaching language through stories. In traditional classrooms, "the vocabulary and grammar used in stories are deliberately placed there; the

story is a way of helping students learn these items. Vocabulary lists and definitions are usually provided before the actual stories are presented or read, and exercises are provided after the stories are presented or read to help students remember the words and 'master' them (Mason & Krashen, 2020, p. 1). However, in this study, storytelling emphasizes understanding and enjoying the stories while facilitating incidental learning of vocabulary, grammar, and other language elements from the stories' context. Teachers narrate the story using various comprehension-aiding supplements (Krashen et al., 2018), such as interactive slides, drawings, brief use of the students' L1, and additional linguistic support.

The teacher participants employed the storytelling approach in this study's course, English for Upper Beginners, for several academic years. The teacher designed and developed a course textbook containing various stories as the main lesson materials. During class, the teacher-participants shared stories and then provided related learning activities. To assess students' learning, the teacher-participants alternately gave speaking and writing tasks after every two stories taught in class. This allowed the teacher-participants to gauge students' learning through their speaking and writing performance.

3.2 Design and Participants

This study employed an exploratory-descriptive qualitative (EDQ) research design to explore and describe teachers' perspectives on storytelling as an emotionally safe space pedagogy in EFL classrooms, aiming to promote better language development. The researchers chose EDQ because, as Hunter et al. (2019) note, it is commonly used to investigate under-researched topics, such as storytelling as an emotionally safe space pedagogy, and to generate new knowledge.

Using convenience sampling, 20 English language teachers from a university in southern Thailand were invited to participate, as they had been exposed to storytelling pedagogy for at least a year. The researchers sent an invitation letter via email and social media platforms, providing a brief overview of the study and assuring recipients that their personal information would be kept confidential. The letter also informed potential participants of their right to decline participation by simply not responding. As a result, 11 teachers (7 males and 4 females) expressed their willingness to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which could be conducted in written or face-to-face format. Of these, nine responded through written interviews, while two participated in face-to-face interviews.

Participants ranged in age from 31 to 45 and had diverse teaching experience (6 to 25 years) and qualifications (including 2 Bachelor's degrees, 6 Master's degrees, and 3 PhDs). They were teaching General English courses to first- and second-year EFL students at the selected university during the study period. All participants had experience teaching storytelling for two academic terms using English as the medium of instruction. They also received a few newsletters from the department head and attended a three-day training session before the practical application.

3.3 Instruments

The instruments used in this study comprised guided, semi-structured interview questions meticulously crafted for this research. The researchers formulated these questions in line with the study's objectives, covering learners' understanding of storytelling as an educational methodology, as well as their experiences and perceptions. To ensure the questions' validity, a qualitative research specialist reviewed them, and the researchers then conducted pilot interviews with two randomly selected teachers. Based on the

expert's input and the pilot interview outcomes, the researchers refined certain questions for wording.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through written and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted during the semester break. Before data collection, researchers obtained informed consent from potential participants via email. Participants were assured of their privacy, the protection of their identities, and the confidentiality of their responses. Subsequently, the researchers contacted teachers who agreed to participate in the study again via social media platforms (Line and Messenger). Those who consented to written interviews received the guiding questions and were allocated one week to complete them. They were also advised to contact the researchers through Line for any further clarification regarding the questions or the ongoing research. Participants opting for face-to-face interviews had meetings scheduled at their convenience. To respect their rights and preferences, participants could respond either in writing or through face-to-face interviews. The researchers conducted the face-to-face interviews in English and, with participants' permission, audio-recorded them for transcription. The average interview lasted about 30 minutes.

The researchers transcribed the data by referring to the audio recordings and compiling them alongside responses from written interviews. The researchers then forwarded the final transcriptions to participants for member checking before analysis. At this stage, participants were invited to review the transcriptions for accuracy and propose any necessary revisions.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun et al., 2023). The thematic process encompassed familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and ultimately, report generation. After familiarizing ourselves with the data through transcriptions, the first and second authors independently conducted the initial coding. This approach established intercoder reliability by comparing the codes each researcher identified at a later stage. They then reconciled these codes through consensus discussion. During coding, the two researchers manually examined the transcriptions by reading and re-reading the data iteratively. In accordance with the research objectives, the researchers coded only data pertinent to emotions and language development. For instance, if participants reported, “storytelling helps learners enjoy learning,” the researchers coded enjoyment as a discrete unit under the emotion category. Similarly, if participants mentioned, “storytelling improves learners' vocabulary learning,” vocabulary development was coded as a single unit under the language development category.

The next phase involved categorizing codes and identifying overarching themes. Codes exhibiting similar patterns were consolidated into broader categories or themes. For instance, codes related to enjoyment and anxiety were grouped under the broader theme of storytelling as an emotionally safe space. Similarly, codes indicating linguistic-related aspects, such as vocabulary development and grammar enhancement, were assigned to the principal theme of storytelling as an educational adjunct for language development. The researchers then reviewed these overarching themes and established their names through a consensus process, continuously referencing the generated codes. Subsequently, an expert in qualitative research conducted an audit trail (Akkerman et al., 2008) of the entire data

analysis procedure and findings (including codes and themes). Additionally, the researchers circulated the findings among participants for review to bolster the credibility and trustworthiness of the results. The researchers incorporated suggestions from both the auditor and participants into the final report. Throughout the entire data analysis process, although the researchers adopted an insider positionality, they maintained reflexivity to prevent their prior knowledge from influencing the findings and to ensure that the results accurately represented the participants.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two broad themes: storytelling as an emotionally safe space and storytelling as a pedagogical tool for language development. The study also presented sub-themes within these two main themes, along with relevant excerpts from participants' responses.

4.1 Storytelling as an Emotionally Safe Space

4.1.1 Anxiety Reduction

The participants emphasized that using a storytelling approach in the classroom helps reduce learners' anxiety by creating a more relaxed classroom environment. In this context, Participant 2 mentioned that by listening to stories being told by the teachers, students felt positive emotions, thus lessening their anxiety in the class:

When story-listening is used in the classroom, students' emotional responses shift significantly, reducing anxiety and increasing positive emotions as they become more relaxed and immersed in language acquisition…

Participant 2 believed emotions shifted in the classroom when storytelling was used. Likewise, Participant 5 also supported the idea that storytelling reduces the anxiety of the learners:

I observed that, through storytelling, students experience decreased anxiety and heightened confidence and enjoyment... Through storytelling, students become more comfortable with language expression …

Participant 5 observed that learners felt confident and joy in storytelling, which created a comfortable language environment. Teachers must create a learning environment that encourages learners to feel confident. Participant 10 noted that because the stories in the learning materials were relatable, learners became confident:

They become confident. They don't have the reservation. Probably, I would say, yeah, they feel no anxiety because they have already learned the story. I mean, they can relate to the story because the stories we are using in the class are stories that are very relevant and stories that are very simple, that get the EFL students here in Thailand

The stories used as learning materials in the course were simple. Thus, the participants were able to connect the stories to their learners, particularly among Thai EFL learners.

4.1.2 Creation of a Stress-Free Learning Environment

Another reported benefit of storytelling pedagogy was its role in creating a stress-free learning environment for learners. Participants view storytelling as a method that does not put too much pressure on learners. Participant 4 mentioned that:

It (storytelling) also provides a non-threatening learning atmosphere, as students can listen and enjoy while absorbing the input naturally in a stress-free setting.

A stress-free learning environment allows learners to learn the lesson naturally. This idea also resonated with Participant 5 and Participant 1. Learners feel secure in participating in the class:

Through storytelling, students develop bonds and empathy while entering a relaxed environment that helps them feel secure when participating.

Participant 1 said storytelling promoted personal connection among learners, making them feel recognized as listeners. Participant 1 mentioned:

This level of personal connection creates a shared experience, making listeners feel seen, heard, and acknowledged.

Although Participant 5 and 1 did not mention storytelling explicitly to create a stress-free learning environment, having learners feel safe and recognized in the classroom already promotes a stress-free setting.

4.1.3 Enhancement of Language Classroom Enjoyment

Most participants reported that the storytelling approach increases learners' enjoyment of learning the foreign language. Here are some of the excerpts from their interviews:

Participant 7 commented, *"When telling stories, I have observed that they [students] can relate to the content more easily, making it more engaging and enjoyable."* Similarly, Participant 8 stated that *"they [students] remain calm, enjoy, and immerse themselves in the stories."*

From the perspective of Participants 7 and 8, storytelling promotes enjoyment among learners because stories are relatable. This means that learners can connect with what they are learning. Furthermore, storytelling also promotes a lively classroom atmosphere. Such perception was shared by Participant 1:

Storytelling breaks the tension and builds a strong connection between the teacher and students, fostering a safe learning space. As a result, students

feel more supported, more comfortable, more engaged, happier, and more confident to participate in class discussions and activities.

In addition, storytelling provides enjoyment not only as learners learn the story but also when they retell it in class. Participant 10 explained that:

They enjoy it through sharing the stories, so after I told them the story, they can also retell it to me, and they can interpret it on their own.

Participant 9 also mentioned that *"Students learn more vocabulary, boost confidence, telling a story is a lot more enjoyable than just hitting the books."* Other participants, like 2, 3, and 5, also believe that learners enjoy the class through storytelling. These perceptions show that storytelling promotes learners' enjoyment in the classroom.

4.1.4 Creation of a Fear-Free Learning Environment

Furthermore, participants expressed that storytelling significantly reduces learners' fear in language classrooms. For example, learners do not react negatively to failing or making mistakes in the classroom. Participant 5 claimed that storytelling boosts learners' confidence and reduces fear of language learning. Participant 5 mentioned:

...storytelling significantly eliminates students' fear of failure while promoting their ability to express themselves confidently. Storytelling also help students develop bonds with their teachers and create a relaxed environment that helps them feel them [students] secure…

In a fear-free learning environment, learners should feel comfortable and secure. Participant 11 also observed this in the class, particularly that the learning materials are contextualized and relatable to learners. Participant 11 opined:

I think storytelling has a big part in creating an emotionally safe environment because the material... is contextual and relatable to students.

In addition, when participants tell stories, learners can participate more easily, as the burden of learning the stories is reduced. Learners are just expected to listen to the stories. Participant 10 mentioned:

Students are no longer afraid to speak because there is no structure, no pressure, and no fear involved in the storytelling approach.

Indeed, when learners are not afraid to participate in the class, it shows that the learning environment is fear-free. Storytelling pedagogy can create such an environment.

4.2 Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool for Language Development

4.2.1 Improvement of Receptive (Listening and Reading) Comprehension Skills

In response to inquiries about the benefits of storytelling for language development, the participants acknowledged its potential to enhance learners' listening and reading comprehension skills. For example, Participant 2 observed that the storytelling helped improve the four macro language skills of the learners, particularly the receptive skills such as listening and reading. Participant 2 opined:

Storytelling is a powerful tool for language development that engages the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills as well as vocabulary and grammar. From my observation, when students listen to stories, they develop the ability to understand the language and follow structure…

Participant 5 also shares the perception that storytelling improves learners' listening abilities and writing competencies.

Based on my observation, through storytelling, students learn to better speak while improving their listening abilities and advancing both reading and writing competencies...

In addition, storytelling also promotes listening. Learners listen and follow the series of events in the story as the teacher-participants tell it. Such perception was shared by Participant 8:

This (storytelling) is one of the techniques that helps students learn to listen through a series of events and in a more contextual way. Students will learn the expressions and emotions from the story.

Listening skills play an important role in storytelling. Listening supports comprehension, and comprehension supports learning. Participant 6 mentioned:

In storytelling, students listen to the story the teacher shares. This is already listening comprehension—an essential component of language learning.

Listening and reading, both receptive skills, are directly involved in storytelling. Participants perceived that these receptive skills are honed as learners engage with the stories.

4.2.2 Enhancement of Productive (Speaking and Writing) Skills

While employing storytelling, the teacher-participants also assessed learners' productive skills through a series of speaking and listening tasks. The participants mentioned that storytelling is an effective tool for enhancing learners' speaking skills and writing creativity. They particularly noted that through story retelling and rewriting, learners tend to speak and write better. For example, Participant 1 mentioned that:

Storytelling builds confidence in speaking by expanding students' awareness of the different ways of saying a phrase or an expression…

Likewise, Participant 7 confirmed that storytelling helps learners enhance their speaking skills. Participant 7 stated:

I have observed that stories with engaging content help students internalize pronunciation and intonation naturally. During retelling activities, most students attempt to reproduce these elements, enhancing their speaking skills. Additionally, effective content increases the number of words that become part of students' active vocabulary.

Aside from speaking, participants also confirmed that storytelling pedagogy allows learners to practice writing through classroom activities. For example, Participant 10 mentioned that:

...we have activities in our class to come up with their own stories. From the story they read, they can create their own story. So that's another way for these students to learn how to write…

As one classroom activity is rewriting the story, the teacher-participants can also help enhance learners' writing skills. Participant 5 mentioned in the interview that:

Students who rewrote folk tales achieved better writing coherence and creativity, together with expanded vocabulary skills.

Because the teacher-participants conducted assessments of both receptive and productive skills, they could provide valuable insights into the role of storytelling in learners' language development.

4.2.3 Enhancement of Pronunciation, Vocabulary and Grammar Knowledge

Beyond fostering receptive and productive skills, teacher-participants highlighted storytelling's role in enhancing learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge.

Participants used classroom activities such as story retelling and role-play in the storytelling pedagogy. These activities directly involved learners' pronunciation and vocabulary. Participant 2 confirmed that pronunciation,

vocabulary, and grammar improved in the storytelling class. Participant 2 stated:

When they retell stories or do role-playing, they improve pronunciation and confidence, while answering questions and writing stories makes them become creative. Through stories, they learn new words in meaningful context, and hearing sentences in context helps them learn grammar rules…

Another participant also confirmed that storytelling can improve learners' vocabulary. For example, Participant 8 views that words are better learned in stories:

Students can comprehend vocabulary better through storylines and events, and learn speaking through the characters' expressions…

Likewise, Participant 10 supported the idea that learners learn words in stories. As presented in this excerpt:

Exactly, because the thing with reading stories, when you tell the stories, you don't just learn the structure of the sentence, but you also learn some words or vocabulary that are used…

Other participants also confirmed that storytelling activities enhance learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. These sub-skills are also core components of four macro language skills. Participant 5 noted that:

Story-related questions asked by the teacher are also comprehension-related, which I believe requires interaction. This supports the development of communication, where students can express themselves through speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Vocabulary and grammar are integral parts of these language skills.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight into how Thai EFL teachers conceptualize storytelling not only as a teaching technique but as a

pedagogical practice that mediates both emotional and linguistic dimensions of language learning. While previous research has documented the benefits of storytelling for learner engagement and language development (Gao et al., 2023; Khodabandeh, 2018; Lucarevschi, 2016), this study offers a teacher-centered perspective on how educators interpret storytelling as a strategy for shaping classroom emotional climates while supporting language development. In doing so, the findings suggest that storytelling functions as affective pedagogy, where emotional safety and language learning are mutually reinforcing rather than separate instructional goals.

One key insight is that teachers view storytelling to mediate classroom emotions, particularly anxiety and fear associated with foreign language use. Participants consistently reported that storytelling reduces learners' anxiety and creates a relaxed environment in which students feel more comfortable participating. These perceptions align with research emphasizing the central role of emotions in language learning processes (Plonsky et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2019). However, the findings extend this literature by illustrating how teachers intentionally use storytelling to reshape the emotional dynamics of classroom interaction.

From this perspective, storytelling does not merely generate positive emotions incidentally. Instead, it functions as a pedagogical structure that shifts learners' attention from linguistic accuracy to meaning-making and narrative engagement. This shift appears to reduce the evaluative pressure typically associated with foreign language classrooms, where learners often fear making mistakes or being judged by peers. Such findings resonate with research on foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), which identifies anxiety as a major barrier to participation and willingness to communicate (Dewaele, 2019). In other words, by embedding language use within narratives rather than performance-based tasks, storytelling appears to

reframe classroom interaction as a shared communicative experience rather than a site of linguistic evaluation.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of relatable, contextualized stories in fostering emotional comfort among learners. Teachers noted that students felt more confident and less anxious when stories reflected familiar experiences or culturally accessible themes. This suggests that storytelling may serve as affective scaffolding, enabling learners to approach language use through emotionally meaningful contexts. In this sense, storytelling contributes to emotionally safe learning environments not simply by making lessons enjoyable, but by providing a narrative structure that lets learners engage with language without constant fear of failure.

Beyond reducing anxiety, the findings show that teachers see storytelling to cultivate positive emotional engagement, including enjoyment, confidence, and curiosity. These perceptions align with the growing influence of Positive Psychology in SLA, which emphasizes fostering positive emotional experiences in language learning environments (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014). Positive emotions such as enjoyment and interest have been shown to broaden learners' cognitive engagement and enhance motivation (Shao et al., 2019).

However, the findings suggest that storytelling may foster positive emotions through its relational and participatory nature. Teachers observed that storytelling strengthened relationships among students and between students and teachers, creating a shared classroom experience. This relational dimension echoes findings from Printer (2023), where collaborative storytelling supported learners' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Similarly, Zhang and Wang (2026) highlight how positive emotionality among teachers and learners can strengthen classroom rapport and engagement.

The present findings suggest that storytelling may function as a social-emotional practice in language classrooms. By inviting learners to listen, interpret, and retell narratives, storytelling creates opportunities for shared meaning-making that strengthens interpersonal connections. These connections appear to contribute to a classroom atmosphere where learners feel recognized and supported, which in turn encourages participation. In this sense, storytelling may function not only as a language learning strategy but also as a practice that reconfigures the social relationships through which language learning takes place.

Beyond its emotional benefits, teachers in this study viewed storytelling as a powerful tool for developing learners' language skills. Participants reported improvements in both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). These observations align with earlier research showing that storytelling provides learners with rich, contextualized language input that supports comprehension and language acquisition (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022; Khodabandeh, 2018).

However, the findings also suggest a deeper pedagogical function. Teachers described how storytelling creates a sequence of activities that move learners from listening to participation, such as story retelling, role-play, and story rewriting. This progression can be understood as interactional scaffolding, where learners first encounter language through meaningful input before gradually producing it themselves. In this sense, storytelling provides a narrative framework that integrates receptive and productive skills within a single pedagogical cycle.

These observations align with Kirsch's (2016) findings that storytelling supports vocabulary retention when combined with multimodal strategies such as gestures, repetition, and role-play. Similarly, Alkaaf (2017) found that storytelling activities improved learners' vocabulary, creativity, and

writing abilities while increasing motivation to participate in language tasks. The teachers in the present study similarly emphasized that learners acquire vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar more effectively when these linguistic elements appear in meaningful narrative contexts.

These findings therefore suggest that storytelling supports language development not only through exposure to input but also through structured opportunities for language reuse and reinterpretation. By encouraging learners to retell or adapt stories, storytelling helps students move from passive comprehension to active language production.

Finally, the findings highlight teachers' role as active agents in shaping emotionally responsive pedagogies. While much of the storytelling literature focuses on learner outcomes, this study shows how teachers interpret storytelling as a strategy for managing classroom emotions, fostering engagement, and facilitating language learning simultaneously. This perspective aligns with research emphasizing the importance of teachers' emotional awareness and pedagogical decision-making in language education (Richards, 2022; Zhang & Wang, 2026).

Teachers in this study did not simply implement storytelling as a predefined instructional method. Instead, they adapted stories to match learners' linguistic levels, cultural experiences, and emotional needs. Through these pedagogical choices, teachers actively shaped the classroom's emotional climate. This finding suggests that storytelling functions as a teacher-mediated practice, where its effectiveness depends on how educators interpret and integrate it within their teaching contexts.

Thus, the findings suggest that storytelling operates at the intersection of emotional, social, and linguistic processes in language classrooms. In other words, rather than functioning solely as a language-teaching technique, storytelling appears to serve as a pedagogical framework through which

teachers can cultivate emotionally supportive learning environments while facilitating meaningful language development.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored how Thai EFL teachers view storytelling as a teaching approach for creating emotionally supportive classrooms while also supporting language development. The findings show that teachers do not see storytelling as just another technique for delivering language input. Instead, they see it as a practice that shapes the classroom's emotional atmosphere and influences how learners engage with English.

Many teachers explained that storytelling eases learners' anxiety and makes it easier for them to participate. When language is presented through stories rather than isolated drills, the focus shifts from getting every word right to understanding and sharing meaning. This change seems to make the classroom feel less tense. Students become more willing to experiment with the language and express their ideas. Teachers also observed that storytelling tends to spark positive emotions such as enjoyment, curiosity, and confidence. These emotional responses can strengthen classroom relationships and gradually build a sense of community among learners.

Teachers also spoke about the linguistic value of storytelling. In their experience, stories provide a natural way to introduce vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation while supporting the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Activities like listening to a story, retelling it, acting it out, or rewriting parts of it encourage learners to move from understanding language to using it actively. In this way, storytelling becomes more than a listening activity. It becomes a space where learners interact, imagine, and create language together. Thus, the findings suggest that

storytelling works as an integrated pedagogical practice that brings together emotional engagement, social interaction, and language learning.

These findings also contribute to broader conversations in language education about the role of emotions in learning. Storytelling can be understood as affective pedagogy that connects emotional experience with language development. While earlier studies have often focused on how storytelling supports vocabulary learning or comprehension, the present study highlights another dimension. Storytelling appears to reshape the classroom's emotional dynamics. Through narratives, learners encounter language in ways that feel meaningful and less evaluative, which can lower anxiety and encourage participation.

This perspective also aligns with what scholars describe as the emotional turn in second language acquisition. Emotions in language classrooms are not only internal psychological states. Teachers also shape them through how they structure activities and interact with students. From this perspective, storytelling becomes one tool teachers use to cultivate a supportive classroom climate where students feel comfortable engaging with the language.

Another contribution of this study lies in its focus on teachers' perspectives. Much of the storytelling literature focuses on student outcomes, such as vocabulary learning or motivation. By examining teachers' experiences and interpretations, this study highlights the importance of teacher agency. Teachers decide how they use storytelling, which stories they choose, and how classroom activities unfold. Their beliefs and experiences therefore play a crucial role in shaping how storytelling works in practice.

The findings also suggest several practical implications for language teaching. First, teachers can incorporate storytelling as a regular classroom practice to make language learning more engaging and emotionally supportive. Stories provide meaningful contexts for language use, allowing

learners to encounter vocabulary and grammatical structures in ways that feel more natural and memorable.

Second, storytelling activities can support both receptive and productive language skills. Teachers might begin with listening or reading activities that introduce a story, then follow up with tasks such as retelling, role-playing, or rewriting parts of the narrative. These activities encourage students to actively use the language while reinforcing comprehension and vocabulary development.

Third, the choice of stories matters. When teachers select narratives that reflect learners' interests, experiences, or cultural backgrounds, students are more likely to connect emotionally with the material. This connection can make classroom activities more meaningful and engaging.

Teacher education programs may also benefit from giving greater attention to storytelling-based pedagogy. Training sessions could help teachers learn how to choose appropriate stories, design interactive storytelling activities, and use narratives to create supportive classroom environments where learners feel comfortable experimenting with language.

7. Limitations

The study also has several limitations. First, the research focused on teachers' perceptions rather than direct classroom observations or measurements of student learning outcomes. The findings, therefore, reflect how teachers interpret the impact of storytelling rather than providing direct evidence of its effects on learners' development or emotional experiences.

Second, the study was conducted within a specific context involving Thai EFL teachers. Educational policies, institutional conditions, and cultural expectations vary across contexts, and these differences may influence how

teachers use storytelling in language classrooms. For this reason, the findings may not apply in the same way to other educational settings.

Third, the study relied on self-reported interview data. While interviews provide valuable insight into teachers' beliefs and experiences, they do not always capture everyday classroom practice. Teachers may describe what they value or intend to do, which does not always fully reflect classroom realities.

Future research could build on these findings in several ways. Classroom-based observational studies would offer a closer look at how storytelling unfolds in real teaching situations and how learners respond during storytelling activities. Such research could reveal the specific interactional processes through which storytelling supports both language learning and emotional engagement.

Further studies could also explore students' perspectives. Understanding how learners themselves experience storytelling may shed light on how narratives influence their motivation, confidence, and willingness to participate in class.

Quantitative or mixed-methods studies could also examine storytelling's effects on specific aspects of language development, such as vocabulary growth, speaking fluency, or listening comprehension. Evidence of this kind would complement teachers' perceptions and provide a more complete picture of storytelling's pedagogical value.

Finally, future work might explore how storytelling can be combined with other approaches in language teaching, such as communicative language teaching, task-based learning, or digital storytelling. Examining these possibilities may help educators design creative and effective ways to support language learning in diverse classroom contexts.

Declarations

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that Grammarly was used as an AI-assisted tool to improve the language and clarity of the English writing.

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