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Storytelling in Elementary Education: A Systematic Literature Review on Literacy Development

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Abstract. This study presents a systematic literature review on the role of storytelling in elementary education, with a particular focus on its impact on literacy development and vocabulary acquisition in Indonesian EFL context. Drawing on 75 articles published in Scopus, Eric and Sinta database from 2020 to 2025 between synthesized findings across diverse methodologies, and mixed method design. Results consistently enhance vocabulary mastery, learner engagement, and early literacy skills by providing contextualized language input, repeated word exposure, and opportunities for meaningful communication. Storytelling activities were also found to foster motivation, cultural identity, and multimodal literacy awareness, making them developmentally appropriate and pedagogically effective for young learners. The review concludes that storytelling is not merely a complementary classroom activity but a powerful instructional strategy that supports holistic literacy development and strengthens vocabulary acquisition in Indonesian elementary education.

Keywords: elementary education, literacy development, storytelling, vocabulary acquisition

Introduction

From the moment children enter kindergarten until their last exam in high school, students are being instructed and assessed particularly on their productive language ability which is speaking skill. Most states address the importance of literacy with standards for proficiency at each grade level in areas of reading and writing. Early literacy skills generally include children's ability to understand

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oral language, recognize print, and develop phonological awareness (Rohde, 2015). In kindergarten settings, these skills are commonly introduced through teacher-guided literacy instruction, which is then supported by drill-and-practice activities to strengthen children's learning (Zettler-Greeley et al., 2018). Previous longitudinal studies have also shown that such instructional practices play an important role in supporting the development of children's literacy skills over time (Piasta et al., 2011).

Storytelling can be understood as a social and cultural practice that involves telling, sharing, and exchanging stories (Roig, 2018). It is also often regarded as one of the earliest forms of teaching. In elementary classroom contexts, storytelling session, in which teachers share stories with children, have the potential to attract students' attention, increase their motivation, and help them make meaning by relating the story to their daily experiences and prior knowledge. However, in practice, storytelling is often not used as a main instructional strategy. Instead, it is commonly treated as a relaxing activity between lessons or as a way to gain students' attention at the beginning of the day. Therefore, in primary education, storytelling is mostly positioned as a supporting or complementary classroom activity (Roslan, 2008; Wells, 1986). Literacy is commonly understood as a set of abilities related to reading, writing, communication, and oral language (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Although these skills are essential for supporting children's literacy development, they are not sufficient when developed in isolation. For this reason, literacy skills need to be taught and assessed systematically within a broader and more comprehensive language and literacy program. Since literacy development begins early in life and continues as a gradual developmental process (Gao et al., 2020), its fundamental aspects should be introduced and strengthened from the elementary education level.

This condition has motivated the present study to conduct a systematic review of international literature on storytelling in elementary education. Accordingly, this study provides an in-depth and structured review of 75 articles published within the last five years and indexed in the Scopus, ERIC, and SINTA databases, focusing on the implementation of storytelling in educational contexts.

Method

The present study employed a systematic literature review design to synthesize previous studies related to the use of storytelling technique and its impact on English vocabulary development in Indonesia's elementary education context. A systematic literature review was considered appropriate because this study aimed to identify, analyse, and interpret findings from relevant studies in a structured and comprehensive way. Through this method, the researchers were able to examine how storytelling has been implemented in elementary classrooms and how it contributes to students' literacy development, particularly vocabulary acquisition. This study focused on building a qualitative synthesis of the selected literature. The synthesis was conducted by exploring the main objectives, educational contexts, research designs, types of storytelling activities, and major findings reported in the reviewed studies. In order to organize the analysis, a thematic exploration of the literature was applied. This approach helped the researchers identify recurring themes and patterns across the studies, especially

those related to vocabulary improvement, learner engagement, oral language development, and literacy support through storytelling activities.

To identify the most relevant findings, the present study used the PICO framework to formulate and answer the research question. The PICO framework was used because it helps clarify the focus of the review by determining the population, intervention, outcome, and context of the study. In this research, the population refers to elementary or primary school students, the intervention refers to storytelling activities, the outcome refers to English vocabulary development, and the context refers to Indonesian EFL elementary education. Based on this framework, the research question of this study was formulated as follows: How significant are storytelling activities in supporting literacy, particularly vocabulary development, in elementary classrooms in Indonesia? This question guided the selection and analysis of the articles included in the review. By using the PICO framework, the study was able to maintain a clear focus on the relationship between storytelling activities and vocabulary development in the Indonesian elementary EFL context.

The keyword construction from the PICO framework is presented below:

1. Population: Elementary or primary school students
2. Intervention: Storytelling activities
3. Outcome: English vocabulary development
4. Context: Indonesian EFL elementary education

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance of the selected literature, several inclusion criteria were established for this study, as presented below. All sources were obtained from the search results generated by the predetermined search equation (see Table 1) applied in the Scopus, ERIC, and SINTA databases.

1. All related articles of social sciences and educational research belonging to the temporary period 2020-2025 were included.
2. Studies focus on oral storytelling in relation to English vocabulary development in elementary education were considered to be selected.
3. Only documents published in the form of journal articles were included, while other types of publications, such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and book reviews, were excluded.

All documents that did not meet the established inclusion criteria were excluded from the analysis.

Search Strategy and Data Analysis

To conduct a comprehensive literature search for this SLR across the selected databases, specific keyword search strategies were applied. The search strategy was developed using Boolean operators to systematically retrieve relevant studies on storytelling and literacy development in elementary education. Databases Scopus, ERIC, and SINTA were selected to capture both international and Indonesian scholarly publications published between 2020 and 2025.

Database Search String (Boolean Keywords)	
Scopus	(storytelling OR story-based learning OR narrative pedagogy) AND (vocabulary development OR reading literacy OR writing literacy OR early literacy) AND (elementary school OR primary school) AND (Indonesia OR EFL classroom)
ERIC	(storytelling OR narrative instruction) AND (literacy skills OR reading skills OR writing skills) AND (elementary education OR primary education) AND (Indonesia OR foreign language classroom)
SINTA	(storytelling OR pembelajaran berbasis cerita) AND (literasi OR perkembangan kosa kata Bahasa Inggris) AND (sekolah dasar OR pendidikan dasar)

Figure 1. Keywords and Search Equation

After the selection process, a comprehensive document search was conducted using a search equation in each database. Once the search strategy had been determined, the retrieved results were screened using the available database filters. Following this initial screening, duplicate articles found across the three databases were removed. The remaining articles were then reviewed thematically through a peer-review process among the researchers (Alterio, 2003). To guide the thematic analysis and data selection process, the study adopted the PRISMA protocol (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009). The following flow chart presents the stages of the thematic review process based on the PRISMA Protocol.

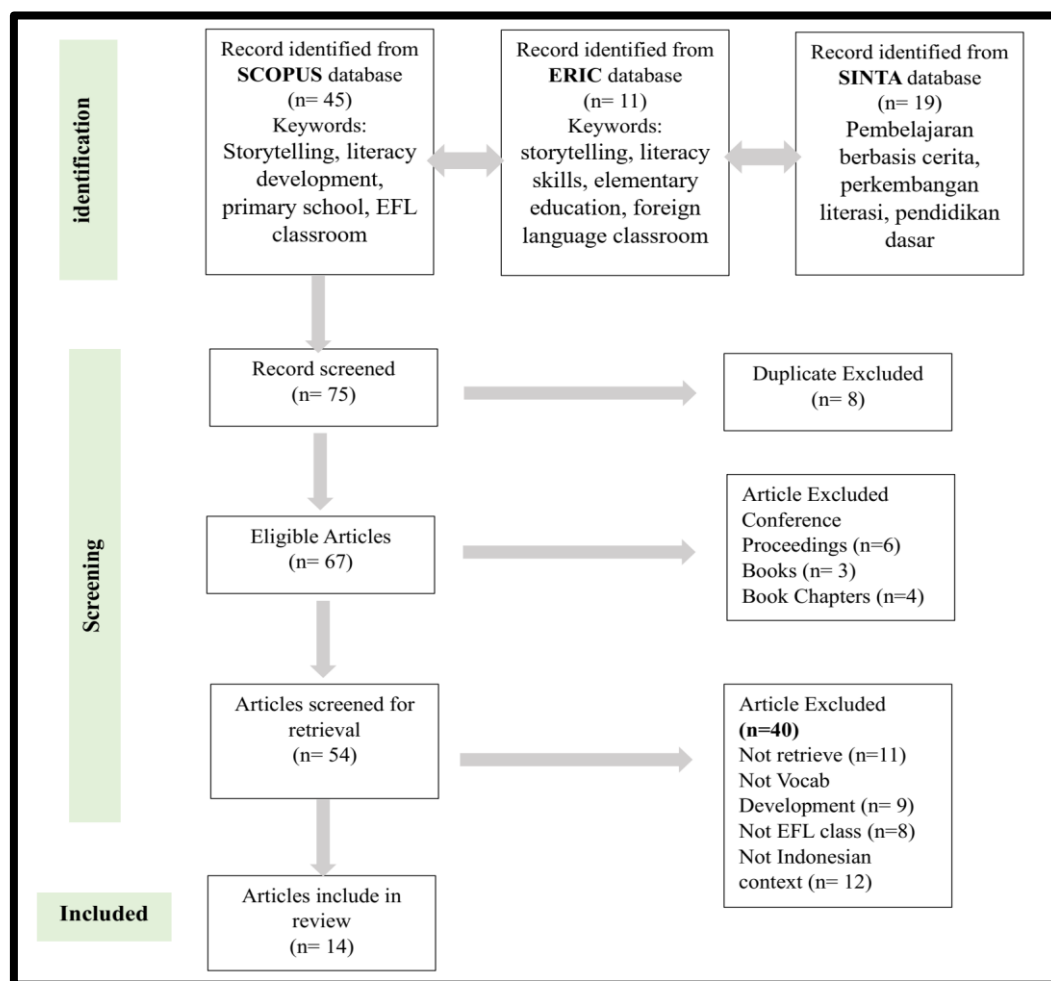


Figure 2. Flowchart based on PRISMA Protocol

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The main findings of this systematic review are presented in the following section. Table 1 summarizes the 14 included studies by presenting the author and year, research context, methodological design, type of storytelling, and key findings of each study.

Table 1. Result of the Analysis of Storytelling & Vocabulary Development

Author (Year)	Context	Method	Storytelling Type	Main Findings
(Maya & Halim, 2021)	Elementary EFL learners, Indonesia	Quantitative (one-group pretest–posttest)	Digital storytelling	Significant improvement in vocabulary mastery , supporting early literacy development
(Mulyono et al., 2023)	Early childhood	Qualitative case study	Bedtime oral storytelling	Improved vocabulary ,

	Indonesia			fluency , confidence, and retelling skills (early literacy foundations)
(Otoluwa et al., 2022)	Preschool children, Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Oral storytelling	Increased vocabulary mastery , supporting listening and speaking literacy skills
(Br Sembiring & Simanjuntak, 2023)	EFL learners (secondary), Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Digital storytelling	Significant gains in vocabulary knowledge , engagement, and literacy-related skills
(Medina & Goddard, 2024)	Primary education (8–10 years), inclusive EFL	Quantitative comparative	Inclusive digital storytelling	Positive effect on vocabulary acquisition and multimodal literacy awareness
(Bunayyah et al., 2025)	Primary education, Indonesia	Mixed methods	Structured oral storytelling	Enhanced early literacy, narrative thinking, listening, vocabulary , and verbal expression
(Gao et al., 2020)	Elementary EFL learners	Qualitative	Storytelling (varied approaches)	Strong vocabulary acquisition and retention, supporting literacy input efficiency
(Kristiawan et al., 2022)	Indonesian young EFL learners	Experimental (pretest - posttest)	Local-culture-based digital storytelling	Improved vocabulary building , engagement, identity-based literacy meaning-making
(Mujahidah et al., 2021)	Early childhood, Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Storytelling with hand puppets	Development of early literacy, vocabulary , listening & oral language skills
(Rahmawati, 2020)	EFL learners	Mix methods	Short story reading	Enhanced vocabulary comprehension as a core component of literacy
(Miller & Pennycuff, 2008)	Elementary classrooms (general literacy)	Quantitative	Oral storytelling	Improved oral language , reading comprehension, and writing,

context)				strengthening holistic literacy development
(Maya et al., 2022)	Elementary EFL learners (Grade 5), Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Digital storytelling	Enhanced English vocabulary mastery, learner engagement, motivation, and retention, supporting literacy development

Based on the analysis of the reviewed studies, storytelling activities demonstrate a significant and consistently positive impact on literacy development, particularly vocabulary acquisition, in Indonesian elementary classrooms. Both oral and digital storytelling were found to enhance students' vocabulary mastery by providing meaningful language input, contextualized word exposure, and repeated encounters with new vocabulary. This is in-line with study conducted by (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Empirical studies in Indonesian EFL and early childhood settings report measurable improvements in learners' vocabulary scores, as well as increased ability to recall, understand, and use new words in oral and written contexts. Moreover, storytelling promotes higher learner engagement, motivation, and attention, which further supports vocabulary retention as a foundational component of literacy. These findings suggest that storytelling is not only an effective instructional strategy but also a developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant approach for strengthening vocabulary development in elementary education in Indonesia.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that storytelling activities have a strong contribution to literacy development, particularly in vocabulary acquisition among elementary learners. The reviewed studies consistently show that storytelling, whether conducted orally or digitally, provides rich and meaningful language input for young learners. Through stories, students are exposed to new vocabulary in context, which helps them understand not only the meaning of words but also how the words are used in communication. This supports the idea that vocabulary learning becomes more effective when words are introduced through meaningful situations rather than isolated memorization. In the Indonesian EFL elementary education context, storytelling appears to be a relevant strategy because students are still in the early stage of developing English literacy. The use of stories allows learners to connect new vocabulary with familiar experiences, characters, events, and cultural contexts. This connection makes the learning process easier to follow and more engaging for children. Studies such as those using digital storytelling, hand puppets, bedtime storytelling, and local-culture-based storytelling show that students' vocabulary mastery, listening skills, oral expression, and confidence

can improve when storytelling is implemented in classroom activities. Therefore, storytelling can support vocabulary development as well as broader literacy skills, including listening, speaking, reading comprehension, and early writing.

Another important point from the findings is that storytelling increases learners' motivation and engagement. Young learners often learn better when the activity is enjoyable, interactive, and imaginative. Storytelling provides these elements because it invites students to listen, respond, predict, retell, and sometimes create their own stories. These activities encourage active participation and repeated exposure to vocabulary. Repetition in storytelling does not feel monotonous because words are presented through plot, characters, and visual or oral support. As a result, students are more likely to remember and use the vocabulary they have learned. The findings also suggest that digital storytelling offers additional benefits for literacy learning. Digital storytelling combines narration, images, sound, and sometimes animation, which can help students understand vocabulary through multimodal input. This is especially useful for young EFL learners who may need visual and auditory support to comprehend English words. In addition, digital storytelling can increase students' interest and provide a more interactive learning experience. However, oral storytelling remains equally important because it promotes direct communication, teacher-student interaction, and students' oral language development.

Overall, the reviewed studies confirm that storytelling should not be seen merely as an additional or entertaining activity in elementary classrooms. Instead, storytelling can function as a meaningful instructional strategy for developing vocabulary and literacy skills. In relation to the research question, storytelling activities significantly benefit literacy development, particularly vocabulary acquisition, because they provide contextualized input, repeated word exposure, meaningful interaction, and learner engagement. These findings support the use of storytelling as a pedagogical approach in Indonesian EFL elementary classrooms. However, this review also indicates that further research is still needed. Many studies focus on short-term vocabulary improvement, while fewer studies examine the long-term impact of storytelling on students' literacy development. Future studies may explore how different types of storytelling, such as oral storytelling, digital storytelling, and culturally based storytelling, influence students' vocabulary retention and literacy performance over a longer period. More classroom-based research is also needed to provide practical models for teachers in implementing storytelling effectively in Indonesian elementary education.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review highlights that storytelling activities have a significant role in supporting literacy development, particularly vocabulary acquisition, in elementary education. Based on the reviewed studies, both oral and digital storytelling provide meaningful and contextualized language input that helps young learners understand, remember, and use new vocabulary more effectively. Storytelling also provides students with repeated exposure to vocabulary, invites them to participate actively, and helps develop their listening, speaking, reading, and early writing skills. The findings show that storytelling is not only useful for improving vocabulary mastery, but also for increasing

students' motivation, engagement, confidence, and cultural awareness in the learning process. In the Indonesian EFL elementary context, storytelling can be considered a developmentally appropriate and pedagogically effective strategy because it connects language learning with children's experiences, imagination, and social interaction. Therefore, storytelling should not be viewed merely as a complementary classroom activity, but as an instructional strategy that can strengthen holistic literacy development. Teachers are encouraged to integrate storytelling activities, both oral and digital, into English learning practices to support vocabulary development and improve students' literacy skills. Future research is suggested to explore more specific storytelling models, long-term effects, and classroom-based implementation across different elementary school contexts in Indonesia.

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