

Once Upon a Timeline: Storytelling as a Pedagogy of Listening and Speaking for Generation Z and Generation Alpha Learners

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Received: 07 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 05 Aug 2026; Accepted: 11 Aug 2026; Available online: 15 Aug 2026

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Abstract— *Listening and speaking remain the least systematically taught skills in many school English classrooms, precisely as they become the skills most demanded of a generation formed by voice, video, and participatory media. This conceptual article argues that oral storytelling the oldest of language-teaching technologies is uniquely suited to developing the aural–oral competence of Generation Z and Generation Alpha learners, provided it is redesigned around what is actually known about these cohorts rather than around popular myths of digital nativity and collapsing attention spans. The article first audits generational claims against the critical literature, retaining three defensible design constraints: multimodal habituation, participatory expectation, and an everyday vernacular of micro-narrative (stories, reels, streams). It then grounds storytelling pedagogy in narrative psychology and second language acquisition theory, synthesising evidence that live telling outperforms reading aloud for oral-language growth, and maps established techniques story-listening, dictogloss, retelling, fluency cycles, digital storytelling onto listening and speaking development. The article's central contribution is the Story Cycle for Screen-Native Learners (SCSNL), a six-stage pedagogical framework (Hook, Tell, Reconstruct, Remix, Perform, Reflect) that moves learners from scaffolded narrative listening to increasingly autonomous speaking and publication. A concluding research agenda specifies a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, with validated instruments, through which the framework's claims can be empirically tested.*



Keywords— *storytelling, listening, speaking, Generation Z, Generation Alpha, digital storytelling, oral skills pedagogy, ELT*

I. INTRODUCTION: THE OLDEST TECHNOLOGY MEETS THE NEWEST LEARNERS

Every language classroom contains a paradox. The learners in it belong to the most story-saturated generations in human history children and adolescents who consume and produce narrative continuously through short-form video, streams, games, memes, and the aptly named “stories” of social platforms and yet the skills through which stories primarily live, listening and speaking, remain the least systematically taught components of most school English curricula. Reading and writing dominate assessment and therefore instruction; listening is widely

reduced to test-format comprehension exercises, and speaking to occasional, anxiety-laden performance (Goh & Burns, 2012; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). The result, familiar to teachers across English-as-a-second/foreign-language contexts, is the learner who can parse a passage but cannot hold a conversation, who has studied English for a decade and dreads being asked to speak it for a minute.

This article argues that the most promising response to this paradox is also the oldest technology in the pedagogical repertoire: the told story. Storytelling predates literacy as humanity's primary instrument for transmitting language, and a substantial pedagogical literature from Wright (2008) and Ellis and Brewster (2014) to Wajnryb

(2003) and Heathfield (2014) has long documented its power in the language classroom. What that literature has not yet fully absorbed, however, is the arrival of learners whose relationship to narrative, attention, and audience has been reshaped by the media ecology into which they were born: Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012), now filling secondary and tertiary classrooms, and Generation Alpha (born from about 2010), now filling primary ones. Popular discourse about these cohorts oscillates between celebration (digital natives, natural multitaskers) and panic (eight-second attention spans, screen-ruined minds); neither pole, this article will show, survives scholarly scrutiny, and a storytelling pedagogy built on either would be built on sand.

The argument therefore proceeds in three movements. First, it audits the generational literature to extract design constraints that are actually defensible: multimodal habituation, participatory expectation, and fluency in a vernacular of micro-narrative. Second, it grounds storytelling in narrative psychology and second language acquisition (SLA) theory and maps its established techniques onto the specific mechanics of listening and speaking development. Third, it integrates these strands into an original framework the Story Cycle for Screen-Native Learners (SCSNL) and specifies the empirical research design through which the framework's claims should be tested. The article is thus conceptual in genre: it builds no new data, but it builds, from existing evidence, both a teachable model and a testable one.

II. WHO IS ACTUALLY IN THE ROOM? GENERATION Z, GENERATION ALPHA, AND THE MYTHS THAT MISLEAD PEDAGOGY

Any pedagogy addressed to “modern kids” must first decide what it believes about them, and here the scholarly ground is treacherous. The most influential framing, Prensky's (2001) declaration that a generation of “digital natives” had arrived whose brains and learning styles differed fundamentally from those of their “digital immigrant” teachers, has been comprehensively dismantled: reviewing two decades of evidence, Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) conclude that the digital native who learns differently, and the effective multitasker, are myths information-savvy behaviour does not follow automatically from growing up with devices, and multitasking measurably degrades learning for the young as for the old. The companion panic is equally suspect. The endlessly recycled claim that attention spans have collapsed to eight seconds traces to a misattributed marketing report, not to psychological science; Bradbury (2016) shows that

even the venerable “ten-minute rule” for lectures rests on weak evidence, and that attention is a function of task design and engagement far more than of generational neurology. A storytelling pedagogy premised on either myth on effortless digital genius or on goldfish attention would misdesign itself from the start.

What, then, survives audit? Three characteristics appear robust enough to serve as design constraints. The first is multimodal habituation: whatever their cognitive continuity with earlier cohorts, Generation Z and Alpha learners have overwhelmingly formed their media habits in environments where sound, image, text, and interaction co-occur (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), which makes principled multimodality governed by the evidence-based principles of multimedia learning rather than by decoration (Mayer, 2009) a reasonable default. The second is participatory expectation: these learners have grown up inside what Jenkins (2006) calls convergence and participatory culture, in which audiences expect to respond, remix, and republish rather than merely receive; Gee's (2003) analysis of games reaches the same conclusion from a different direction the media that hold these learners position them as actors, not spectators. The third is vernacular micro-narrative competence: the daily genres of this cohort the story, the reel, the stream highlight, the meme-thread are narrative genres, compressed, serialised, hook-driven, and socially addressed. Far from arriving story-poor, the screen-native learner arrives with a tacit narratology; the pedagogical task is to transfer that competence from thumb to tongue and ear. Finally, the affective literature (Twenge, 2017) counsels care: reported rises in adolescent anxiety argue for speaking pedagogies that build performance gradually from low-stakes, well-scaffolded participation rather than demanding exposed solo display.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: WHY STORIES TEACH LANGUAGE

The claim that storytelling deserves the centre of oral-skills pedagogy rests on two converging bodies of theory. The first is narrative psychology. Bruner (1986, 1991) distinguishes narrative thought as one of the two irreducible modes of human cognition and argues that reality itself is largely constructed and communicated narratively; Fisher (1987) generalises the point into a paradigm of humans as *homo narrans*, evaluating all communication through narrative probability and fidelity; and Egan (1986) translates it into curriculum, showing that the story form binary tension, affective engagement, resolution is the child's most powerful native instrument for organising meaning. If narrative is the mind's default format, then narrative input and output are not enrichment

activities; they are language teaching conducted in the mind's own file format.

The second body of theory is SLA proper, and its classic constructs align with storytelling to an almost suspicious degree. Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input is delivered by the told story under near-ideal conditions: a live teller calibrates pace, gesture, repetition, and paraphrase to the faces in front of her, achieving the $i+1$ adjustment that no recording can. Swain's (1995) output hypothesis that learners acquire by being pushed to produce, noticing the gaps in their competence is operationalised naturally by retelling, which obliges precisely such stretched production within a supportive frame. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development describes exactly the architecture of guided retelling and joint storytelling, in which narrative structure and peer collaboration scaffold performance beyond solo capacity. And the empirical record, though thinner than one would wish, points the right way: in the study most often cited, Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, and Lowrance (2004) found that young children exposed to live storytelling outperformed a story-reading group on oral language complexity and comprehension suggesting that the telling itself, with its eye contact, prosody, and co-presence, carries measurable value over and above the text.

IV. STORYTELLING AND THE LISTENING SKILL

Listening pedagogy has moved decisively from testing comprehension to teaching the process of comprehending the metacognitive turn associated with Vandergrift and Goh (2012) and Rost (2016), in which learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their own listening. Stories are the ideal texts for this pedagogy for reasons intrinsic to their form. Narrative schema the tacit knowledge that stories have characters with goals, obstacles, attempts, and outcomes gives the listener a predictive scaffold that expository text lacks: the learner who loses lexical footing can re-anchor on structure, and prediction (What will the third brother do?) becomes both a comprehension strategy and a source of suspense. Repetition, formula, and refrain the deep grammar of oral tale-telling supply the natural redundancy that second language listeners need without the artificiality of a replayed recording. Prosody does organise work: the teller's voice marks episode boundaries, signals character, and carries emotion, training exactly the paralinguistic decoding that test-audio starves. And crucially, a told story is listening with a face: learners watch meaning being made with gesture and gaze, recruiting the visual channel in the disciplined way Mayer's (2009) principles endorse.

Technique translates these affordances into procedure. In story-listening, the teacher tells (never reads) a tale, supporting comprehension with board drawings and brief glosses, with no comprehension test to follow listening for the story's sake, building implicit competence and, no less importantly, rehabilitating listening as pleasure. In dictogloss (Wajnryb, 2003), learners hear a short narrative at natural speed, jot fragmentary notes, and then, in pairs, reconstruct the text an activity that converts listening into collaborative noticing and grammaring, and which sits precisely at the junction of input and output theory. In the circling techniques of story-based methods such as TPR Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 2015), the teller pauses to ask layered questions that recycle the story's language in comprehensible variation. Across all of these, the metacognitive cycle applies: learners predict before the telling, monitor during it, and evaluate after it turning each tale into a complete lesson in how to listen.

V. STORYTELLING AND THE SPEAKING SKILL

Speaking pedagogy's central problem is that fluency, accuracy, and complexity compete for limited attention (Housen & Kuiken, 2009), and that classroom speaking tasks too often maximise anxiety while minimising redesign of the learner's resources. Goh and Burns (2012) answer with a teaching-speaking cycle—focus attention, provide input, conduct speaking tasks, focus on language, repeat the task, direct reflection and storytelling populates every station of that cycle naturally. The told story provides rich input and a model of performance; retelling provides the speaking task; the narrative frame provides the repeatable structure that makes task repetition meaningful rather than mechanical. Nation's (1989) classic 4/3/2 procedure in which the learner tells the same story to successive partners in four, then three, then two minutes remains the best-evidenced fluency treatment in the literature precisely because narrative is its vehicle: familiar content frees attention for faster, smoother formulation, and the shrinking clock converts repetition into pressure toward automaticity.

Beyond retelling lies a graded repertoire. Story completion and alternative endings push learners from reproduction toward creation while keeping the scaffold of the received tale. Perspective retelling the wolf's version, the servant's version demands genuine reformulation, exercising complexity. Personal narrative tasks (a time you were brave; the story of your name) migrate the skills to the learner's own life, where storytelling becomes identity work and, in Swain's (1995) terms, output with the highest stakes of noticing. Story circles distribute performance across a

group, lowering the affective cost of the floor—an explicit answer to the anxiety profile of the cohort discussed above. Throughout, the story frame does for the speaker what schema did for the listener: it tells the learner what to say next at the level of structure, so that attention can go to how to say it at the level of language.

VI. THE DIGITAL TURN: FROM CAMPFIRE TO TIMELINE

The storytelling classroom does not have to choose between the campfire and the screen; the digital storytelling movement has spent two decades demonstrating their synthesis. In the classic model of Lambert (2013) and its educational elaboration by Robin (2008), learners script, voice, and assemble short multimedia narratives; the empirical literature, though heterogeneous, associates the practice with engagement and learning gains Sadik (2008) with engaged deep learning in ordinary school conditions, and Yang and Wu (2012), in a year-long experimental study, with significant improvement in achievement, critical thinking, and motivation among English learners. For oral-skills purposes, the crucial component is the voiceover: recording narration externalises the learner's speech as an editable object, inviting exactly the monitoring, re-recording, and self-evaluation that fluent speech requires but real-time speaking never permits. The class podcast and the narrated video are, in this sense, pronunciation and fluency laboratories disguised as media production.

Two further features of the current media ecology deserve pedagogical capture rather than prohibition. The first is the platform vernacular itself: the sixty-second story arc of the reel and the serialized episode of the stream are legitimate target genres compressed narrative forms whose discipline (hook fast, cut ruthlessly, land the turn) maps remarkably well onto the classical economy of the folktale, and whose social address gives classroom speech an audience beyond the teacher, the condition Jenkins (2006) identifies as the engine of participatory motivation. The second is the arrival of generative artificial intelligence as a story partner. Used with care, conversational AI can serve as an inexhaustible co-teller generating tale variants for remixing, playing a character for interview, or providing a low-stakes interlocutor for rehearsal before human performance; used carelessly, it can silently replace the very production the pedagogy exists to elicit. The design principle proposed here is therefore strict: machines may supply *input* and *interaction*, but the culminating telling—voiced, embodied, owned—must remain the learner's own.

VII. THE STORY CYCLE FOR SCREEN-NATIVE LEARNERS (SCSNL): A FRAMEWORK

The strands of the argument can now be braided into a single teachable model. The Story Cycle for Screen-Native Learners is a six-stage sequence designed to carry a class from scaffolded narrative listening to autonomous narrative speaking within a unit of two to five lessons, honouring the three design constraints established in Section 2 principled multimodality, participation, and micro-narrative form while embodying the theoretical machinery of Sections 3 through 6. Stage one, *Hook*, opens with a compressed multimodal prompt in the cohort's own vernacular an image, a six-second clip, a one-line mystery from which learners predict the coming story, activating schema and committing attention before a word of the tale is heard. Stage two, *Tell*, is deliberately counter-cultural: the teacher tells the story live, screens dark, with voice, gesture, and drawing as the only media—the stage at which comprehensible input, prosodic training, and the sheer novelty (for this cohort) of unmediated human narration do their work. Stage three, *Reconstruct*, converts reception into collaboration: through dictogloss, sequencing, or paired retelling, learners rebuild the tale from notes and memory, negotiating language in the zone of proximal development.

Stage four, *Remix*, hands the story over: individually or in groups, learners transform it new ending, new era, the villain's perspective, a genre-shift into news report or chat thread exercising the participatory reflex on narrative material and pushing output toward complexity. Stage five, *Perform*, returns the story to voice under graduated stakes: a 4/3/2 fluency cycle first, then a story circle, and finally, where feasible, publication a class podcast episode, a narrated video, a telling recorded for families so that speech acquires a real audience and the platform vernacular becomes a target genre rather than a distraction. Stage six, *Reflect*, closes the metacognitive loop: learners replay their recordings, compare early and late tellings, and set listening and speaking goals for the next cycle, making the process of oral learning itself an explicit object of attention (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Assessment across the cycle should triangulate: comprehension and reconstruction accuracy for listening; fluency measures such as speech rate and pausing, alongside complexity and accuracy indices (Housen & Kuiken, 2009), for speaking; and self-report of willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998) for the affective dimension the framework claims to improve.

VIII. FROM FRAMEWORK TO EVIDENCE: A RESEARCH AGENDA

A conceptual proposal earns its place only by specifying its own test, and the SCSNL is designed to be tested. The natural first study is a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design in intact classes: an experimental group taught listening and speaking through the full cycle for one term against a comparison group receiving the standard coursebook treatment, with pre- and post-measures on three families of instruments standardised listening comprehension tests; elicited oral narratives scored for complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Housen & Kuiken, 2009); and the willingness-to-communicate scale (MacIntyre et al., 1998) supplemented by classroom observation and learner interviews to capture the participatory and affective processes that numbers alone will miss. Predictions are explicit and falsifiable: the framework predicts advantages in fluency and willingness to communicate first, comprehension gains second, and accuracy effects last if at all. Necessary refinements follow naturally: component studies isolating the live-telling stage against video-mediated telling (extending Isbell et al., 2004, to adolescents); age-graded comparisons between Generation Z secondary learners and Generation Alpha primary learners; and, urgently, studies in large-class South and Southeast Asian school contexts, where oral skills are most neglected and where the storytelling traditions available for classroom use are richest. Research with minors will require, throughout, parental consent, assent procedures, and careful handling of recorded voice data.

IX. CONCLUSION

The argument of this article can be told, fittingly, as a story. A generation arrived that lived inside narrative as no generation before it, narrating its days in stories, reels, and streams yet its classrooms went on teaching language as text, and its listening and speaking withered on the examination vine. The mistake was to believe two myths about these learners: that screens had made them either superhuman or broken. The truth was simpler and more useful: they were multimodal, participatory, and fluent in micro-narrative and there existed, in the oldest layer of the teacher's craft, a technology perfectly shaped for exactly such learners. The told tale delivers comprehensible input with a human face; the retold tale converts input to output under the gentlest of pressures; the remixed tale turns participation from distraction into curriculum; and the published tale gives the learner's voice what it never had in the classroom an audience. The Story Cycle for Screen-Native Learners formalises this sequence and hands it to research for judgement. If the framework survives that

judgement, the conclusion will be a pleasing one: that the way forward for the newest learners was, all along, the way stories have always been passed on by someone who listened well, learning to tell.

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