

# What Happens When You Introduce Storytelling Pedagogy to Fifth Grade Literacy Classrooms in Zambia?

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0544>

Received: 11 September 2025; Accepted: 16 September 2025; Published: 13 October 2025

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the efficacy of storytelling pedagogy to fifth-grade literacy class in Nyimba district of Zambia. The study used a pretest and posttest quasi-experimental design over 12-weeks intervention with 140 study participants of 10 -15 years of age. Data collected through assessments were analyzed using STATA which revealed statistically significant results ( $p < 0.05$ ) from MANOVA, indicating the overall effect of storytelling pedagogy. A Post Hoc Bonferroni test further confirmed significant differences between the experimental group and control group. The introduction of storytelling pedagogy notably improved skills in pronunciation, story writing, audio listening and sentence fluency. These findings highlighted the efficacy of storytelling pedagogy in auditory processing, verbal expression and creative writing. Given its versatility and success, the study recommended the adoption of storytelling pedagogy by teachers in Zambia as a comprehensive, yet complementary strategy to enhance literacy outcomes and develop language proficiency among fifth-grade learners.

**Keywords:** storytelling, effectiveness, pronunciation, auditory processing, verbal expression

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a foundational skill that underpins educational achievement and lifelong learning, making it critical for both personal and societal development (UNESCO, 2023; Mwanza-Kabaghe, 2015; Mandyata et al., 2023). Despite its importance, literacy rates across Africa remain a pressing concern, particularly among primary school learners. Continental and global frameworks including the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016-2025, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, and the African Union's Agenda 2063-emphasize literacy as a cornerstone for achieving educational transformation (African Union, 2024). However, evidence shows that Africa continues to lag behind other regions due to persistent illiteracy and learning poverty (OECD, 2023). Post-COVID-19 estimates indicated that nearly 90% of children in sub-Saharan Africa could not read a simple text with comprehension by the age of ten (African Union, 2024). Zambia reflects these regional challenges: while adult literacy stands at approximately 61% (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2021), studies reveal that many school-aged learners continue to struggle with literacy acquisition (Mwanza, 2020; Mandyata et al., 2023; Banda & Kaan, 2025). Recognizing this, the Eighth National Development Plan (2022–2026) prioritizes education as a driver of socio-economic transformation (GRZ, 2022), although progress remains uneven.

One pedagogical approach that has received international attention is storytelling. Widely employed in Asian and Western contexts, storytelling has been shown to enhance literacy skills, stimulate imagination and promote learner engagement (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Wright, 2008; Mokhtar et al., 2011; Satriani, 2021; Etor, 2019; Khodabandeh, 2018). Its deep historical roots, tracing back to oral traditions as a medium for knowledge transmission, underscore its cultural and educational significance (Bonds, 2016; Landrum, Brakke & McCarthy, 2019; Widrich, 2012). Theoretically, storytelling aligns with constructivist views of learning in which new experiences are embedded within meaningful narratives (Schank & Abelson, 1995).

Empirical evidence consistently affirms the benefits of storytelling in literacy development. Studies have demonstrated improvements in reading comprehension, narrative writing, creativity, vocabulary acquisition and

critical thinking across diverse contexts including Indonesia (Syahada, 2023; Maureen, Meij & Jong, 2021), Brazil (Backes et al., 2024), Nigeria (Chikamadu et al., 2022), Korea (Lee, Kang & Park, 2023), Egypt (Ramadan, 2022), Iran (Khodabandeh, 2018), Malaysia (Mokhtar et al., 2011), China (Lu-ying et al., 2025) and Germany (Barwasser, Bracht & Grunk, 2021). Meta-analyses and reviews also highlight its effectiveness in enhancing fluency, comprehension and writing proficiency across age groups (Wang & Adair, 2019; Dickinson et al., 2012; Morrow, 2009, 2017). Furthermore, storytelling facilitates emotional and cognitive engagement by fostering teacher-learner interaction, oral expression and multimodal communication (Cortazzi & Jin, 2007; Hsu, 2008).

Despite this overwhelming global evidence, storytelling remains underutilized in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Zambia, where most studies on literacy continue to emphasize structural and resource-related challenges rather than pedagogical innovations (Serpell, 2023; Mandyata, 2023; Mwanza, 2020). As a result, there is limited empirical research investigating how storytelling pedagogy can be systematically integrated into primary literacy classrooms within this context. This study therefore addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the use of storytelling pedagogy in Grade Five literacy classrooms in Nyimba District, Zambia. By situating storytelling within local educational context, it sought to generate context-specific insights into how this pedagogical strategy could be harnessed to improve foundational literacy skills among learners.

## Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>** The use of storytelling pedagogy will not be effective in improving literacy performance among grade five learners in Nyimba district.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory and Holdaway's Natural Learning Theory to examine the impact of storytelling on literacy education for fifth-grade learners in Nyimba district. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural tools, particularly language, in cognitive development, highlighting collaborative learning and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where children can achieve tasks with guidance. Storytelling promotes social engagement, enhancing literacy skills such as phonics, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, life skills, and comprehension. Holdaway's (1979) theory focuses on shared reading, particularly beneficial for struggling readers, and outlines a four-step process: observation, participation, role play/practice, and performance. This framework encourages learners to engage with knowledgeable partners, progressing from observation to independent practice. By adapting Holdaway's approach, the study evaluates the effectiveness of storytelling pedagogy in fostering literacy skills among grade five students. Together, these theories advocate for collaborative, engaging and socially-driven experiences to enhance literacy development.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental research design with a pretest and posttest format. The design was chosen to assess the effectiveness of storytelling intervention to Fifth-Grade learners which were randomly sampled to ensure internal validity (Muchanga, 2024).

### Participants

The study involved 140 Grade Five learners randomly sampled from two urban primary schools in Nyimba District. The participants were divided into two groups called experimental group ( $n = 79$ ) that received storytelling intervention and a control group ( $n = 61$ ) that followed the traditional literacy instruction programme.

### Data Collection

Data was collected through pretest and posttest assessments. The pretest assessed learners' baseline literacy skills, while the posttest measured improvements after a 12-week storytelling intervention.

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## Storytelling Intervention

This storytelling intervention aims to enhance students' language and literacy skills through a structured approach that incorporates phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and writing skills. The intervention is designed for flexible implementation, allowing teachers to adapt activities according to classroom needs while ensuring comprehensive coverage of essential components.

### Components of the Storytelling Intervention

1. **Phonemic Awareness:** the aim should be to develop the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words. **Activities** should include: **Sound Discrimination** (use storytelling to emphasize different phonemes. For example, while telling a story, pause and ask students to identify specific sounds e.g., /s/, /t/, /a/), **Segmentation** (break words from the story into their individual sounds and have students repeat them) and **Blending** (Present phonemes and guide students to blend them into words, such as /c/ + /at/ = cat).
2. **Phonics Instruction:** the aim should be to establish phoneme-grapheme correspondences to enhance decoding and spelling. **Activities** should include: **Word Building** (use word parts from stories to create new words, guiding students in blending and segmenting) and **Phonics Games** (implement games that focus on blending sounds to form words, utilizing materials like letter tiles).
3. **Fluency:** the aim should be to improve correct pronunciation and reading speed through repeated practice. **Activities** should include: **Choral Reading** (read stories together as a class, focusing on intonation and expression), **Echo Reading** (have students repeat sentences after the teacher to practice pronunciation) and **Sight Word Practice** (identify frequently occurring words in stories and practice them through flashcards or word walls).
4. **Vocabulary Development:** the aim should be to expand student vocabulary through diverse activities. **Activities** should include: **Word Cards** (Create flashcards with new vocabulary from stories, including definitions and images), **Matching Games** (use interactive games to match words with their meanings or related images) and **Podcast Discussions** (listen to podcasts related to vocabulary themes and discuss them in class).
5. **Comprehension Strategies:** the aim should be to enhance students' understanding of texts through various comprehension strategies. **Activities** should include: **Story Mapping** (guide students in creating visual story maps that outline key components such as characters, setting or plot), **Think-Alouds** (model thinking processes while reading, encouraging students to verbalize their thoughts) and **Questioning Techniques** (pose open-ended questions about the story to promote discussion and deeper understanding).
6. **Writing Skills:** the aim should be to foster effective writing through structured practice. **Activities** should include: **Daily Story Writing** (encourage students to write short stories at home on various topics, emphasizing creativity and critical thinking), **Peer Review** (implement reading circles where students share their work and provide constructive feedback) and **Grammar and Mechanics** (integrate lessons on grammar, punctuation, and capitalization through writing exercises).

### Lesson Journey Structure

#### Step 1: Before

- Pre-teach vocabulary relevant to the story.
- Introduce phonics concepts from known to unknown.
- Use clear and simple language to prepare students for the content.

#### Step 2: During

- Read the story using various methods (narrated, choral, etc.).
- Encourage interactive participation; ask questions, facilitate discussions.
- Scaffold understanding by guiding students through comprehension activities.

### Step 3: After

- Retell the story collaboratively or individually to reinforce comprehension.
- Engage in activities that promote fluency, such as role-playing or dramatization.
- Implement writing exercises that incorporate the learned vocabulary and story elements.

### Assessment and Feedback

- Provide timely feedback to students to guide improvement and encourage growth through formative and summative assessments.

### Instruments

This study used pretest and posttest in pronunciation, audio listening, grammar, vocabulary, sentence fluency, comprehension, dictation, punctuation, speed reading and phonemic awareness. A pilot study with 62 students was performed to validate the instruments and ensure internal consistency. Expert analysis confirmed the tools' validity and reliability, achieving a Cronbach Alpha of 0.97, thus meeting reliability standards for the assessment.

### Data Analysis

Data was analyzed quantitatively using MANOVA in STATA software. This was done in order to assess overall effect of storytelling on multiple dependent variables in order to gain insights into how storytelling influenced multiple outcomes. A Bonferroni post hoc test was also performed to identify specific group differences.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Zambia (HSSREC IORG No.0005376 / IRB No. 00006464/ REF No. 2024: APR-055) and relevant educational authorities at province, district and school level. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including teachers and parents, and confidentiality was maintained to protect participants' identities in reporting the findings.

## RESULTS

### Overall effect of storytelling pedagogy on literacy related outcomes

A MANOVA test was conducted to assess the impact of introducing storytelling pedagogical intervention into the fifth-grade literacy classroom in Nyimba district. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Manova Test

Effect	Test	Statistics	F(df1, df2)	F	Sig.
Storytelling	Wilks' Lambda	.6241	11.0 128.0	60.76	.000
	Pilai's Trace	.7205	11.0 128.0	60.76	.000
	Lawley-Hotelling	.5927	11.0 128.0	60.76	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.1873	11.0 128.0	60.76	.000

Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The analysis evaluates the impact of storytelling pedagogical intervention on literacy performance among grade five learners in Nyimba district, starting with the null hypothesis: the use of storytelling pedagogy will not be effective in improving literacy performance among grade five learners in Nyimba district. The results reveal significant multivariate test statistics: Wilks' Lambda of .6241 (F-value of 60.76,  $p < .001$ ) indicates a strong

effect, while Pillai's Trace of .7205 further supports this with robust significance for small samples and non-normal distributions. The Lawley-Hotelling Trace at .5927 aligns with these findings, showing significant effects similar to Wilks' Lambda. Additionally, Roy's Largest Root value of .1873 confirms the effectiveness of storytelling with consistent F-statistics and significance. All p-values are less than .001, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This strong evidence suggests that storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing literacy performance among grade five learners in Nyimba district.

### Specific difference in performance between the experimental and control group

#### Post Hoc Analysis

Following the MANOVA test, a Bonferroni post hoc test was conducted to determine the specific differences in performance between the two groups. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2 below:

**Table 2:** Post-Hoc Test

Variable	Contrast	Std.Err	t	Sig.
Pronunciation				
Group				
2 vs 1	-54.42602	3.337247	-16.31	.000
Audio listening				
Group				
2 vs 1	-53.14588	3.906111	-13.61	.000
Grammar				
Group				
2 vs 1	-33.2818	3.00355	-11.08	.000
Vocabulary				
Group				
2 vs 1	-30.45881	3.902725	-7.80	.000
Sentence Fluency				
Group				
2 vs 1	-51.09255	3.39875	-15.03	.000
Comprehension				
Group				
2 vs 1	-38.74248	3.233413	-11.98	.000
Dictation				
Group				
2 vs 1	-44.76655	3.910071	-11.45	.000
Story writing				
Group				
2 vs 1	-54.20606	2.83468	-19.12	.000
Punctuation				

Group				
2 vs 1	-34.63997	3.212622	-10.78	.000
Speed reading				
Group				
2 vs 1	-30.31106	4.361695	-6.95	.000
Phonemic awareness				
Group				
2 vs 1	-44.20378	3.403939	-12.99	.000

Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The study analysed eleven language skill variables: pronunciation, audio listening, grammar, vocabulary, sentence fluency, comprehension, dictation, story writing, punctuation, speed reading, and phonemic awareness. Results revealed that Group 1 (Experimental) significantly outperformed Group 2 (Control) in all areas, with p-values below 0.001. Specifically, Group 1 scored 54.43 points higher in pronunciation ( $t = -16.31$ ), 53.15 points in audio listening ( $t = -13.61$ ), and 33.28 points in grammar ( $t = -11.08$ ). Additional strengths included vocabulary (30.46 points,  $t = -7.80$ ), sentence fluency (51.09 points,  $t = -15.03$ ), comprehension (38.74 points,  $t = -11.98$ ), dictation (44.77 points,  $t = -11.45$ ), story writing (54.21 points,  $t = -19.12$ ), punctuation (34.64 points,  $t = -10.78$ ), speed reading (30.31 points,  $t = -6.95$ ), and phonemic awareness (44.20 points,  $t = -12.99$ ).

### Literacy components where storytelling pedagogical had the most impact

The study sought to determine which of the dependent variables: pronunciation, audio listening, grammar, vocabulary, sentence fluency, comprehension, story writing, punctuation, speed reading, and phonemic awareness did storytelling pedagogical intervention had the most impact. Contrast values were used to compare the mean differences or effect sizes for each variable measured by ranking them. The findings were summarized in Table below:

**Table 3:** Effect of storytelling intervention on literacy components

Dependent Variable	Mean Difference	Rank
Pronunciation	54.43	1
Story writing	54.20606	2
Audio listening	53.14588	3
Sentence fluency	51.09255	4
Dictation	44.76655	5
Phonemic awareness	44.20378	6
Comprehension	38.74248	7
Punctuation	34.63997	8
Grammar	33.2818	9
Vocabulary	30.45881	10
Speed reading	30.31106	11

Table 3 highlights the significant impact of storytelling pedagogical intervention on various literacy components, with pronunciation showing the highest mean difference (54.43), indicating improved accuracy in word

pronunciation. Story writing (54.21) and audio listening skills (53.15) also benefit notably. Other areas positively affected include sentence fluency (51.09), dictation (44.77), and phonemic awareness (44.20). Comprehension (38.74), punctuation (34.64), and grammar (33.28) skills improve moderately, while vocabulary acquisition (30.46) and speed reading (30.31) show smaller benefits. Overall, storytelling is an effective tool for enhancing literacy skills across multiple dimensions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The MANOVA test results in Table 1 underscore the significant impact of storytelling interventions on literacy performance in fifth-grade classrooms, evidenced by a Wilks' Lambda value of .6241 and an F-value of 60.76 ( $p < .001$ ), which indicate a substantial multivariate effect. This outcome aligns with existing literature (Backes et al., 2024; Chikamadu et al., 2022; Morrow, 2017; Mokhtar et al., 2011; Egan, 2012), which documents the cognitive and emotional benefits of storytelling, such as improved comprehension, critical thinking, reading proficiency and communication skills. The robustness of these findings is further validated by Pillai's Trace (.7205) and Lawley-Hotelling Trace (.5927), which confirm storytelling's effectiveness in fostering language acquisition and cognitive development (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Similar international evidence has been reported in diverse contexts, for instance, Lee, Kang, and Park (2023) in Korea, observed that storytelling enhanced creative thinking and communication, and Maureen et al (2021) in Indonesia, found that students improved across speaking, listening, reading and writing.

What distinguishes the current study is its contextual contribution. Unlike much of the existing scholarship, which is largely situated in Western or Asian settings, this research addresses the scarcity of empirical evidence on storytelling pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa and, more specifically, Zambia. By demonstrating statistically significant literacy gains among Grade Five learners in Nyimba District, the study provides localized evidence that storytelling is not only theoretically sound but also practically effective in resource-constrained African classrooms. In doing so, it broadens the global discourse on storytelling pedagogy by validating its applicability and relevance in Zambian primary schools. The findings therefore, contributes new knowledge to the limited body of African-based research, while also advocating for the integration of storytelling as a core pedagogical strategy in literacy instruction rather than a supplementary classroom activity.

The post hoc analysis following a MANOVA test revealed significant performance differences in literacy skills between an experimental group (Group 1) employing storytelling pedagogical intervention and a control group (Group 2) employing a traditional literacy instruction, with experimental group consistently outperforming control group across multiple areas including: pronunciation, audio listening, grammar, vocabulary, comprehension and writing skills, all with p-values below 0.001. These findings are consistent with emerging research, which underscores the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing literacy outcomes (Khodabandeh, 2018; Alkaaf & Al-Bulushi, 2017; Etor, 2019; Satriani, 2021; Dickinson et al., 2012). The substantial effect sizes reported echo Metcalfe et al. (2013) indicating that innovative pedagogical strategies foster deeper engagement with complex language concepts. Specifically, the experimental group demonstrated notable improvements, scoring 54.43 points higher in pronunciation and substantial gains in listening and comprehension, indicating enhanced active engagement and critical thinking skills (Yunita, 2022). Barwasser et al (2021) added that there was significant large to very large effects on vocabulary and moderate to large effects on letter sound fluency and reading, providing indication for the positive impact of storytelling on multiple aspects simultaneously for the focused sample in German. Thus, Morrow (2017) concluded that the use of storytelling pedagogy is an emerging issue to child development as it helps to strengthen neural pathways that make learning of all kinds possible. Therefore, incorporating storytelling pedagogy into curricula can help teachers to consciously create a literacy and language-rich environment in which learners actively participate in classroom dialogue for improved literacy outcomes.

While storytelling benefits all the listed literacy components, its influence is more pronounced in certain areas compared to others. The study revealed that storytelling pedagogy is particularly effective in enhancing skills related to auditory processing, verbal expression, and creative writing. This finding aligns with existing literature (Syahada, 2023; Yazıcı & Bolay, 2017; Nisa, 2022; Sintonen, Kumpulainen & Vartiainen, 2018) which underscores storytelling's role in vocabulary acquisition and a deeper understanding of syntax and semantics,

critical for effective communication. This highlights its versatility and efficacy as a multifaceted pedagogical tool, underscoring its potential to significantly improve literacy outcomes and foster comprehensive language proficiency. The implications extend to diverse educational contexts, suggesting that storytelling pedagogy can accommodate varying learning styles and promote inclusivity, as highlighted by (Landrum, Brakke & McCarthy, 2019). By cultivating a sense of belonging and community, Etor (2019) stressed that storytelling enhances motivation and persistence in literacy tasks. Overall, this study not only reinforces the importance of narrative techniques in literacy and language teaching and learning but also contributes to the evolving educational discourse by illustrating how storytelling can create engaging, supportive learning environments, ultimately leading to improved literacy outcomes for learners across diverse backgrounds. Therefore, findings of this study support the hypothesis that teaching programme based on storytelling pedagogy is effective in improving literacy performance among Fifth-Grade learners in Nyimba district.

## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that storytelling pedagogy significantly enhances literacy performance among Grade Five learners in Nyimba District, with statistically validated improvements across multiple skill areas including pronunciation, listening, vocabulary, comprehension, grammar and writing. By situating its findings within the Zambian context, this research contributes much-needed African-based evidence to the global discourse, affirming that storytelling is not only theoretically robust but also practically effective in resource-constrained classrooms. The study further underscores storytelling's versatility in fostering cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development, making it a powerful pedagogical tool for inclusive and engaging literacy instruction. These results advocate for the systematic integration of storytelling into literacy curricula as a core teaching strategy rather than an auxiliary activity, offering educators a culturally responsive and evidence-based approach to improving literacy outcomes and laying a stronger foundation for lifelong learning.

## LIMITATIONS

- The study was limited to Grade Five classrooms in Nyimba District, Zambia, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions, age groups, or educational contexts.
- The study examined only the immediate impact of storytelling on literacy, without assessing long-term retention or lasting effects on learners' language development.
- Large class sizes, heavy teacher workloads and differences in learners' prior literacy exposure may have affected uniformity of outcomes.

## Suggestions for Future Research

While this study demonstrates immediate literacy gains from storytelling pedagogy among Grade Five learners, future research could explore the long-term effects of storytelling interventions across multiple academic years. Longitudinal studies could examine whether improvements in literacy skills, critical thinking and creative expression are sustained over time and whether early exposure to storytelling influences learners' academic trajectories in higher grades. This would provide deeper insights into the durability and cumulative benefits of storytelling in literacy development.

## Contributions to the Body of Knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence from a sub-Saharan African context, specifically Zambia, demonstrating that storytelling pedagogy significantly enhances multiple literacy skills in primary school learners. It expands global discourse on literacy instruction by validating storytelling as a practical, inclusive and effective pedagogical strategy in resource-constrained African classrooms, thereby addressing a critical research gap.

## Declaration of Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research authorship and/ or publication of the article



## Funding

This study was not funded by any institution.

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