

Using “Storytelling Challenge” to Enhance Primary Fifth-grade EFL Students' Engagement in English Speaking Class

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Abstract – In the context of 21st-century globalization, English-speaking skills have become a crucial medium for intercultural communication. How to engage students in learning to speak English effectively and actively has become a key concern in the field of language education. However, in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in China, particularly at the primary level, students often show low levels of participation in English-speaking activities. Despite years of instruction, their oral expression in class remains limited, largely due to low intrinsic motivation, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of interactive opportunities. To address this issue, this action research introduced a classroom activity called the “Storytelling Challenge.” As a form of transformative education, the activity is based on task-based learning and aims to encourage fifth-grade students at a public primary school in China to learn and use spoken English more confidently and actively. By integrating storytelling, peer sharing, and a transparent reward system, the activity sought to create a supportive and motivating classroom environment. The action research employed a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through pre- and post-surveys, classroom observation checklists, and semi-structured interviews with participating students. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in overall student engagement, particularly among those previously identified with high and low levels of classroom participation. The activity successfully fostered a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere, contributing to reduced language anxiety and increased learner confidence. Additionally, the implementation of reinforcement strategies, including a fair and transparent reward system, proved essential in sustaining motivation and participation. This study offers practical insights into transformative English language pedagogy by demonstrating how a student-centered, task-based, and innovative activity can reshape the learning environment and enhance students' engagement in speaking English.

Keywords – action research, transformative teaching, EFL learners, student engagement, storytelling, oral English.

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become an important medium of intercultural communication in the context of globalization. For ESL (English as a foreign language) learners, the ability to communicate effectively in English is crucial (Akhter et al.). As a result, many ESL countries have incorporated the enhancement of English-speaking teaching into their national education policy. For instance, China's 2010 Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform Plan and Japan's 2017 Core Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

However, despite these efforts, the actual speaking proficiency of many EFL learners is still significantly lower than expected. A study by Maulana et al. (2016) identified twelve major barriers to speaking English, with vocabulary deficits, anxiety, and pronunciation problems being the most prominent. Amoah and Yeboah (2021) at the Nanjing University of Science and Technology also showed that most learners had difficulty in participating or responding to conversational English. These findings indicate that EFL learners face both linguistic and psychological barriers in oral communication.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are various effective teaching methods to improve English speaking skills. For example, Khan et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of integrating vocabulary learning into the speaking classroom. Meanwhile, a large number of studies have shown that the more actively learners participate in speaking activities, the more significant the effect of improving their spoken English is (Aubrey et al., 2020; Istiara et al., 2023; Tiana & Rahayuningsih, 2022). It is pointed out in Kachru's (1997) theory of World English that ESL learners are mostly from “expanding circle” countries and seldom use English in their daily communication, which leads to their limited exposure to English and reduced interest in learning. Under such conditions, English language teaching often falls into the difficulties of test orientation and over-reliance on textbooks (Hu & McKay, 2012), which makes it difficult to stimulate learners' interest. Thus, limited language exposure and an inadequate knowledge base exacerbate learners' fear of making mistakes, and this lack of confidence further exacerbates speaking anxiety. As observed by Mulyono (2019), anxious learners tend to avoid speaking tasks, resulting in lower classroom engagement.

The researcher observed in her previous teaching experience that storytelling significantly improves children's expressive language skills and willingness to speak. This view is confirmed by the findings of Dvalidze and Shota (2022), who state that storytelling is effective in motivating learners of English as a foreign language to learn and express themselves by combining real-life experiences with imagination. As a form of task-based learning, it leads learners to engage in activities such as creating short stories and sharing their work, which increases motivation for oral learning and provides frequent opportunities for oral practice (Sholeh et al., 2020). However, motivation alone may not be adequate, reinforcement for engagement, such as rewards and compliments can further increase learners' engagement and self-confidence in speaking tasks (Anthony et al.)

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Based on the above discussion, the researchers developed the Storytelling Challenge activity to increase oral engagement among fifth grade EFL learners. This activity began in September 2024 and ran for six weeks, with a 20-minute lesson in each week's speaking class. Each lesson is designed around a theme that echoes the curriculum content and is age-appropriate for the learners. Students work in pairs to write short stories and present them to the class. Stickers are awarded to students who voluntarily share their stories and additional prizes are awarded to students who express themselves clearly and confidently. Mystery gifts were redeemed biweekly. To assess the effectiveness of this approach, the researcher will use pre- and post-surveys, interviews, and structured observation checklists to examine changes in student engagement with presentations.

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the use of "Storytelling Challenge" is effective in enhancing the English-speaking class engagement of Grade 5 EFL students in the context of a public school in China.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of English-Speaking Learning for EFL Students in the Context of China.

According to Maulana et al., (2016)'s study on the problems of speaking skills of EFL students in Indonesian schools, the most significant problems of their English-speaking learning are lack of vocabulary, lack of Grammar, nervousness in speaking, and poor pronunciation. It shows that the lack of basic knowledge of EFL learners' linguistics is a major challenge. In addition, Amoah and Yeboah (2021) in their survey of English language learning among non-English major EFL students at Nanjing Tech University in China found that not only the above-mentioned problems in the article. However, they also face difficulties initiating conversations or answering questions in English. Reza Pahlavannezhad and Heidarypur (2021) also pointed out, after comparing students English learning in bilingual and monolingual environments, that EFL students are usually monolingual and English seems to be irrelevant to the students as it is not a part of their daily lives, which leads to the possibility of lower intrinsic motivation to learn.

Combining the above findings, EFL learners often lack linguistic knowledge when learning and using speaking skills, leading to speaking anxiety due to a lack of linguistic knowledge and confidence in using English.

The second challenge is the lack of intrinsic motivation to learn spoken English due to low exposure to English is also faced, which leads to the loss of prerequisites for EFL students' willingness to learn spoken English.

Engagement in English Speaking Class

According to the findings of numerous scholars, EFL students' engagement in speaking learning tasks is positively related to their speaking skills, and higher and more engaged engagement often represents improved

speaking skills (Aubrey et al., 2020; Istiara et al., 2023; Tiana & Rahayuningsih, 2022). Based on Yunus et al. (2023)'s research on EFL students' English-Speaking performance, one of the complaints that teachers have about English Speaking classes today is that students are reluctant to speak English. While students may engage in other skills such as reading, writing, and listening in class, they often show reluctance when it comes to speaking in their second language (L2). From this, we can see that EFL learners' engagement in speaking classes or activities is low. In the same study, Yunus et al. (2023) derived the reasons for students' lack of engagement in English-speaking classes through interviews with EFL learners in Indonesia. Most of the participants had learned English from an early age but focused mainly on grammar and vocabulary and lacked speaking lessons. However, the participants in Yunus's research generally perceived their English proficiency problems as a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. At the same time, the participants believed that their interest or lack of interest in the topic directly affected their engagement in speaking classes, and were more willing to speak and engage in discussions on topics that interested them. The findings revealed the reasons why most EFL students experience low English-speaking classroom engagement: lack of speaking proficiency leading to speaking anxiety and lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English Speaking skills.

The "Storytelling Challenge" as an English-Speaking Learning Activity

In order to address the challenges faced by EFL students in engaging in the English-speaking classroom, as mentioned above. The researcher developed the "Storytelling Challenge" as a possible solution strategy that combines storytelling, task-based learning, and reinforcement theory such as earning stickers or rewards, to increase their willingness to engage.

Significance of Using Storytelling in the English Classroom

In this study, "storytelling" refers only to oral storytelling, which consists of verbal narratives shared in a variety of settings, from informal family gatherings to formal performances (Alex, 2024). Hartono & Ananada (2020), in a comparative experiment on the use of storytelling as a method of teaching oral language to eighth-grade students, noted that when storytelling is used as a means of teaching English as a foreign language, students are asked to use correct vocabulary, grammar, and expression skills. Repeated storytelling practice can increase students' exposure to English and thus improve their overall English-speaking skills. Secondly, by telling stories in front of the class, students feel empowered to express themselves, share their emotions, and overcome their fear of making mistakes, which means that storytelling helps build students' confidence and motivation to speak English (Hartono & Ananada, 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2023; Castañeda et al., 2018).

Task-based learning

In summary, storytelling in this study fits the definition of task-based learning. According to Sholeh et al. (2020), task-based learning (TBL) is considered a type of communicative language teaching because it emphasizes real-life meaningful communication as the focus of a language course.

In order to solve the problem of low participation of EFL learners in speaking classes, task-based learning (TBL) is considered as an effective strategy. According to Page and Mede's (2018) study on traditional teaching and task-based learning to improve students' engagement in English activities, most students indicated that they preferred to participate in activities where task-based learning was the main teaching tool because it helped them learn English in authentic scenarios and made learning more interesting.

Reinforcement

According to Cherry's (2023) definition of reinforcement, it increases the likelihood of a response occurring and is categorized into positive and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement refers to the giving of positive, welcome stimuli such as rewards and praise, which increases the number of times the desired behaviour occurs (Ackerman, 2019). In this study, the researcher will use stickers and mystery gifts as incentives to stimulate re-engagement by rewarding students after they actively participate in an activity and put in effort.

However, when the researcher read and analyzed the literature on promoting students' engagement in oral English learning, no researcher has proposed the combination of storytelling, TBL, and reinforcement as an instructional activity or method to increase students' engagement. Therefore, in this study, the researcher developed the Storytelling Challenge, which combines all three as a strategy to increase fifth grade EFL students' engagement in the speaking classroom, and the effects of its implementation will be studied and analyzed in this action research.

IV. METHOD

The study was conducted at a public Primary School in China. The participants are 40–50 fifth-grade students from the school, who will participate in this study as EFL learners. The students' varying levels of English proficiency and participation provide a diverse sample for the study, enabling a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the “storytelling challenge” on participation levels across different proficiency levels.

This study aims to explore changes in fifth-grade students' participation in English speaking classes through action research, particularly after the introduction of a “storytelling challenge.”

Ethical Procedures

The informed consent of all participants is guaranteed, and only data from students who explicitly agree to participate in the study will be included. Data will be used solely for academic purposes and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the research team. Data appearing in the study will be anonymized using ethical methods, such as using pseudonyms to represent specific participants.

Pre-survey and Post-survey

Adapted from Abbasi et al. (2023) on the participation of university students in online English classes where English is a foreign language. This study focuses on students' self-reported participation levels in English speaking classes, encompassing three dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Students will have the opportunity to express their level of agreement with each question by selecting an appropriate number from 1 to 5. 1 indicates strong disagreement, 2 indicates disagreement, 3 indicates neutrality, 4 indicates agreement, and 5 indicates strong agreement. During the data analysis phase, the researcher will calculate the mean value for each question in the pre-survey and post-survey. The mean value for the same question across the two surveys will be compared to determine changes in participation levels (O'Leary, 2020).

Observation Checklist

This checklist is adapted from Latifaturrizqia et al. (2023) “Participation Checklist” for using songs in English-speaking instruction. It includes five dimensions related to learner participation. They are Positive Body Language (PBL): Students demonstrate body postures indicating they are paying attention to the teacher. Continuous Focus (CF): Students remain focused on the learning activity with minimal distractions. Verbal Participation (VP): Students express deep thoughts, reflective responses, and appropriate questions related to learning. Student Confidence (SC): Students demonstrate confidence and initiative, can complete tasks with limited guidance, and can complete tasks independently. Fun and Enthusiasm (F&E): Students show interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor. Each aspect is rated on a scale of 1 to 3. (1) is “low,” (2) is “medium,” and (3) is “high.” and trends at the end, quantitative methods will be used for data analysis (O'Leary, 2020). When implementing the storytelling challenge in English speaking classes, researcher will observe students' participation levels across the five dimensions of the storytelling challenge and assign scores. Trends and patterns in participation levels will be analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the method.

Semi-structured interview questions

Adapted from Abbasi et al. (2023) questionnaire on EFL university students' participation in online English courses. The researcher modified some questions to open-

ended questions based on the characteristics of semi-structured interviews and the research questions of this study. The same set of interview questions will be used for three different student groups with varying levels of participation. During the data analysis phase, the interview content will be transcribed to analyze whether the “storytelling challenge” improved students' participation in English speaking classes from their own perspective. At the same time, the extent of participation improvement among students with different participation levels can be inferred.

V. FINDINGS

Pre and Post-Survey Results

Based on the categorization and comparison of the pre- and post-survey data (see Figure 1), it can be seen that there was a very substantial increase in students' willingness to engage, with a 0.29/5 increase. Furthermore, students' perception of the impact of rewards also had a positive increase of 0.25/5; and there was a certain amount of increase in students' interest in English speaking classes and learning, as well as their sense of self-confidence and self-growth when speaking English. Finally, it is important to note that the data on students' negative attitudes towards learning English speaking, such as low interest and resistance, have decreased. This data proves that this intervention, from the perspective of students' perceptions, has increased students' interest in learning English speaking and their self-confidence in speaking English through the combination of storytelling, TBL, and reinforcement, thus effectively increasing EFL students' engagement in English classes.

	Question	Pre-Survey Mean	Post-Survey Mean	Change
Interest in Learning	1, 4	4.12	4.20	+0.08
Willingness to Engage	2, 3, 9	3.81	4.10	+0.29
Confidence and Self-Efficacy	7, 8, 10, 11	3.48	3.54	+0.06
Impact of Rewards	12, 13	3.95	4.20	+0.25
Self-belief and Growth	8, 10	3.57	3.73	+0.16
Disinterest or Resistance	5, 6	2.50	2.45	-0.05

Figure 1: Mean Values of Student Engagement in Pre and Post-Surveys

After the intervention, students' engagement increased in all three categories (see Figure 2). Behavioural engagement showed the most significant increase of 0.27/5 points, followed by Emotional Engagement of 0.16/5. This shows that after the intervention, most of the students were more positive in their attitudes and willingness to participate in English speaking activities and were able to engage in higher frequency of classroom engagement, such as classroom discussion, engagement in activities.

	Corresponding Dimensions	Pre-Survey Mean	Post-Survey Mean	Change
Cognitive Engagement	Interest in Learning Confidence and Self-Efficacy	3.8	3.87	+0.07
Emotional Engagement	Self-Belief and Growth	3.57	3.73	+0.16
Behavioural Engagement	Willingness to Engage Impact of Rewards	3.88	4.15	+0.27

Figure 2: Mean Values of Cognitive, Emotional, And Behavioural Engagement in Pre and Post-Surveys

Observation Checklist Results

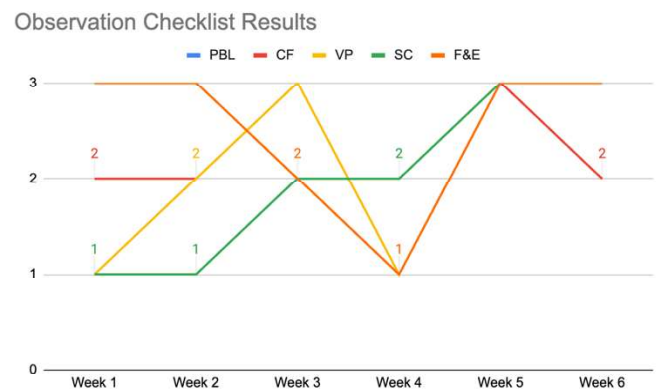


Figure 3: Line Graph of 6-week Observation Checklist
Note. PBL = Positive Body Language. CF = Continuous Focus. VP = Verbal engagement. SC = Student Confidence. F&E = Fun & Enthusiasm.

From the data, in weeks 1-3, the students were interested in the novelty of the activity and were able to maintain their attention, and through practice and encouragement from the teacher, their self-confidence and body language gradually increased. However, in the fourth week, there was a significant drop in sustained attention and interest in the activity. After the researcher discussed with some of the students, the reason for the drop in these data was that the students lost their freshness and attention to the “Storytelling Challenge” because of the fixed format and theme. Therefore, in the fifth and sixth weeks, the researcher changed the fixed topic to a freely chosen topic, the students' interest increased significantly, their attention was sustained, and most of the students actively participated in the activity. However, compared to the beginning, their self-confidence in storytelling increased, body language became more positive, and some of the students were able to tell a story without using scripts.

Interview Transcripts Results

Question	Student Responses (Early Stage)	Student Responses (Late Stage)	Preliminary Coding	Theme Classification

Willingness to Engage in English Speaking Activities	Not very willing to participate because of I don't think I can speak well.	Willing to participate now because my teacher always encourages me and my classmates don't laugh at me.	Unwilling Willing	->	Increased Willingness to Engage
Feelings During engagement (Relaxed, Nervous)	A bit nervous, I was a bit unskilled in speaking the text aloud this week, but my teacher encouraged me to practice more.	Slightly more relaxed, I tried some simple sentences in the storytelling and it felt good.	Nervous Relaxed	->	More Positive Attitude Toward engagement
Interest in English Speaking Classes	Not very interesting because I couldn't understand and didn't know what to say.	Found it interesting, especially the group work part, I felt very involved.	Not Interesting Interesting	->	Increased Interest in English Speaking Classes
Frequency of Using English for Conversation	Occasionally used, for example, some words that have appeared in the text.	Often, practicing storytelling in English with my classmates.	Occasionally Used Frequently Used	->	Increased Frequency of Using English
Difficulty in Having Conversations Using English	Difficult, sometimes not using the right words.	A little easier, because practicing more makes me more confident.	Difficult Easier	->	Perceived Conversation Difficulty Decreased

Impact of Rewards on Willingness to Engage	Doesn't matter much, rewards seem very far away for me.	Very willingly, because it was an accomplishment to see my progress and to get the rewards.	Small Impact of Rewards Large Impact of Rewards	->	Increased Willingness to Engage
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Figure 4: Coding of Semi Structured Interview Transcription

Based on the coded data, it can be seen that all dimensions of students' engagement in English speaking classes increased to some extent during the intervention. First, students' interest in English speaking increased, their attitudes were more positive, and they were more willing to participate in English speaking activities. In the interviews about their feelings about participating in English speaking activities, students mentioned "Slightly more relaxed, I tried some simple sentences in the storytelling and it felt good." It can be seen that, compared with traditional modes of teaching spoken English, such as reading aloud the given text or tests, the "Storytelling Challenge" activity does not highly require students' correct knowledge of the language, and the researcher encourages students' initiative, which reduces the students' stress in using English. Some students also mentioned about their interest in English speaking activities, "Found it interesting, especially the group work part, I felt very involved." This shows that the activities are more innovative in exercising spoken English through storytelling and group discussion, and also give students the opportunity to use English in a real environment, which makes students feel a higher sense of involvement and their attitudes towards spoken English learning gradually become positive. Secondly, after the intervention, the students' frequency of using English for conversation increased, and they also thought that the difficulty of speaking English decreased. According to the students' response "A little easier, because practicing more makes me more confident." about the frequency of using English, it can be proved that the "Storytelling Challenge "By increasing the opportunities for discussion, practice and performance, the Storytelling Challenge increases students' chances of practicing and using English, and over time students' confidence in speaking English gradually increases, making them more willing to use English in their studies or in their lives. Finally, rewards also have a great positive impact on student engagement in spoken English. One of the students' responses to the question of whether rewards affected their willingness to participate was, "Very willingly, because it was an accomplishment to see my progress and to get the rewards." This means that getting rewards made students visualize their progress, which also led to an increased sense of accomplishment in speaking English. At the same time, since the requirements for getting a reward in this intervention were not high, almost all students were able to get the mystery gift at least once, which demonstrated the fairness of education, and every student was able to get positive feedback from the

teacher, which increased their motivation and self-confidence in participating in speaking activities.

In conclusion, the results of the transcribed data from the interviews show that the “Storytelling Challenge”, from the students' point of view, through novel learning methods, extensive practice opportunities and positive feedback, has increased students' positive attitudes and interest in learning spoken English, as well as their confidence in speaking English, which has effectively increased students' engagement in the spoken English class. The students' engagement in the English-speaking class was effectively enhanced.

VI. DISCUSSION

Impact on Students' Engagement

The results of the study showed that the storytelling challenge was effective in increasing students' engagement in oral English activities. The results of the questionnaire showed a significant increase in students' behavioural engagement (+0.27) and affective engagement (+0.16). According to Alonso-Tapia et al.'s (2022) study on engagement, this suggests that students showed greater initiative in both academic and non-academic activities (in this case, spoken English activities in the classroom as well as the use of English in their lives). These findings are consistent with the previously mentioned studies (Hartono & Ananada, 2020; Ramadhani et al.), which suggest that storytelling promotes oral English expression, stimulates interest, and increases engagement. Student Becca (pseudonym) said in her Week 4 interview, “I find it interesting because I like to add my own ideas to the story. Although there was a decrease in student engagement in the middle of the period, the subsequent flexible adaptation of teaching strategies successfully restored student engagement. This phenomenon illustrates the importance of adaptive teaching.

The Role of Rewards on Motivation and Engagement

The impact of rewards on engagement is particularly evident in the results of this study. The survey data (Figure 2) showed a significant increase in students' endorsement of rewards (+0.25), indicating that the majority of students reported that rewards motivated them to participate more actively. The interview results confirmed this view, with Amy stating in week 6, ‘I am more willing to participate because rewards make me feel that my efforts are recognized’. Showing that rewards are not only an extrinsic motivator but also a sign of academic progress that enhances intrinsic motivation (Pandya, 2024). Most importantly, it is difficult for EFL students to receive positive feedback for English use in their lives, and the reward incentive system in this activity fills this gap as an effective positive reinforcement mechanism. It enhances EFL learning's motivation and interest in learning English.

Implications for EFL Teaching Practices

This study demonstrates that the storytelling challenge, as an integrated and novel teaching method, greatly increased Chinese fifth-grade students' engagement in spoken English, providing practical insights for EFL teaching. As a task-based approach, this activity promotes the development of language skills and interest in learning through purposeful storytelling activities in English (Sholeh et al., 2020). Similar oral training activities can help teachers increase classroom engagement. In addition, the reward system greatly increased students' willingness to speak. When implemented properly, reinforcement through praise, feedback, or incentives can increase intrinsic motivation. It is also clear from the students' interview responses that the supportive and non-judgmental environment provided by the teacher was critical in reducing anxiety and increasing participation. By avoiding punishment for mistakes, providing encouragement, and creating an inclusive atmosphere, initially anxious students gradually built confidence over the course of six weeks. Given that EFL learners rarely use English outside of the classroom and face challenges with fluency (Yu et al., 2009), it is crucial to create safe, inclusive spaces for expression and provide constructive feedback. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of the storytelling challenge and provides EFL teachers with pedagogies that can be learnt to enhance engagement in English speaking activities.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study demonstrates the positive impact of storytelling challenges on student engagement, it has limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 50 students in the same class from China may not be sufficiently representative of the wider community of EFL learners. For example, Japan adopted the Communicative Language Teaching method in 2011 (Gaynor, 2022), then Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language may have been exposed to more oral English training, and the effectiveness of the present activity for these learners may not be evident. Future research should include participants from different regions and backgrounds to increase applicability (Winton & Sabol, 2021). Secondly, due to the length of the researcher's internship, only a six-week intervention could be analysed cross-sectionally, thus limiting the detection of long-term effects. Longitudinal studies, such as that of Zhang et al. (2023), are better suited to capturing sustained engagement. Finally, the data may have been influenced by subjective factors, as students' responses may have been satisfactory to their teachers. Future research could improve the reliability of the data by using objective indicators such as frequency of participation or speaking proficiency tests.

VII. CONCLUSION

EFL learners' low engagement in spoken English activities is often due to a lack of intrinsic motivation, anxiety and fear of making mistakes (Yunus et al.). To address this issue, the researcher designed the Storytelling Challenge for fifth-grade students, which integrates

storytelling, task-based learning, and reinforcement mechanisms. The results of the study showed that the activity compensated for the lack of intrinsic motivation and led to a significant increase in student engagement, especially for students who were initially more or less engaged. However, the activity had little impact on moderately engaged learners. Therefore, when implementing the activity, teachers should focus on the different backgrounds and learning situations of their students so as to differentiate their teaching and ensure the effectiveness of the activity. At the same time, a supportive and inclusive classroom environment helps to foster positive attitudes, increase interest and motivation, and reduce resistance. In conclusion, the Storytelling Challenge offers a promising solution for improving engagement in English speaking classrooms by combining storytelling, task-based learning and reinforcement theory.

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