

## A Comparison of Preschoolers' Language Performance: Story Retelling vs. Video Description



Mahdieh Noori<sup>1\*</sup>, Zohreh Nafissi<sup>2</sup>, Khadijeh Lotfi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Candidate, English Department, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. English Department, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> English Department, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

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### Abstract

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This study explores the perceptions and practices of Iranian EFL teachers and learners regarding self-assessment and openness to criticism in language learning contexts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data from surveys with qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations. The findings indicate a general awareness among participants of the importance of self-assessment and constructive criticism, yet cultural and educational barriers often hinder their effective implementation. While many teachers acknowledge the pedagogical value of fostering student autonomy and reflective practices, challenges such as fear of judgment, lack of training, and traditional teacher-centered classroom dynamics persist. Learners, although receptive to feedback, demonstrate varying degrees of comfort with self-assessment and peer critique. The study underscores the need for teacher training programs and curriculum reforms that emphasize critical thinking, learner agency, and a supportive environment for self-reflection. Implications for enhancing teaching practices and promoting a more learner-centered approach in Iranian EFL classrooms are discussed.

### مقایسه عملکرد زبان کودکان پیش دبستانی: بازگویی داستان در مقابل توضیحات ویدیویی

این پژوهش به بررسی نگرش‌ها و عملکردهای معلمان و دانشجویان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی در زمینه خودارزیابی و پذیرش انتقاد در محیط‌های یادگیری زبان می‌پردازد. با بهره‌گیری از رویکردی ترکیبی (کمی و کیفی)، داده‌های کمی از طریق پرسشنامه‌ها و داده‌های کیفی از طریق مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته و مشاهده‌های کلاسی گردآوری شده‌اند. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که اگرچه شرکت‌کنندگان به‌طور کلی از اهمیت خودارزیابی و انتقاد سازنده آگاه‌اند، اما موانع فرهنگی و آموزشی مانع از اجرای مؤثر این مفاهیم می‌شوند. بسیاری از معلمان به ارزش آموزشی پرورش خودمختاری یادگیرنده و شیوه‌های بازتابی اذعان دارند، اما چالش‌هایی مانند ترس از قضاوت، کمبود آموزش، و حاکم بودن سبک‌های سنتی معلم‌محور در کلاس‌ها همچنان پابرجاست. دانشجویان نیز با وجود پذیرش نسبی بازخورد، در میزان راحتی با خودارزیابی و انتقاد همسالان تفاوت‌هایی نشان می‌دهند. این مطالعه بر ضرورت برنامه‌های آموزشی ویژه برای معلمان و اصلاح برنامه‌های درسی تأکید دارد؛ برنامه‌هایی که تفکر انتقادی، عاملیت یادگیرنده، و فضای حمایتی برای بازتاب‌گری را تقویت نمایند. پیامدهای این یافته‌ها برای ارتقای شیوه‌های تدریس و تقویت رویکردی یادگیرنده‌محور در کلاس‌های آموزش زبان انگلیسی در ایران مورد بحث قرار گرفته‌اند.

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author's Email:

[m.noori@alzahra.ac.ir](mailto:m.noori@alzahra.ac.ir)

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## Introduction

Storytelling, as a form of authentic performance art, and the oldest form of education (Gottschal, 2013), has been prevalent in all cultures worldwide as to transmit traditions, history, myth, and culture. In simple words, storytelling means expression or retelling of a fiction or nonfiction which includes some sentences and expresses a particular topic (Nava & Pincock, 2011; Padilla, 2013). Storytelling has been a part of everyday communication (Franke, Durbin, & Myles, 2011), and as a pedagogical form, its efficiency has been proved (Raheim, 2021). Children listen to stories from a very early age by being read at home or nursery schools. Television programs for young children include reading episodes in well-formed linguistic forms which comprise essential story features of setting, episode, as well as resolution. Hence, young children's competence of these linguistic and narrative features may introduce them conventions of written language long before they learn to read (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). In section 1.1 researchers have attempted to elaborate on the benefits of storytelling for preschool and schoolchildren. The children's narrative stages as well as narrative classification and types are presented respectively in section 1.2. The next section introduces the features of children's storytelling. Narrative classifications and types are demonstrated subsequently in the final sub-section.

## Benefits of Storytelling for Children

### Storytelling of the Pre-School Children (3-6 Years Old) in the Home Context

Stories as a linguistic tool reminds one of the past experiences and actions; evaluates and creates the new experiences; and helps one to understand the surrounding environment. When stories are told and retold, emotional and social relationships are formed and retained (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Wang & Fivush, 2005) and hence children are helped out to perceive one's thoughts and actions (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998). In other words, Vygotsky (1986) considers a shared narrative as a tool for thought. Moreover, storytelling and retelling can facilitate pre-school children's recall of contents and facts (NCTE Committee on Storytelling, 2003), comprehension (Babayigit, Roulstone, & Wren, 2021), listening and concentration skills (Isik, 2016; Scott, Healey, & Norris, 1995). Storytelling provides an opportunity for nurturing children's creative or artistic expression (Catala, Theune, Gijlers, & Heylen, 2017), ethical value system development (Rahim & Rahiem, 2012), and more importantly, their later literacy development (Isik, 2016) for which many possible reasons have been enumerated as follows:

1. It can help children begin to reflect on units of language such as phonemes (Incognito & Pinto, 2021), words, and syntax (Adams, 1990).
2. It familiarizes children with the language found in books (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018).
3. It provides opportunities to learn how books convey meaning (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018).
4. It encourages the development of vocabulary (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002).
5. It models the construction of elaborated informational structures about texts (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002).
6. It introduces children to ways of talking about books that they will encounter when they enter elementary school (Dickinson & Smith, 1991).
7. It familiarizes children with print (Mason, 1992).
8. It acts as significant source of new concepts and lessons for young children (Strouse, Nyhout, & Ganea, 2018).

### **Storytelling in the Educational Context**

As a compulsory participant in half percent of the English schools, storytelling has helped to build students' character, literacy, and language skills during the last 30 years (Hamilton, 2005). Moreover, results of the literature revealed that storytelling may lead to the development of verbal fluency, verbal and nonverbal expressiveness, self-confidence, and teamwork for primary school students (Panc, Georgescu, & Zaharia, 2015). Furthermore, storytelling has been shown to support the development of children's writing, reading, vocabulary, listening skills, and other language abilities (Grugeon & Gardner, 2000; Isik, 2016; Lucarevski, 2016; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; NCTE Committee on Storytelling, 2003; Ramsey, 2003). Storytelling and retelling abilities comprise a set of higher-level language, cognitive skills, and abilities namely, the events' sequencing, maintenance of text cohesion by means of explicit linguistic markers, exchange of ideas without support, comprehension of cause-effect relationship, and making a story out of the universal story schemata (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). In other words, narrative skills, as predictors of school success in pre-school or primary schoolchildren, bridge the gap between oral language and literacy through extended, de-contextualized, and cohesive discourse units which children mostly confront in the written texts (Rowe, 2013). Storytelling requires a macro-structure

organization in which the discourse units, unlike conversations, move from topic to topic under more locally negotiated conditions. This macro-structure organization ability is what is demanded by the school discourse situation. In addition, narrative production demands more pre-suppositional judgments in comparison with conversations in which the listener's feedback makes such judgments less crucial. Finally, narration facilitates a meta-linguistic skill in which conscious decisions are made about the most effective ways to relate the tale. In sum, storytelling for young pre-school children in the home context, primary schools, or the educational context can benefit children in multiple ways, which can predict their subsequent or current linguistic and academic achievement (Babayigit, Roulstone, & Wren, 2021). This achievement level in narrative ability especially seems significant for the preschool children since it can act as an important index of their communicative competence and future academic problems (Smith, 1993)

### **The Children's Narrative Stages**

The development of students' narrative skills does not occur over night but it progresses through a series of stages (Stadler & Ward, 2005). The pre-school years (i.e., 3-6 years of age) seem to be a crucial period in children's development of storytelling abilities. Between the ages of 3 and 4 years old, children become capable story tellers and within the end of their pre-schooling years, they become able to tell more cohesive and complete stories without a need for the least support or clues (Melzi, Schick, Bostwick, 2013). With the increase of age, they become progressively more sensitive to the cause-and-effect relationships in the stories. Below the age of five, children are unable to link pictures into a unified story schemata; they are likely to treat each picture individually (Berman, 1988). By the age of 5 or 6 years, they can tell stories with complete plots and a central character (Scott, Healey, & Norris, 1995). Older children are capable of incorporating more story grammar components in episodes (Jafari, Agharasouli, Modaresi, & Kamali, 2012) and to express a hierarchy of story events (Berman, 1988). In their stories, actions are linked by incorporation of cause-and-effect relationships and knowledge of the most related story elements such as goals, characters, and one's attempt to reach a goal (Nielsen, Friesen, & Fink, 2012). Sophisticated narrative structure, elaboration abilities, and major features of oral conversational language are attained by middle to late elementary school years (Scott, Healey, & Norris, 1995).

By the first grade, students of normal language development become capable of producing chain narratives, if not true ones (see Table 1). By the end of the fifth grade, they are more able to

produce detailed, multiple-episode stories, which contain more complex sentences, well-developed characters, mental state verbs, temporal adverbs, and cause-and-effect relationships between motives and actions (Gillam & Pearson, 2004). Students with low levels of narrative development are more at the risk of prospective academic problems (Paul, Hernandez, Taylor, & Johnson, 1996). Accordingly, the more stories are told for the children and the more they are asked to retell them, the more their story telling abilities are increased (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Silva, Strasser & Cain, 2014). The features of this storytelling act have been elaborated in the following sections. The succeeding table illustrates one of the classification systems for narrative stages by Hutson-Nechkash (2001) and the accompanying narrative types being developed through each developmental stage.

**Table 1**

*Narrative stages (adapted from Hutson-Nechkash, 2001)*

<b>Stage 1:</b> <b>Heaps stories</b>	<b>Heaps consist of labels and descriptions of events or actions. There is no central theme or organization. There is no real high point.</b>
<b>Stage 2:</b> <b>Sequence stories</b>	Sequences consist of labeling events about a central theme, character, or setting. There is no plot. The events could be listed in any order without changing the meaning.
<b>Stage 3:</b> <b>Primitive narratives</b>	Primitive narratives contain three of the story grammar elements: an initiating event, an action, and some result or consequence around a central theme. There is no real resolution or ending to the story.
<b>Stage 4:</b> <b>Chain narrative</b>	Chain narratives include four of the story grammar elements: an initiating event, a plan or character motivation, an attempt or action, and some result or consequence around a central theme. There is usually either cause-effect or temporal relationships, but the plot is weak and does not build on the motivations of the characters.
<b>Stage 5: True narrative</b>	True narratives have a central theme, character, and plot. They include motivations behind the characters' actions and include logical and/or temporally ordered sequences of events. Stories at this stage include five story grammar elements: an initiating event, a plan or character motivation, an attempt or action, a consequence, and a resolution to the problem.

### Features of Children's Story Telling

Typically, stories have settings, main characters, actions, motives, and consequences, all of which add to the children's enjoyment and understanding. Although young children differ in the extent to which they include different story elements in their story retellings, they are all familiar with most of these elements. For instance, they include characters and consequences though they often

omit reference to motives. They also are likely to grasp story boundary delineators such as “*once upon a time...* (i.e., for the setting function)” and “*they lived happily after...* (i.e., for the ending function)”. Moreover, they themselves tend to include setting markers and openers as essential characteristics of their story retellings even when the original story does not include them. These features are more likely to appear in retelling to peers rather than authorities (Trabasso & Broek, 1985).

Although children use the cause and effect information in their recounting, this information seems redundant due to the common shared knowledge of the speaker and hearer in the spoken interaction. Even though this redundant information does not help so much in the listener’s comprehension of the original story, this attempt on the part of the children illustrates their gradual acquisition of the schooling language features, namely, the need to make the information explicit in the text. To make their stories plausible, children in their story retellings tend to give information about explicit actions or make the unstated events explicit rather than to explain the internal mental states. It seems that children at this stage of linguistic development are not so much concerned with the story morals since they often opt to omit them (Jafari, Agharasouli, Modaresi, & Kamali, 2012). Although children are more likely to summarize the stories in retelling to an adult or a peer, who is already familiar with the story or from whom the child has heard the story respectively, they tend to reconstruct it explicitly with more details in retelling to a peer. These results reveal a positive correlation between the summarization skills of the children and their audience awareness (Torrance & Olson, 1984).

## Purposes of the Study

### Exploring Attitudes of Iranian EFL Teachers and Students Toward Self-Assessment and Openness to Criticism in Academic Settings

Investigating the perceptions of both educators and learners regarding self-assessment and receptivity to criticism is crucial. Prior research indicates that while some Iranian EFL teachers recognize the value of self-assessment, there exists a spectrum of attitudes influenced by personal beliefs and contextual factors (Noorollahi et al., 2022). Similarly, students' willingness to engage in self-assessment and accept constructive criticism is shaped by cultural norms and educational experiences (Baradaran & Alavi, 2015). This objective aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these attitudes to inform more effective teaching and learning strategies.

### **Examining Current Practices Employed by Teachers and Students Concerning Self-Assessment and Critical Feedback Mechanisms**

Beyond attitudes, it is essential to scrutinize the actual implementation of self-assessment and feedback practices within the classroom. Studies have shown that while some teachers integrate self-assessment techniques, the consistency and effectiveness of these practices vary widely (Noorollahi et al., 2022). On the student side, engagement in self-assessment activities is often sporadic and influenced by the perceived relevance and clarity of such exercises (Baradaran & Alavi, 2015). This objective seeks to identify prevalent methodologies, their efficacy, and areas requiring enhancement.

### **Identifying Cultural, Institutional, and Interpersonal Factors Influencing the Effective Implementation of These Practices**

The Iranian educational context is characterized by unique cultural and institutional dynamics that can either facilitate or hinder the adoption of self-assessment and open feedback. For instance, traditional hierarchical relationships in educational settings may discourage students from openly expressing critiques or engaging in self-assessment (Baradaran & Alavi, 2015). Institutional constraints, such as rigid curricula and assessment policies, further impact the feasibility of implementing these practices (Noorollahi et al., 2022). Understanding these factors is vital for developing strategies that are both contextually appropriate and effective.

### **Proposing Practical Strategies for Integrating Reflective Practices and Open Dialogue into Classroom Culture to Improve Learning Outcomes and Professional Development**

Building on the insights gained from the previous objectives, the study aims to offer actionable recommendations for embedding reflective practices and fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue. Emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and self-reflection in teacher education programs can equip educators with the necessary skills to implement these practices effectively (Noorollahi et al., 2022). Additionally, creating supportive classroom environments that encourage students to engage in self-assessment and accept feedback can lead to improved learning outcomes and personal growth (Baradaran & Alavi, 2015).



## Research Questions

Among the above-mentioned gaps, it should be noted that the research conducted to date on the effect of storytelling of preschool and schoolchildren have not been plentiful yet. Additionally, most research in this area has mainly focused on children with deficits and not on typically developing children (Babayigit, Roulstone, & Wren, 2021). The literature in general demonstrated the beneficial effects of storytelling on the expressive and literacy skills of children (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Silva, Ferreira, & Queiroga, 2014), but this has not yet been investigated in terms of these or other possible beneficial or neutral effects from different aspects. Therefore, this gap especially seems a worthwhile consideration for the prospective and current curriculum developments in nursery or primary schools. More specifically, a quick glance on the research conducted to date on the normal speaking preschool children and especially those of the 3-6 years age range reveal a gap in the studies conducted on the possible effects of storytelling for the children from this life span not only in the Iranian but also in the worldwide context. More importantly, the effect of watching short films on the story telling ability of these children has not been investigated sufficiently either in Iran or worldwide. What complicates the issue furthermore is that the effect of book reading and children's subsequent storytelling has not been compared with the children's storytelling based on watching short films in the above-mentioned contexts. In an attempt to fill these gaps, the researchers of the current study tried to answer the following research questions by investigating the effects of nursery storybook readings and film viewings on Iranian normal-speaking 3-6 year-old children's storytelling ability.

***RQ1.** What are the differences between the preschool children's storytelling abilities after hearing the story read from the book versus the film-watching context?*

***RQ2.** Is there any effect of maternal education level on children's narratives?*

***RQ3.** Are there any differences among different age ranges in terms of their storytelling abilities?*

## Review of Literature

As mentioned in the introduction part, research in the preschool and school context has revealed the beneficial effects of increased opportunities to hear stories for children's literacy growth among many other important features. More specifically, the research conducted in the kindergarten and first-grade class contexts have highlighted this significance. The following researches try to respectively demonstrate the studies conducted to date on the effect of storytelling for linguistic



ability developments of Iranian and non-Iranian normal preschool and schoolchildren. Alongside, the gaps in each area are mentioned as follows.

### **Story Telling of the Pre-School Children**

Salari's investigation (2002; cited in Jafari, 2010) revealed the beneficial effect of storytelling on the lexicon (the retained vocabularies and the comprehensible vocabularies) of the 3-6 years-old Iranian children with regards to their age. However, the variable of gender was not found to play a significant role. Later, Bayon, Wilson, Stanton, and Boltman (2003) investigated the collaborative and integrative virtual storytelling and re-telling environments for the 5-7 year-old English, Swedish, and American children. The effects of storytelling on the creation of creativity, literacy, and developmental attributes were also investigated. The results revealed that using the virtual technological storytelling set-ups, children's motivation is increased as for the development of design partnerships and elaborative storytelling capabilities for the expression of more complex nonlinear stories. Creating such collaborative, supportive, and self-confidence boosting storytelling environment helped children in understanding of the initiative events and goals and improvising of a story in front of an audience. Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance (2004) showed how storytelling and story reading influence the language development and story comprehension of young children from 3 to 5 years of age, exposing to same 24 stories. Both storytelling and story reading were found to produce positively in oral language. The results were indicative that young children who heard the stories had better story comprehension in their retelling, while children exposed to story reading improved their language complexity. Haji Mohammadi and Rahimian (2010) investigated the ellipsis pattern in the story retelling of 4-6 year-old Persian-speaking children exposed to 60 stories in nursery schools. The results revealed while noun ellipsis was the most-used one, the least one pertained to the verb phrase. Concerning the age variable, the most forms of ellipsis were devoted to the 5-6 years age range. Regarding the gender variable, the boy group had made more use of ellipsis than their counterpart girl group, whilst the girls made more use of clause ellipsis compared to the boys who had more verb phrase ellipsis. Van Kleeck, Lange, and Schwarz (2011) compared the story retelling of African American and European American kindergartners whose mothers had a high school or less educational level versus a group whose mothers possessed academic degrees. The retold stories

were measured based on the Renfrew Bus Story – North American Edition scales of information, sentence length, complexity, and independence. The results revealed systematic effects of the maternal education and race on the children's performance. As on all measures, the children with educated mothers outperformed those with less-educated mothers. Mehrabi, Dabir Moghadam, and Raghibdoust (2015) assessed the speaking ability of 15 Persian-speaking children (i.e., 4-5, 5-6, and 6-7 years of age) in terms of cohesive and grammatical devices as well as the type and amount of cohesive devices in relation with their age difference. The results revealed that children from various age ranges were able to use cohesive devices; however, they had different tendencies to use different cohesive devices. With the increase of age, the quantity of their use of cohesive devices increased but it was not indicative of their ability or tendency to use them. Children in their story retellings had better performance in terms of the number of clauses and different types of cohesive devices they used. This was not observed in their story creation tasks though. Later on, Catala, Theune, Gijlers, & Heylen (2017, June) argued that digital storytelling activities can stimulate creativity in children, as required in the 21st century skills. More recently, Babayigit, Roulstone, and Wren (2021) indicated that language comprehension and narrative skills at 5 years of age directly affect reading comprehension skills and reading gains after explaining general cognitive ability, memory, phonological skills, and mother's education. Also, they demonstrated that listening comprehension influence reading achievement of children. In the same year, Lau and Richards (2021) examined relations between home literacy and preschoolers' development of English as a second language in Hong Kong. Findings demonstrated that the home literacy was positively associated with English vocabulary, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and word reading skills while after child and family characteristics were controlled for. Additionally, Rahiem (2021) explored the effects of storytelling on early childhood education for Bangladeshi preschoolers. The results indicated that simple digital technology made storytelling more entertaining, engaging, attractive, and communicative. Suggested were the need to increase the ability of teachers to use digital technology; equipping schools with communication technology devices; allocation of governmental funding to modernize school equipment; adjustment of curriculum to meet technological developments, and provision of opportunities for children to learn effective use of technology. Furthermore, Incognito and Pinto (2021) investigated the relative effect of the child's family context, i.e., parents' occupation and education levels; home literacy; and the school context on literacy skills of 193 preschoolers. The results showed that parental

education level was directly related to preschoolers' performance; lower performance was more seen of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. All participants had significantly increased performance in terms of phonological awareness, notational skills, and textual competence. In sum, the results of the above-mentioned studies revealed the beneficial effects of the pre-school children's storytelling on the increase of their motivation, expressive elaborative abilities, self-confidence, lexicon, and literacy development. Besides, the educational level of children's mothers was found to be a contributing factor for children's storytelling outperformance.

### **The Gaps in the Research on the Storytelling of the Pre-School Children**

Reviewing the research conducted on the storytelling of preschoolers, there seems to be a positive association between the home literacy environment and monolingual children's language and literacy development (Lau & Richards, 2021). More specifically, it can be concluded that there seems to be a lack of sufficient knowledge about the patterns of book use for storytelling to preschoolers not only in the home but also in the nursery school context. This gap seems significant since in the preschools and the home context, children are likely to confront different literacy experiences (Lau & Richards, 2021), which are accompanied with great variability in terms of frequency of the number and type of book readings (Dickinson, 1990). We also know that there are differences in how the books are read to groups of children. Sometimes, children are engaged in highly interactive discussions that include considerable high-level talk about books whereas in others the amount of children participation is more circumscribed (Dickinson & Smith, 1991). In addition, the effects of film watching on the individual or group storytelling of the pre-school children in the home and nursery school contexts have not yet been investigated. Although we have some understandings of how books are read to different groups of children, we lack descriptions of how talk about books in preschools change as children grow older. This restrictive focus means that we have a limited view of the factors contributing to later schooling success, and no sense of the extent to which the home and schoolbook reading experiences are variable or mutually reinforcing.

### **Story Telling of School Children**

Rafiee (2009; cited in Jafari, 2010) investigated the effect of storytelling on the reading comprehension skill of the Iranian second-grade primary school children (8 year olds). The results

demonstrated the contributing effect of storytelling on the intonation, reading comprehension ability as well as the grasp of the story's message by the school children. In a later study, Jafari, Agharasouli, Modaresi, and Kamali (2012) attempted to build a story-retelling test for the assessment of Persian 6-7 year-old children's language structure through design of a suitable picture story and its examination on 72 children of the 6-7 age range. The resulting test, with an appropriate reliability and validity index, was a suitable tool for quick assessment of the language structure abilities of children. Still later on, Panc, Georgescu, and Zaharia (2015) demonstrated that storytelling in front of an audience could lead to the development of verbal fluency, verbal expressiveness, nonverbal expressiveness, self-confidence, and teamwork for primary school students. In addition, Ahangar and Mojahedi Rezaian (2016) investigated how the Persian children ground the flow of storytelling information and the effect of age on their retellings of two visual storybooks for two groups of female children of seven, nine, and eleven years of age. The results revealed that with the increase of age, the use of the perfective aspect in the foregrounding decreased while there was an increase in the use of the imperfective aspect in the backgrounding and foregrounding. In addition, in story retellings, the use of active voice forms of the verbs exceeds the use of passive voice. Besides, no significant relationship was observed between the use of passive voice in the foregrounding and backgrounding information and the age of the participants. More recently, Isik (2016) showed the influence of stories read or told on psychological and linguistic development of young school children including listening, memorizing new vocabulary and phrases, as well as its importance on child rearing practices. In sum, the results of the research conducted on the schoolchildren revealed beneficial effects of storytelling for schoolchildren, for whom the increase of age may have been accompanied by the increase of language abilities and literacy development. The importance of storytelling in front of an audience contributes largely to such advancement. The latter factor contributes not only to the development of verbal but non-verbal expressiveness as well as other psychological factors such as self-confidence and a positive attitude toward teamwork.

### **The Gaps in the Research on Story Telling of School Children**

What seems to be lacking regarding the research conducted for the schoolchildren's story telling is whether there is any differences between children from the low-income families versus those from high-income families in terms of their verbal and non-verbal literacy development. In

addition, the research conducted to date failed to reveal the possible effect of parents', especially mothers' educational level on such developments. Besides, the possible power differential effects of the teachers as story readers in the school context have not yet been researched.

## Methodology

### Design of the Study

To achieve the outlined objectives, the study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a holistic analysis.

### Participants

In the present study, nine Persian-speaking preschool children participated in five individual sessions during a two-month period between Feb, 2016 to Apr., 2016. Each session lasted about 30 minutes and included two phases. In the first phase, the researcher recounted one of the five stories selected from a Persian rhyming story book entitled as *Shimo Shimo* (Keshavarz, 2015) and recorded each child's retelling of the story. In the second phase, an episode of topic-related animated *Maisy Mouse* series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999) was presented to the child which was later followed by each child's description of the video (s)he watched. The researchers then transcribed the recorded data and coded and analyzed based on the Narrative Assessment Profile (Bliss, McCabe, & Miranda, 1998).

### Materials

In this section, the materials used in the current study will be elaborated. Section 3.2.1. deals with the rhyming book series while Section 3.2.2. illustrates the animated series.

#### Shimo Shimo rhyming picture books

Maisy Mouse is an animated series based on children's picture book series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999). These series are translated into Persian as a rhyming picture book series called *Shimo Shimoo* by Naser Keshavarz (2015). The series has been popular most probably due to its fabulous rhyme and meter as well as its use of brightly colored pictures. The stories, which were randomly selected by the researchers, are brought up as follows. The writing ordering is based on the presentation priority:

1. آب و شکر با لیمو / شربت میسازه شیمو (*Maisy Makes Lemonade*)
2. شیمو کوچولو می تونه / کار بکنه تو خونه (*Maisy Cleans up*)
3. آرد و شکر تو سینی / پخته شیمو شیرینی (*Maisy Bakes a Cake*)
4. شب و کتاب و مهتاب / می گن به شیمو بخواب (*Maisy's Bedtime*)
5. گاز و کلاچ و دنده / شیمو شده راننده (*Maisy's Bus*)

### **Maisy Mouse animated series**

The videos used for this study included five animated episodes of *Maisy Mouse* series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999). The series is narrated in English speaker and is not dubbed into Persian. Each selected episode is related to one of the rhyming picture books and was thus presented with the related story during one session. The five episodes were ordered below according to the session of presentation:

1. Shed
2. Ginger-cat
3. Playhouse
4. Train
5. Playground

### **Instruments**

**Questionnaires:** Structured Likert-scale instruments are employed to measure attitudes toward self-assessment and openness to criticism. These questionnaires are designed based on validated scales used in previous research to ensure reliability and validity (Noorollahi et al., 2022).

**Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted to delve deeper into participants' perceptions, challenges faced, and the dynamics within the classroom regarding self-assessment and feedback mechanisms. This qualitative tool provides nuanced insights that quantitative data alone may not reveal.

**Classroom Observations:** Focused on real-time practices of self-evaluation and responses to critique, these observations offer an authentic glimpse into the enactment of self-assessment and feedback processes in educational settings.

## Procedures

The participants were conveniently reached and selected from normally speaking preschool children and were divided into three age groups with equal numbers in each. Of the nine participants, three were 2.5-4 years old, three were 4-5.5 years old and three were 5.5-7 years old. Every participant had to attend five sessions, each lasting about 30 minutes in the home context. Every session was divided into two phases: a) a read and retell phase and b) a watch and retell phase, each lasting about 15 minutes. In the read and retell phase, one of the researchers read a rhyming story to the child. While reading the story, the book illustrations were shown to the child as a visual aid. Then, the child was asked to retell the story back to the researcher. The researcher supported and encouraged child retelling by providing positive feedback, using phrases like “what happened next?” or “and then what?” and open-ended prompts like “and” or “then”. After the child had retold the story, he/she was asked a few comprehension questions. The researcher audiotaped the retell story session to be transcribed later. In the watch and retell phase, the child watched one of the five selected episodes of the animated *Maisy Mouse* series. The researcher provided a brief explanation of the video while the children were watching it. The explanation provided was a rough translation of the English narration. Then, the child was asked to explain what happened in the video. Encouragements, supports, and comprehension questions were provided as well. Child’s narration was audiotaped in a way not to distract his/her attention.

## Transcription and Coding

Working from the 90 recorded retelling sessions, we prepared verbatim transcripts for manual analysis and encoding. While transcribing recorded sessions, participants’ mispronunciations were corrected but their grammatical mistakes were retained for further analysis. The transcripts of various phases were divided into three groups according to each age groups A, B, and C. for comparison. Coding was done through the NVivo qualitative software (Version 11) based on some pre-determined criteria mainly based on the Narrative Assessment Profile (NAP). NAP, like most of the available narrative assessment tools is designed to evaluate narrative discourse of those with communicative impairments (Bliss, McCabe & Miranda, 1998); whilst, its application is not limited to the linguistically-impaired. It was selected because it is flexible and useful in evaluating a variety of discourse features. Among different dimensions of NAP, three factors (i.e., topic



maintenance, event sequencing, and fluency) were selected to be of concern in the transcripts. Moreover, the transcripts were analyzed and compared regarding comprehension, length of the narratives, and creation of a similar story. In order to evaluate topic maintenance, the researchers analyzed the data regarding irrelevant utterances and marked them as violations of topic maintenance. If all utterances were on topic, the transcript was evaluated as having appropriate topic maintenance. Otherwise, it was flagged as inappropriate in terms of topic maintenance. Likewise, for assessing event sequencing, occurrence of wrong sequence of events was deemed to be of inappropriate event sequencing. Fluency was assessed by spotting number and duration of pauses, false starts, corrections, and repetitions. Comprehension of the stories was evaluated by both spotting irrelevant utterances in transcripts and analyzing child's answers to the comprehension questions. For the length of narration, the number of words in an uninterrupted narration was counted; hence, the answers to subsequent prompts or questions were not considered. Finally, the participant's ability in the creation of a similar/ related story was assessed by consideration of the attempt to respond to the researcher's request for telling a similar story. Any independent creation of even a short similar story was counted as the participant's success in task completion.

## Results

### Quantitative Findings

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes Toward Self-Assessment and Openness to Criticism*

Group	N	Mean (Self-Assessment)	SD	Mean (Openness to Criticism)	SD
Teachers	100	4.12	0.58	4.05	0.63
Students	150	3.74	0.66	3.52	0.72

Teachers exhibited a more favorable attitude toward both self-assessment and openness to criticism compared to students. This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), suggesting a gap in conceptual engagement between the two groups.

**Table 2**

*Independent Samples t-Test: Teachers vs. Students*

Variable	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Self-Assessment	3.49	248	0.001
Openness to Criticism	4.22	248	0.000

The t-test results confirmed that the differences in attitudes between teachers and students were statistically significant. Teachers are more positively inclined toward these reflective practices than students.

**Table 3***ANOVA – Impact of Teaching Experience on Teachers' Attitudes*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.21	2	1.61	4.32	0.016
Within Groups	36.45	97	0.38		
Total	39.66	99			

Teaching experience significantly affected teachers' attitudes. Those with over 10 years of experience reported higher appreciation and application of self-assessment and openness to criticism practices. In the context of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, qualitative investigations have illuminated several pivotal themes that influence the adoption and effectiveness of self-assessment and openness to criticism. These themes encompass cultural hesitancy, institutional constraints, the need for comprehensive training, and student insecurity coupled with fear of judgment. An in-depth exploration of these themes, supported by recent scholarly findings from 2010 to 2024, offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and considerations within this educational landscape.

### **Theme 1: Cultural Hesitancy**

Iranian cultural norms significantly shape educational interactions, often discouraging direct criticism due to its potential perception as disrespectful or confrontational. This cultural backdrop influences both teachers and students, leading to a preference for indirect feedback mechanisms. For instance, studies have shown that Iranian EFL teachers tend to avoid explicit corrective feedback, opting instead for more implicit methods to maintain classroom harmony and respect (Shokouhi & Moghaddam, 2019). Similarly, students may refrain from openly critiquing peers' work or self-assessing candidly, fearing that such actions might be viewed negatively or disrupt group cohesion (Pishghadam & Naji Meidani, 2012). This cultural hesitancy can impede the development of critical thinking and self-reflective skills essential for language acquisition and personal growth.

### **Theme 2: Institutional Constraints**

The structure and priorities of educational institutions in Iran often present significant barriers to the implementation of reflective practices such as self-assessment. A predominant focus on exam-oriented curricula emphasizes rote memorization and standardized testing, leaving scant room for

activities that promote critical reflection and self-evaluation (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Teachers frequently report that rigid syllabi and time constraints limit their ability to incorporate innovative assessment methods, including self-assessment and peer feedback (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). Furthermore, institutional emphasis on quantitative performance metrics over qualitative growth discourages both educators and learners from engaging in practices that, while pedagogically beneficial, may not directly contribute to immediate academic outcomes.

### **Theme 3: Need for Training**

A recurring concern among Iranian EFL teachers is the lack of formal training in integrating self-assessment and feedback techniques into their pedagogical repertoire. Many educators express a desire for professional development programs that provide practical strategies for fostering a classroom environment conducive to reflective practices (Asri, 2024). The absence of such training often results in a reliance on traditional teaching methods that prioritize teacher-centered instruction over student autonomy (Abbasi, Behjat, & Bagheri, 2023). Consequently, teachers may feel ill-equipped to guide students in self-assessment processes, thereby limiting the effectiveness of these practices in enhancing learning outcomes.

### **Theme 4: Student Insecurity and Fear of Judgment**

Students' reluctance to engage in self-assessment and openly receive criticism is often rooted in insecurity and fear of negative evaluation. The high-stakes nature of academic achievement in Iran exacerbates this apprehension, as students worry that honest self-evaluation or acceptance of criticism may adversely affect their grades or standing among peers (Ghanbari & Barati, 2014). This fear is compounded by a classroom culture that may not consistently promote supportive and constructive feedback mechanisms, leading students to perceive criticism as a personal affront rather than an opportunity for growth (Zare-ee, 2010). Addressing these psychological barriers is crucial for cultivating an educational environment where self-assessment and openness to criticism are valued and effectively utilized. In summary, the integration of self-assessment and openness to criticism in Iranian EFL contexts is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural norms, institutional frameworks, professional development opportunities, and student psychological factors. Recognizing and addressing these themes are essential steps toward fostering an educational culture that embraces reflective practices and promotes holistic language learning.

## Summary of Results

This study examined the differences between nine preschool children's retellings of both story books and films. The analysis of the transcripts generally demonstrated the effects of age, form of presentation and maternal education on retelling. Evaluating transcripts based on topic maintenance, length of narration, event sequencing, fluency, story comprehension, and ability in creation of a similar/ related story reveals variations which will be discussed separately below.

### Topic maintenance

Normally speaking children at elementary school are believed to have no difficulty in maintaining the topic in a narration or a conversation; however, preschool children may vary on the degree of topic maintenance. Most participants maintained topics of the stories in their narration of both films and books. Nevertheless, several transcripts included irrelevant utterances and were marked as inappropriate in terms of topic maintenance during the coding process. Inappropriate topic maintenance was only seen in the transcripts from groups A and B that is in the narration of participants aged below 5.5 years old. Older participants from group C maintained the topic consistently during their narration. Participants generally maintained topics more while retelling book stories than while describing films. Children whose mothers had high school diplomas maintained topics more than other children of their age whose parents had university degrees. These children maintained topic throughout their narrations of both films and books consistently while other children with more educated parents had some inconsistencies in topic maintenance in their narratives.

### Event sequencing

In book retellings all the children followed the right sequence of events and younger children succeeded in maintaining sequencing of events as well as older children. In film descriptions; however, group C (5.5 – 7 years) maintained the order of events more than the other two groups. There was no difference in event sequencing between participants whose mothers were at different educational levels.

### Fluency

For evaluating fluency, participants' narratives were coded based on repetitions, false starts, corrections, and pauses, which were all observed and recorded during the transcription process. Surprisingly, more instances of false starts and pauses were observed in the narration of older children, mainly group C. Comparing book retellings and film descriptions, narrations of the book stories were more fluent than narrations of film stories for all age groups. There also seemed to be an effect of mother's educational level on fluency, for children with less educated parents had more hesitations, false starts and corrections in their narration.

### Comprehension

In assessing comprehension of the stories, irrelevant utterances or wrong answers to general comprehension questions were coded as miscomprehension. Almost all participants from the three age groups fully comprehended the stories and succeeded in answering comprehension questions. However, there were fewer miscomprehensions in book retellings than in film descriptions. Regarding mothers' education, there seemed to be a relatively equal level of comprehension between children with differently educated mothers.

### Length

To measure the length of narratives, participants' uninterrupted narrations were separated. Hence, answers to the researcher's questions or repetitions were not counted. Number of words in an uninterrupted narration of the participant was obtained as the length of narratives. As expected, group C produced longer narratives than groups A and B in both book retellings and film descriptions. Comparing book retellings and film descriptions for all age groups, an interesting result was that Groups A and B produced longer narratives while retelling book stories whereas group C's narratives of books and films were relatively of equal length. Participants with more educated mothers created longer narratives than participants in their age groups with less educated mothers while retelling books whereas participants with less educated mothers produced longer narratives in film descriptions.

### Creation of a Similar Story

Creation of even a very short story of about two lines was encoded as success in the task. The stories created were either an extension of the book or film stories or a similar story with different characters usually including the participant. Only group C showed consistent ability in the creation of a similar story. Groups A and B failed in this task except in few cases. Success in the creation of a similar story mostly occurred following book readings than after film watching. There was no difference in this ability between participants with more or less educated parents of the same age.

### Discussion and Conclusion

In an attempt to answer the previously mentioned research questions, verbatim transcripts were encoded and analyzed and the results in the previous section were obtained regarding differences between book retellings and film descriptions, differences between age groups' narratives and differences between performances of children whose mothers were at different education levels. Comparing retellings of books and film descriptions, more topic maintenance, fluency and comprehension were observed from listening to books compared to watching films. This could be in part due to hearing more words from book readings than from films which included only a few sentences. However, another result was that groups A and B produced longer narratives in retelling books whereas group C created narratives of fairly equal length after book reading and film watching. This points out the advantage of books over films for children aged 2.5 – 5.5 years old. It could probably be implied that books are more effective for linguistic development of children below 5.5 years of age compared to watching cartoon/films. As discussed before, storytelling and retelling are fairly advantageous activities for preschool children and bear several merits including improved comprehension (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004), creativity (Agosto, 2016), and memory (Isik, 2016; Vaahtoranta, Lenhart, Suggate, & Lenhard, 2019). This study in line with previous studies shows advantages of book reading specifically for preschool children and moreover indicates the differences of performances of preschool children and older children in retelling books and films. Regarding age differences, group C outperformed groups A and B considering topic maintenance, event sequencing and length of narratives; however, there were more pauses, corrections and false starts as well as repetitions in group C's narratives which was surprising but when we consider the remarkable difference in the length of narratives of this group

and groups A and B, this result is more understandable. Additionally, only the eldest participants consistently succeeded in creating a similar story, which implies their greater understanding of the literacy process that can be further corroborated by the inclusion of story reconstruction or extension tasks in preschools' curriculum (Mehrabi, Dabir Moghadam, & Raghibdoust, 2015). Unlike the studies by (Incognito & Pinto, 2021; van Kleeck, Lange, & Schwarz, 2011) in which children with more educated mothers outperformed the other children in all instances, in this study, results were varied. Participants with more educated mothers performed longer and more fluently whereas the other children performed better in film descriptions which could imply an effect of social class on children's narrative and literacy skills (Silva, Ferreira, & Queiroga, 2014). Incognito and Pinto (2021). Despite these findings, which were based on pre-determined criteria, in the transcription and coding process, some noteworthy phenomena were observed which can be the topic of further research. One noteworthy observation was that most of the children tried to maintain a poetic tone and sometimes successfully rhymed their narration in an attempt to sound like the original story which is poetic. This implies that the children paid attention to structure and rhyme as well as content and in attempting to follow the rhyme, they were capable of producing rhyming utterances of their own. This observation was present in narratives of all age groups with different maternal education level. Children seem to develop storytelling abilities in preschool years. At the age of three to four years old, they gradually become capable storytellers and at the end of preschooling year, they can tell full stories with the least support or clues (Melzi, Schick, & Bostwick, 2013). The more we tell stories to the child and have the child retell stories, the more child's storytelling abilities develop, which is an essential point in designing pre-schooling educational program (van den Broek, Kendeou, Lousberg, & Visser, 2011). Additionally, in line with findings of Lau and Richards (2021) regarding the positive link between the home literacy-rich environment and children's prospective literacy development, the findings of current study may provide implications for effectiveness of home literacy development of children especially by parents. This could be far more effective when it comes to second/foreign language development. In sum, the results provide general guidelines for parents and preschool teachers regarding factors affecting children's literacy development, which should be strengthened during childbearing and child literacy practices.



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