Effect of Storytelling Instruction on Developing Iranian EFL Learners' Oral Proficiency within ZPD-activated Proximal Context

Maryam Mardani, M.A., English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran
maryammardani2020@gmail.com

Abstract
The application of zone of proximal development (ZPD), as a major tenet of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT, 1978), has recently been invited in the L2 learning/teaching profession. This study mainly examined whether Iranian EFL learners' interactions in diverse ZPD-activated proximal contexts through the use of storytelling instruction could improve their oral (speaking) proficiency and attitudes towards speaking in ZPD-based learning context. A pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was used with 60 intermediate EFL participants selected from Asre-no English Language Institute in Iran, after administering the OQPT. Then, the participants were assigned into 2 experimental groups (ZPD-activated equal and unequal groups), and 1 control group, with 20 participants in each group. The students in both experimental groups were exposed to the storytelling-based instruction within different ZPD-activated proximal contexts (equal and unequal), but in the control group the traditional teacher-fronted instruction within a non-ZPD context was conducted. A semistructured interview and a questionnaire were used to assess the participants' speaking proficiency and attitudes before and after the instruction. The findings from the analysis of covariance and *t* test suggested that using storytelling instruction within ZPD-activated contexts significantly improved both the participants' speaking proficiency and their attitudes. Further data analysis of the ZPD participants' performance indicated that no significant difference between the learners' speaking proficiency development of equal and unequal peer groups was found. By implication, ZPD-based pair work and storytelling-based instruction, interwoven with each other in a balanced manner, would be highly fruitful in developing EFL learners' speaking skill and their attitudes.

Keywords: Attitude, oral proficiency, speaking skill, storytelling instruction, ZPD-activated proximal context

Introduction

Being considered as the language of international communication, the English language and primarily developing English speaking ability is one of the most important areas in the context of English language teaching and learning. According to McDonough and Shaw (1993), speaking a language proficiently and producing well-formed utterances enable L2 users to achieve a particular end in the process of communication. To put it differently, oral language skills empower them to express ideas, wishes or opinions, negotiate and solve communication problems. Moreover, establishing or maintaining social relationships involve using oral language to communicate.

Actually, storytelling is rooted in oral traditions; humans began told stories when their capacity of speech has been developed to communicate in order to adapt to the environment. Storytelling has a strong history across many ancient cultures and generations in which all have their own canon of storytelling. (Zipes, 2012). For instance, the Holy Qur'an, has used the art/technique of storytelling as a fundamental medium to touch people's identities, thought, beliefs, hopes, attitudes, and values. Storytelling in the Holy Qur'an, can be considered as a kind

of training for humans who considered to have intelligent, social, and lively mind through the way of making meaning of their lives and experiences. To name but a few, "There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it, a detailed exposition of all things, and a guide and a mercy to any such as believe" (The Qur'an 12:111). Due to the characteristics of storytelling and the advantages of it as an effective instruction in the process of language learning and teaching, it has been met with a good deal of enthusiasm among language professionals, and many teachers and educators have tried to adopt storytelling as an effective instruction in this process (Wright, 2004).

The sociocultural theory (SCT) was conceived by L. S. Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978) with the mediated mind as its core concept. According to this view of mind, humans make use of symbolic tools so as to establish, mediate and regulate their relationships with others. This type of relationship has been referred to as the mediated relationship between humans and the world. The SCT of mind makes a strong contribution to understanding the nature of foreign and second language classroom (L2). Language learning process has been considered as developmental mediated by semiotic resources such as classroom materials and the environment. Moreover, language instruction within the context of zone of proximal development (ZPD) is central to language development that is created through opportunities to mediate and assist learners on the part of the teachers and peers. Learners themselves are participants in the learning process in opposition to passive recipients of instruction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). With regard to the developmental process in speaking ability, it is important on the part of the teachers to pay close attention to the learners' ZPDs (Mohana, 2014).

Hence, this study explored the applicability of ZPD-based model of instruction to the method of storytelling for developing EFL learners' oral proficiency (i.e., speaking skill). Actually, this study focused on the ZPD-activated proximal context of equal and unequal peer collaborative interactions compared with the traditional teacher-fronted teaching method to see whether ZPD-based context could facilitate EFL learners' speaking skill. Moreover, the present study aimed to explore EFL learners' attitudes towards practicing speaking in ZPD-based learning context using the storytelling method.

Literature Review

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

SCT was first systematized and applied by the Russian psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotsky and his colleagues in the 1920s and 1930s. Vygotsky was called the Mozart of psychology, whose ideas have influenced in a wide range of subjects including the theory of child learning and development, language and thought, and educational psychology during his tragically short lifetime. Inspired by Spinoza, his favorite philosopher, Vygotsky stated that the key to understanding humans' abilities and the process of their development, lay in actually promoting their development.

The basic tenet of SCT is that human cognition is mediated socially through incorporating socially evolved and socially organized human tools, and mediated culturally through using cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts. Vygotsky (1978) claims that in the early steps of the cognitive development process, the child is totally dependent on the parents, who served as cultural sources, actualize the instruction initially through language to the child as to what to do, how to do, and what not to do. Actually, first, the child obtains this cultural knowledge and value through interaction and contact with others, then, the child tries to assimilate and internalize that knowledge adding personal value to it as well. To put it differently, cognitive development of the

child occurs when the child's mental functioning process shifts from the external context, and the learning process switches from interpsychological to the intrapsychological plane; this process is taken place within the ZPD. In this way, individuals can control their own learning environment and the sociocultural environment can nurture and scaffold them. Vygotsky states that this transition is not merely a copy, instead, it is a transformation of knowledge obtained through interactions into personal values during the processes of appropriation.

The seminal interrelated notions behind this theory can be considered as three sides of a triangulation, composed of mediation, ZPD, and scaffolding, which help to frame the discussion of SCT and reflect various applications of this theory in supporting learning.

Mediation

One of the outstanding features of SCT is mediation. According to Vygotsky (1978), through the lens of sociocultural theory, learning is viewed as a mediated process during which humans interact within the social environment not just directly within the stimulus-response cycle; but, they can also use physical and symbolic tools to make such an interaction indirectly. In other words, their interactions can be mediated via physical and psychological tools or artifacts. These tools and artifacts can be generated by human cultures and then can be gradually transferred to the next generation.

Following an intellectual tradition that dates back to the work of Hegel, Marxist theoretical perspective posits a dialectical rather than dualistic relationship between humans and their own learning environment. Influenced by Marx's ideas, Vygotsky and his colleagues accept this crucial view, whereby humans shape and are shaped by their environment through a process during which a concrete activity is first mediated by physical tools and then, the mediation is extended using psychological tools; subsequently, humans' cognitive functions are also mediated. This process is called internalization. Vygotsky (1998) also points out that the secret of internalization lies in the uniquely human capacity to imitate the independent mental or intellectual operations of other humans, this process is called imitation which offers a harmonizing viewpoint to the behaviorist theories of learning; the process around which the key concept of ZPD was constructed. When a human is able to control such higher mental operations, and perform independently, the process of regulation as one type of mediation happens.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The key concept of ZPD was proposed by Vygotsky in the 1930s. Vygotsky considers the conceptual and reciprocal learning as a social process during which the social and cultural nature of interactive and dynamic learning is formed and the child's higher psychological function is developed. This notion is conceptualized the Vygotsky's (1930) concept of ZPD. Two differentiating levels of development have been proposed by the concept of ZPD, that is, the child's actual level of development characterizes the child's current level of psychological development or what the child can perform individually, and the child's potential level of development characterizes the child's proximal psychological development or what the child can perform collaboratively with assistance of more competent peers or a teacher as the social medium which in turn defines what the child can perform independently and autonomously in the future of individual psychological processes. The child can move beyond to the higher mediated level of development or engage in the higher order intellectual activity through interaction (i.e., symmetrical and asymmetrical) with peers or teachers in a specific problem-solving context, the distance between the actual and potential developmental levels is referred to as ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is another fundamental element of Vygotsky's (1978) SCT. The concept of scaffolding was first introduced by Wood et al. (1976). Actually, this term is rooted in Vygotsky's concept of ZPD that is an essential aspect of the language acquisition process, in which a less competent individual is helped by more competent one who is referred as the mediator to solve a problem. The mediator accommodates the conceptual complexity of the task to the learners' current state of capability and provides support and encouragement to achieve higher levels of regulation. In other words, the learning process should be regulated in a way that matches learners' levels of development (Lidz, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Then, the role is gradually shifting towards the learners, which in turn helping them to become more independent and autonomous learners, and develop from being regulated by others to self-regulation. This process implying the concept of scaffolding as an effective conceptual metaphor to explain the interventional role of teachers/peers in the process of cognitive development.

Speaking Skill within ZPD-activated Context

Communicative language teaching (CLT), can be portrayed as revolutionary in language teaching/learning context, with its emergence in the early 1980s. This approach put emphasis on pair/group works and interactive practice activities in the EFL classroom. Tong-Fredericks (1984) believes that pair/group work can contribute to language development, if they are structured and managed properly. Consequently, under the influence of CLT, the development of the speaking skill saw some changes in a way that reflected the principles of a communicative methodology. Hence, language teachers sought to find new ways to ameliorate the development of speaking skill in English classrooms.

Along with the preceding scenario, ZPD was crystalized as the potential to develop language skills. Doolittle (1995) argues that Vygotsky's theory concerning the ZPD provides strong support for the inclusion of CLT rational in the L2 classroom. On the basis of this theory, a series of recommendations were provided which support the use of CLT in education. ZPD-based classrooms have been suggested as a good way for language learners to eliminate emotional barriers and acquire language proficiency. In this light, storytelling has been recommended as an instructional method that may create opportunities to develop students' language skills, by providing them with the comprehensible authentic material and increasing their social interactions in the classroom.

There have been several studies focused on the role of storytelling for learners' language development. For instance, Camarillo et al. (2008) sought to investigate the impact of using storytelling method on improving learners' reading skill. To this end, 20 young EFL Spanish learners were examined using a self-report questionnaire, observation checklist, and a reading test. The findings of their study suggested that the use of storytelling for reading activities motivated learners to participate more actively in the reading task.

Numpaque and Rojas (2010) also provided a theoretical exploration into the impacts of the TPR-storytelling method on improving EFL learners' oral production and fluency. They also proposed a procedure to be followed and adapted when applying storytelling method in an EFL classroom. In their study, they specified various advantages in using the method such as facilitating the recall of the words, providing learners with enough exposure to instances of the target language, developing fluency and accuracy simultaneously, promoting a positive attitude to the L2, and lowering learners' stress during the oral performance.

In the same vein, Abdollahpour and Asadzadeh (2012), who investigated the impact of EFL learners' exposure to reading stories on writing skill, concluded that digital storytelling not

only contributes to EFL learners' progress in writing skill, but also helps them explore different features of the language.

Moreover, ZPD context has been found influential in classroom settings for enhancing language teaching/learning processes. For instance, Guerrero and Vilamil (2000) analyzed the scaffolding process through which two EFL learners collaborated to revise a written text in a ZPD context. The findings showed that both learners established a shared focus attitude towards the text revision, and the writer showed a great disposition to being helped in the revision process. They proposed that in a ZPD-activated environment, peer interaction would prompt learners in the mechanism of writing tasks.

In the same line, Mohana (2014) sought to theoretically scrutinize the possible effects of ZPD-based method on learners' oral communication abilities. In order to achieve the desired level of proficiency, the participants of her study went through different phases (assisted performance, self-assisted performance, developed performance, and recursion). Mohana suggested that ZPD-based method would be quite applicable to oral skill development if environmental factors are conducive, and pair/group work are utilized appropriately with both capable and weak learners.

Actually, there is a distinct lack of consensus about which type of proficiency pairing (i.e., equal or unequal) is more conducive to L2 development. For instance, Karimi and Jalilvand (2014) conducted a study to investigate the impact of peers/teacher scaffolding on EFL learners' reading comprehension within symmetrical and asymmetrical contexts. To this end, 60 EFL learners were divided into three instructional groups; two experimental groups (asymmetrical and symmetrical) groups, and one control group. The experimental groups provided the learners with collaborative interactions in pair-subgroups, while in the control group no attempts were made to make interaction and assistance on the part of the teacher and/or peers within a totally traditional teacher-centered context. The results indicated that asymmetrical or unequal pairs worked more effectively with regard to reading comprehension, however, teacher and peer scaffolding in symmetrical and asymmetrical groups improved their reading comprehension. Whereas, several other studies lent support to the outperformance of equal pairs. To name but a few, Baleghizadeh, TimchehMemar, and TimchehMemar (2010) showed that grouping learners in symmetrical or equal groups by reducing some affective factors like anxiety enhanced their performance on reading comprehension.

To conclude, a good amount of research has been investigated the role of storytelling in L2 learning/teaching context. Almost all have underlined the effective role of using different storytelling strategies on EFL learners' professional development. However, few studies have investigated the impact of storytelling on developing speaking proficiency. Moreover, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no previous study has investigated the impact of using storytelling method within the context of ZPD, and more specifically, in the case of oral proficiency development. Besides, although the effect of proficiency pairing of learners on different aspects of EFL learners' language proficiency has been explored in previous studies, there is not a robust research literature within a ZPD framework regarding oral (speaking) proficiency.

Hence, with the above rationale in mind, this study sought to apply a ZPD-based approach to EFL classrooms to investigate the effect of storytelling as an instructional tool on EFL learners' speaking ability. This study also aimed at finding out whether engaging in storytelling-based instruction within an atmosphere of equal and unequal peer ZPD-based could bring about significant variations in EFL learners' improvement of speaking skill. Actually, drawing upon the Vygotsky's concept of ZPD, the current study offered a starting point to fill the gap in the

literature in order to gain a deeper understanding of EFL learners' speaking skill development by implementing storytelling instruction within equal/unequal peer ZPD-based contexts.

In addition, students' attitudes towards various speaking activities and their willingness to participate in such activities together with the difficulty level of the tasks and the type of the task used by teachers are all thought to affect the extent to which students are inclined to produce oral speech in the EFL classroom (Mai, 2011). Although a significant amount of emphasis has been placed on English, many Iranian students still have trouble with developing productive skills (e.g., speaking). Thus, research is required to examine new techniques and methods for developing productive skills such as speaking. In this light, this study also explored EFL learners' attitudes towards practicing speaking in ZPD-activated learning context using storytelling method to see any change in the EFL learners' attitudes.

In order to clarify the points under investigation, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1. Does storytelling in a ZPD-activated context lead to a better development of oral (speaking) proficiency compared to storytelling in a non-ZPD learning context?

Q2. Is there any significant difference between the oral proficiency development of the L2 learners collaboratively interacting within different ZPD-based contexts of equal and unequal peers, when using storytelling method?

Q3. Does storytelling in a ZPD-activated context contribute to the development of positive attitudes in EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted on the three classes in Asre-no English Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. Prior to the start of the experiment, a placement test was utilized to choose a homogeneous sample of EFL participants. All the participants were female intermediate level EFL leaners, between 18 and 22 years old. They were all native speakers of Farsi. Then, the participants were assigned to three instructional groups; two experimental groups: ZPD-based equal group, ZPD-based unequal group, and one control or non ZPD-activated group, each consisting of 20 participants.

Instruments

This quasi-experimental study used a pretest-posttest design. At first, an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT, Oxford University Press, 2001) was used to exclude those EFL participants who were intermediate level. The test was comprised of two sections: structure and vocabulary. These two sections consisted of 60 items in multiple-choice format. The scores in OQPT could range from 0 to 60. Meanwhile, the reliability value for the test, via the Cronbach coefficient, was 0.86.

Additionally, an in-depth semistructured interview was carried out to assess students' ability to reproduce the story orally based on their own words, concerning the plot's structure of the story. The participants responded to open-ended questions and statements designed by the researcher. The participants were asked to answer questions as following based on the Freytag's (1894/1900) model of plot's structure:

1. 'When and where did the story take place?'
2. 'What can you tell me about the character(s) in the story?'
3. 'What was the dilemma or the main conflict to be solved in the story?'
4. 'When did the climax (turning point) take place in the story?'
5. 'Can you discuss the falling action of the story?'

6.'How is the problem resolved at the end of the story?'

The interviews took about 45 minutes in average, and were recorded. Moreover, in order to increase the reliability and validity, the data from the interview were analyzed by two raters, who were experienced EFL instructors. A speaking assessment scale, the Cambridge English Speaking Assessment Scale-Level B, based on Common European Framework of References (CEFR, 2001), was used consisting of four main constituents: grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse management, and interactive communication. It was based on a scale of 0 to 5 marks for assessing the EFL learners' speaking proficiency.

To ensure reliable results, the consistency of the two raters' evaluations was measured in the interviews by using the correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficients obtained for the two sets of the scores at the pretest and posttest were .97 and .98, which represented an acceptable interrater reliability. According to Educational Testing Service (ETS, 1982), interview tests are generally perceived as valid, since they can offer the test-taker with the chance to simulate conversation, and their format can provide the examiners with the opportunity to examine the highest level of the test-taker's ability.

Moreover, a 5-point Likert scale attitude questionnaire was used at the pretest and posttest phases to explore the respondents' attitudes towards the method of the study (see Appendix). The students in two experimental groups were subjected to this attitude questionnaire. The questionnaire included 15 statements on a continuum scale, ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. The questionnaire was developed in English, and its reliability and validity were established. The content validity of the test was determined through experts' judgments and pilot-testing to ensure that the test was carefully and accurately planned to include the required attitude items. Further, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated to establish the internal reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability of the tests was about .75, which was considered an acceptable reliability for the questionnaire.

Procedure

The participants were selected from three classes at Asre-no English Language Institute in Iran. Accordingly, the participants were randomly assigned to three different instructional groups: two experimental groups (ZPD-based equal and unequal groups), and one control group (non ZPD-based group) with 20 students in each group. In order to make sure that all the three groups were homogeneous in terms of their language proficiency, the OQPT was used. Then, the three groups received the oral proficiency interviews as pretest. Prior to any storytelling session, the participants were prepared well with detailed instruction and clarification. In the experimental groups, the participants were placed into subgroups with four or five members in each subgroup. Meanwhile, the equal peers were those who had roughly similar performance on the storytelling-based oral proficiency interview test. However, the unequal peers were those who demonstrated differential levels of performance in speaking on the storytelling-based oral proficiency interview.

Treatment included three different stages: prestorytelling, while-storytelling, and poststorytelling. In the prestorytelling activity stage, the students were made familiar with the topic, activated prior knowledge, and elicited key vocabulary. In this stage, the teacher explained the purpose of the activity and demonstrated it. In the while-storytelling stage, the students were supposed to listen to the story played through the audio CD of the book, *Steps to Understanding* (Hill, 1982). Moreover, in this stage, the teacher monitored their students' processes within the group and helped them (e.g., by giving them feedback). In the poststorytelling stage, the students

read the story, paying their attention to the plot's structure of the story. The plot of a story was depicted based on Freytag's (1894/1900) model.

Then, the students summarized the main events of the story keeping in their mind the plot's structure of the story. Furthermore, the students' performances in the poststorytelling stage were evaluated through a reflective review chart. At the end of each session, each student was evaluated for three general components: preparation, organization, and presentation. Meanwhile, the four storytelling-based instruction lesson plan were used as teaching material to teach students in experimental groups during four weeks, each lesson plan was used for three sessions, 12 sessions in total. Each session lasted about 45 minutes.

In the control group, the traditional instruction of the institute was implemented. A combination of L2 input-provision and structured output was used. In fact, traditional classroom speaking practice took the form of drills, that is one student asked a question and another gave an answer. Structured output exercises such as drills and exercises in the textbook, *American English File 3* (Oxenden, Latham-Koenig, & Seligson, 2008), were used as a transitional stage between the presentation and the practice stages of each lesson plan. The production and output was essentially a teacher-controlled and non-collaborative. It focused on the correct form. In other words, there were often predetermined answers provided by the teacher.

After carrying out the treatment, the gathered data through pretest and posttest phases were then analyzed according to the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Moreover, a one-sample *t* test was used to analyze the data of the attitude questionnaire.

Results

Addressing the First Research Question

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of pretest and posttest oral proficiency (speaking) scores in ZPD-activated and control (non-ZPD) groups.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of oral proficiency (speaking) scores in ZPD-activated and control (Non-ZPD) groups*

Group	Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
ZPD-Activated	Pretest	40	4	19	10.76	3.42	.064	-.1.19
	Posttest	40	4	19	12.76	4.50	.20	-.99
Control	Pretest	20	6	19	11.70	4.16	.12	-1.04
	Posttest	20	6	19	11.75	3.70	.18	-1.07

As Table 1 indicates, the minimum pretest scores was 4 in the ZPD-activated group, which was low on a 20-point scale. The maximum pretest score was 19 in both groups, which were above the median score on a 20-point scale. Besides, the minimum and maximum scores of oral proficiency (speaking) were not much different across both groups. According to Table 1, the skewness and Kurtosis values in both groups were below 1.5, indicating little clustering of scores at the ends and a small degree of flatness. That is, the skewness and kurtosis values were not large, suggesting the normality of the pretest and posttest oral proficiency (speaking) scores

in both ZPD-activated and control (non-ZPD) groups. According to Bachman and Kunnan (2005), the ratios within +2 and -2 indicate that the distributions tend to be mesokurtic (i.e., normal).

Moreover, the pretest mean scores of oral proficiency in the ZPD-activated and non-ZPD groups were 10.76 and 11.70, respectively. That is, the mean score difference was a not large. This result supported the homogeneity of pretest scores before the treatment. In addition, the above data demonstrates that the ZPD-activated group showed, to some extent, an increase from the pretest to posttest.

To address the first research question of the study, a one-way covariate test was conducted. The posttest scores from the interview were considered as dependent variable and the pretest speaking scores as covariate variable. Groups (ZPD-activated vs. non-ZPD) were considered as independent variables. The error was originally set at .05 when comparing groups on the speaking (oral proficiency) variable. The results of analysis of variance for the treatment effect are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. *Analysis of covariance for the treatment effect of storytelling in the ZPD-activated Context*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	946.27	2	473.14	205.14	.000	.87
Intercept	39.50	1	39.50	17.13	.000	.23
Pretest	929.77	1	929.77	403.12	.000	.87
Group	50.311	1	50.311	21.81	.000	.27
Error	131.46	57	2.30			
Total	10440.25	60				
Corrected Total	1077.74	59				

The results in Table 2 revealed that the treatment of the study had a significant effect on the students' posttest oral proficiency scores because the p value was greater than .05, $F = 21.81$, $p \geq .05$. The corresponding effect size was found to be .27, which manifested that .27% of variance in the posttest scores could be explained by the group variable. That is to say, according to Table 3, as Estimated marginal means i.e., the adjusted means on the dependent variable for each of the groups, indicated, the ZPD-activated group ($M = 13.14$) performed better in comparison with the control group ($M = 11.19$) and the marginal mean difference was large enough to have a significant treatment effect. That is to say, storytelling in a ZPD-activated context led to a better development of oral proficiency.

Table 3. *Estimate margin means for both groups*

Group (Activated/Non-Activated)	Mean	Std. Error	99% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	11.19	.34	10.50	11.87
ZPD-Activated	13.14	.24	12.66	13.62

Addressing the Second Research Question

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics for the participants' scores on the speaking for equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups before and after the treatment.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics on the speaking scores of equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups*

Group	Variable	*N*	Min.	Max.	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Equal peer	Pretest	20	4	18	10.22	4.81	.13	-.1.19
	Posttest	20	4	19	12.02	5.33	.013	-1.47
Unequal peer	Pretest	20	4	19	11.30	4.44	.058	-1.25
	Posttest	20	8	19	13.70	3.42	.10	-1.18

The pretest mean score in the equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups were 10.22 and 11.30, respectively. This shows that the difference was not very great. However, the posttest mean scores in the equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups were 12.02 and 13.70, respectively. That is, the difference was much larger. The unequal peer ZPD-activated group received a higher mean score on the posttest ($M = 13.70$, $SD = 3.42$).

To address the second research questions, a one-way analysis of covariate test was conducted. The posttest speaking scores from the interview in the equal and unequal peer groups were considered as dependent variable and pretest speaking scores as covariate variable. Group (equal vs. unequal peer) was considered as independent variable. The results of analysis of variance for the treatment difference (difference between the oral proficiency development of the L2 learners interacting within the equal peer and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups) are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. *Analysis of covariance for the treatment effect of storytelling on the posttest speaking scores in the equal peer and unequal peer groups*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	681.15	2	340.57	114.20	.000	.861
Intercept	62.92	1	62.92	21.10	.000	.363
Pretest	653.09	1	653.09	218.99	.000	.855
Group	5.024	1	5.024	1.68	.202	.044
Error	110.34	37	2.98			
Total	7409.25	40				
Corrected Total	791.49	39				

The results in Table 5 revealed that the treatment of the study did not make a significant difference in the posttest speaking scores in the two groups, $F(1, 37) = 1.68$, $p = .202$. The effect size was also found to be .044, which was very small. Thus, there was no significant difference between the oral proficiency developments of the EFL learners interacting within the equal and unequal peer ZPD-activated context.

Addressing the Third Research Question

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics of attitude data in the equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups*

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Pretest-Equal	20	36.00	65.00	49.25	8.03	0.40	-0.51
Posttest-Equal	20	40.00	71.00	54.75	10.82	0.11	-1.50
Pretest-Unequal	20	36.00	68.00	53.60	6.80	-0.12	1.92
Posttest-Unequal	20	41.00	72.00	59.40	8.51	-0.045	-0.51
ZPD-Activated Pretest	40	36	68	51.42	7.66	0.036	-0.13
ZPD-Activated Posttest	40	40	72	57.07	9.89	-0.10	-1.07

As Table 6 indicates, the attitude mean scores of the participants in the equal peer ZPD-activated and unequal peer ZPD-activated groups in the pretest were 49.25 and 53.60, respectively. However, the attitude mean scores in the posttest in the equal and unequal peer groups were 54.75 and 59.40, respectively. That is to say, attitudes mean scores increased from the pretest to the posttest in the both groups. Taken together, the attitude mean score increase in the ZPD-activated group (which included both equal and unequal peer groups) from the pretest (51.42) to the pretest (57.07) was noticeable, indicating some improvement from the pretest to the posttest phase.

To address the third research question of the study, a paired *t* test was conducted between the pretest and posttest scores obtained from the attitude questionnaire in the ZPD-activated group. The results are reported in Table 7.

Table 7. *Paired samples t-test between pretest and posttest attitudes scores in the ZPD-activated group*

Variable	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval				
				Lower	Upper			

Attitude Pretest-Posttest	-5.65	4.53	.716	-7.09	-4.20	-7.88	39	.000

According to the Table 7, the mean score increase between the pretest and posttest was large (-5.65), stretching from a lower bound of -7.09 to an upper bound of -4.20 (with a 95%t confidence interval). That is to say, there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest means of attitude scores, t (39) = -7.88 (*p < .05). Thus, storytelling in a ZPD-activated context contributed to the development of positive attitudes in EFL learners.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed positive outcomes, both in terms of the students' oral proficiency and attitudes towards storytelling method in speaking classrooms. Regarding the first research question, the results of this study revealed that using storytelling method in the experimental groups significantly improved the EFL learners' speaking skill. This could be attributed to the lack of group dynamics in the control group. In fact, the traditional teaching method was teacher-fronted and less opportunity was given to the EFL students to interact and practice their speaking skills in L2 classrooms. In contrast, the storytelling-based instructions in the experimental groups increased the EFL students' social interactions and collaboration with more capable peers and the teacher in the classroom. Such instructions provided them with comprehensible and authentic input and offered them opportunities to work on the speaking skill through meaningful and contextualized activities. Actually, through the dynamic process of storytelling within ZPD-activated contexts, the EFL learners' learning was mediated by the teacher-led feedback and/or peer-peer collaborative work. Moreover, through the dynamic mechanism of scaffolding, the EFL learners' co-constructive knowledge of speaking was internalized, which in turn assisted the learners in experimental groups to improve their oral proficiency.

These results of the present study strengthen the findings of previous research (e.g., Hsu, 2010), who suggested that through the use of storytelling activities, language learners produced longer and more complex sentences in their L2 oral reproduction when they were interviewed, since they did not passively listen to stories during the instruction. Rather, they had the opportunity to retell the stories they heard, and put into practice the new vocabulary items and sentence structures exposed to them during the storytelling-based instruction.

Regarding the second research question, which was intended to investigate the efficacy of EFL learners' collaborative interactions within equal ZPD-based proximal contexts on their development of speaking skill as compared to the unequal ZPD-based proximal contexts, based on the results of this study, there was no significant difference between the speaking skill development of EFL learners' engaged in ZPD-based interactions of equal and unequal peers. That is to say, the mediating role of interaction in line with scaffolding mechanism exerted an impact on the EFL students' speaking proficiency development, both more capable and less capable peers actively participated in the dynamic reciprocal process of scaffolding and co-constructed a shared knowledge through collaborative interactions. This result highlighted the nature of interaction per se. It can also be argued that the learners were not so different in terms of proficiency levels and there was not a large cognitive gap between the two groups, therefore, the participants in both experimental groups had the same levels of scaffolding to each other, which in turn helped their partners similarly effective to improve within their ZPD.

The above-mentioned results seem to echo the notion of peer's interaction in a few earlier studies, for instance, Rahimi Domakani and Felfelian (2012), which compared the effectiveness of the ZPD-based proximal context of equal/unequal peer interactions and the traditional method of teaching on interlanguage pragmatic development of EFL learners. The results showed that whereas both the equal and unequal peer ZPD groups outperformed the control group, no statistically significant difference between equal and unequal peer ZPD groups was found. The results indicated that interlanguage pragmatic was developed in the light of peer's collaborative interactions and the mediation provided by peer-peer interaction.

However, the above results of the present study hold rather contradictory views with some other previous studies such as Storch (2002) and Wu (2008), which have donated more credit to the effectiveness of mixed-ability settings on L2 development. Collaborative interaction in such a setting can be considered as a mutual win in which provides all the learners with opportunities for cognitive development. In fact, due to the scarcity of current research, it still remains as a matter of controversy to make a strong generalization on the best type of proficiency pairing which is more conducive to different aspects of L2 development.

The third research question sought to find out whether storytelling method in ZPD-activated contexts would contribute to the development of positive attitudes in EFL learners. The results of this study revealed the significant attitude improvement from the pretest to the posttest phase in both experimental groups, similarly. Actually, ZPD-activated proximal context created a non-threatening, more comfortable, and lively classroom atmosphere that promoted the use of English and allowed the EFL students to experience the specific dynamics of collaborative work. The storytelling method within ZPD-activated context created a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere, which was more conductive to learning. Items such as 'I feel more confident in speaking having the storytelling-based instruction' and 'Storytelling-based instruction in class is more interesting than the traditional instruction' received a high percentage of agreement. In fact, the EFL students enjoyed learning English using storytelling method, because it provided opportunities for them to practice their oral (listening and speaking) skills, motivated them to learn new vocabulary and structure, as well as promoted their self-confidence.

The above results are broadly in line with the results of previous research by Ampha (2013), which aimed to examine the students' attitudes towards storytelling-based instruction. Based on the results of the qualitative data through an open-ended questionnaire, using storytelling-based instruction helped to develop the students' positive attitudes.

Conclusion

One major conclusion was the positive effect of using storytelling-based instruction within ZPD-activated contexts on improving oral proficiency (speaking skill). The outperformance of ZPD-activated groups, compared with the control group (non-ZPD activated group), may be attributed to the interactional affordances to the ZPD-activated groups, which were not offered to the control group. During the instruction, the ZPD-activated groups had opportunities for interaction and collaborative learning, which were not highly illustrated in the control group. Actually, the traditional instruction in the control group provided less opportunity for the participants to interact. Thus, the traditional instruction was inadequate in assisting them to arrive at a parallel speaking skill development in L2.

In addition, the results of this study suggest that both equal and unequal proximal context can similarly result in the speaking skill development of EFL learners. This shows the structure of group is not so important as the nature of interaction. That is, interaction per se can majorly bear an impact on EFL learners' speaking proficiency development, either in form of interaction

between more capable peers with less capable peers or interaction between the same level peers. Peer-peer interaction at the optimal level, regardless of diversity within the group, can offer highly optimal chances to all learners' cognitive development. Both more capable peers and peers with the same level of cognitive performance can help other peers overcome their cognitive obstacles in a ZPD-based approach and give rise to a multitude of oral skills practices.

Moreover, it was found that the storytelling-based instruction enhanced the EFL learners' attitudes towards the course. This may be attributed to the fact that a positive sense of interaction provided a productive and low-anxiety atmosphere in the classroom, helping the EFL students gain confidence. The instruction assisted students to boost their confidence and enhance their attitudes towards the language learning context, and particularly, practicing speaking skill in such a context.

The above results suggest that storytelling-based instruction through ZPD-based group-work are complementary tools in bridging the gap between language study and language use and creating a positive classroom atmosphere resembling real-life world in which individual leaners exchange ideas and interact with their peers. Therefore, this study opens up the possibility for further trials using this method (storytelling) within this specific context (ZPD-based context). Finally, it is highly suggested that these tools become a part of the teaching process to add color to teacher's irreplaceable classic role, not to vanish its color; which is actually quite multifaceted role. When it comes to challenging and inspiring students to learn, providing moral guidance, to being a role model who making social contributions and encouraging intellectual growth.

References

Abdollahpour, Z., & Asadzadeh, N. (2012). The impact of exposure to digital flash stories on Iranian EFL learners' written reproduction of short stories. Canadian Journal on Scientific and Industrial Research, 3(2), 40-53.

Ampha, J. (2013). A study of the effectiveness of storytelling-based instruction to enhance English listening and speaking skills of sixth grade students. Unpublished master's thesis, Srinakharinwirot University, Graduate School, Bangkok, Thailand.

Bachman, L. F., & Kunnan, A. J. (2005). Statistical analyses for language assessment (Workbook and CD-ROM). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baleghizadeh, S., TimchehMemar, H., & TimchehMemar, A. (2010). The effect of symmetrical versus asymmetrical scaffolding on English reading comprehension of EFL learners. Studies in Literature and Language Journal, 1(7), 104-111.

Camarillo, C. L. L., Valdivia, P. J. M., & Sánchez, F. C. (2008). Does storytelling improve reading to young learners? Cancún, Mexico: Departamento de Lenguay Educación, Universidad de Quintana Roo.

Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Doolittle, P. E. (1995) Understanding cooperative learning through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Paper presented at the Lilly National Conference on Excellence in College Teaching. Columbia, SC.

Educational Testing Service (1982). Oral proficiency testing manual. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Freytag, G. (1900). Freytag's technique of the drama: An exposition of dramatic composition and art (3rd ed.). (E. J. MacEwan, Trans.). Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, LCCN. (Original work published 1894)

Guerrero, C. M., & Villamil, O. S. (2000). Activating the ZPD: Mutual scaffolding in L2 peer revision. The Modern Language Journal, 84, 51-68.

Hill, L. A. (1982). Steps to Understanding. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hsu, Y. (2010). The influence of English storytelling on the oral language complexity of EFL primary students. Unpublished master's thesis, National Yunlin University of Science & Technology. Yunlin.

Karimi, L., & Jalilvand, M. (2014). The effect of peer and teacher scaffolding on the reading comprehension of EFL learners in asymmetrical and symmetrical groups. The Journal of Teaching Language Skills (JTLS), 5(4), 1-17.

Lantolf, J. P. & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). Techniques and principles in language teaching (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Lidz, C.S. (1992). Dynamic assessment: some thoughts on the model, the medium, and the message. Learning and Individual Differences, 4, 125-136.

Mai, R. (2010). Teacher cognition in corrective feedback in Japan. System, 39, 451-467.

McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (1993). Materials and methods in ELT. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mohana, G. (2014). Enhancing the speaking skill of second language learners through Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Golden Research Thoughts, 3(11), 1-6.

Numpaque, N. R. B., & Rojas, M. A. G. (2010). TPR storytelling: A key to speak fluently in English. Cuadernos de Lingüística Hispánica, 15, 151-162.

Oxenden, C., Latham-Koeing, C. & Seligson, P. (2008). American English file (student book 3). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rahimi Domakani, M., & Felfelian, S. (2012). L2 learner interlanguage pragmatic development within ZPD activated proximal context. Paper presented at the First Conference on Interdisciplinary Approaches to Language Learning and Teaching, Mashhad, Iran.

Storch, N. (2002). Patterns of interaction in ESL pair work. Language Learning, 52(1), 119-58.

Tong-Fredericks, C. (1984). Types of oral communication activities and the language they generate: A comparison. System, 12, 133-134.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). Thought and language. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman. (Eds.). (A. R. Luria, M. Lopez-Morillas & M. Cole [with J. V. Wertsch], Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1930-1934)

Vygotsky, L. S. (1998). The problem of age. In R.W. Rieber (Ed.), The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky (Vol. 5), Child Psychology (pp. v-xv). New York: Plenum.

Wu, M. Y. (2008). The impact of English proficiency on college learners' meaning negotiation in a Chinese EFL context. Unpublished master's thesis, Lanzhou University.

Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem-solving. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17, 89-100.

Wright, A. (2004). Storytelling with children: Resource books for teachers. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zipes, J. (2012). The cultural evolution of storytelling and fairy tales: Human communication and memetics. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Appendix
Attitude Questionnaire
Direction: Please read each item and show your level of agreement with it by choosing one of the five choices given below. All responses will be confidential and used only for research purposes. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

SD: Strongly Disagree   D: Disagree   N: Neutral   A: Agree   SA: Strongly Agree

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I prefer to speak using storytelling method rather than speaking using materials provided in the course book.					
2. I like the storytelling method since it helps me improve my speaking skill.					
3. I like the storytelling method because it provides me with the appropriate speaking strategies that I like.					
4. I like the storytelling method since it helps me greatly develop my speaking.					
5. I like the storytelling method since storytelling method prepare me for different real-life speaking situations.					
6. I like the storytelling method since it introduces me to how language is used in the real-world.					
7. I like the storytelling method since it exposes me to real language use for real-life communicative purpose.					
8. Storytelling method in class is more interesting than the traditional instruction and materials in the textbook/teacher-fronted class.					
9. Storytelling method helps me to get rid of my anxiety when speaking.					
10. Storytelling method arouses my interests and motivations to speak English.					
11. I feel more confident in speaking while having the storytelling method.					
12. Storytelling method is good for me to get the gist of the story and retell the story using my own words and structures.					
13. Storytelling method motivates me to deal with other materials outside the class.					
14. Following storytelling method is difficult to me.					
15. Storytelling method is quite distracting to me.					