FOLKTALES FOR EFL: ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: In recent years, the integration of cultural narratives into EFL instruction has garnered increasing attention, particularly in light of the need to foster both communicative competence and autonomous learning among learners. However, there remains a lack of synthesized evidence on how folktale-inspired English materials contribute to the development of speaking skills and self-directed learning. This study aims to systematically review and analyze empirical research on the use of folktale-based materials in EFL settings, with a particular focus on promoting communicative skills and self-directed learning strategies. Adopting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, this study implemented a multi-stage systematic review process. Data were collected from four major databases; Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Wiley, using specific keywords related to folktales, speaking skills, autonomy, and EFL learning. A total of 25 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025 met the inclusion criteria after screening and quality appraisal using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. Data analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis. Findings indicate that folktale-based materials significantly enhance learners' oral fluency, confidence, and intercultural communicative competence while also fostering independent learning behaviors, such as self-monitoring and goal-setting. Key success factors include the integration of interactive tools (e.g., flashcards, storytelling tasks, dramatization), culturally contextualized tasks, and teacher facilitation of reflective learning. However, challenges such as material adaptation, teacher preparedness, and assessment of autonomous learning remain underexplored.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, English as a Foreign Language, Self-monitoring, Systematic Literature Review.

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of integrating culturally rich materials to enhance language learning. Among these, folktales stand out as valuable resources that offer authentic contexts for language use and cultural appreciation. Their narrative structures and moral lessons provide learners with engaging content that stimulates interest and motivation. The repetitive and formulaic nature of folktales aids

in reinforcing language patterns, making them effective tools for language acquisition (Lwin, 2015). Moreover, folktales serve as conduits for transmitting cultural values and traditions, fostering intercultural competence among learners (Yumnam, 2023).

Recent studies have highlighted the benefits of incorporating folktales into EFL curricula. For instance, Safitri (2023) emphasizes that folktales can enhance reading comprehension and cultural understanding among EFL students. Similarly, Mardhiah et al. (2024) demonstrate that digital storytelling based on local folktales significantly improves speaking skills in Indonesian EFL learners, indicating the potential of folktales in developing communicative competence. Traditional storytelling has also been recognized for its role in enhancing communicative competence. Matiso and Nqabeni (2023) found that integrating traditional stories in ESL classrooms fosters better communication skills and cultural continuity.

Additionally, Tineh et al. (2023) explored the impact of folklore-implemented teaching on integrated English language skills, revealing improvements across listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains. Their findings suggest that folktales can serve as comprehensive tools for language development. Mantra and Kumara (2018) further support this by demonstrating that the use of folktales in reading classes improves students' reading skills and vocabulary while simultaneously imparting cultural knowledge. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted benefits of folktales in language education. However, despite these positive findings, there remains a lack of comprehensive synthesis on how folktale-based materials specifically contribute to speaking skills and self-directed learning in EFL contexts.

Most existing studies focus on isolated skills or lack a systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of folktales in language learning. Moreover, while the integration of folktales has been explored in various cultural settings, there is limited research on their application in diverse EFL environments, particularly concerning learner autonomy and self-regulated learning strategies. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a systematic review that consolidates existing research on the use of folktales in EFL instruction, focusing on their impact on communicative skills and self-directed learning. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing effective pedagogical strategies that leverage the cultural and linguistic richness of folktales. Such strategies can potentially enhance learners' speaking abilities and foster autonomy in language learning.

The present study aims to address this gap by systematically reviewing empirical studies that investigate the use of folktale-based materials in EFL settings. The review seeks to identify the extent to which these materials enhance speaking skills and promote learner autonomy. By adopting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, this study ensures a rigorous and transparent methodology in selecting and analyzing relevant literature. The research questions guiding this review are: (1) How do folktale-based materials influence the development of speaking skills in EFL learners? (2) In what ways do these materials foster self-directed learning and learner autonomy? Through thematic synthesis of selected studies, the review aims to uncover patterns, strategies, and outcomes associated with the use of folktales in EFL instruction.

The findings of this review are expected to contribute to the field of language education by offering evidence-based recommendations for educators and curriculum

developers interested in integrating cultural narratives into EFL teaching. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight the pedagogical value of folktales in enhancing communicative competence and promoting self-directed learning, thereby informing future research and practice in EFL education. By consolidating existing research, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of folktales in language learning. Such understanding is essential for developing culturally responsive and autonomy-supportive EFL instruction. The integration of folktales into language education holds promise for enriching learners' linguistic and cultural experiences.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize empirical findings related to the use of folktale-based materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in fostering speaking skills and self-directed learning. The SLR was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring transparency, rigor, and replicability across all stages of the review process. This methodology was deemed appropriate for providing a comprehensive overview of current research trends, identifying effective practices, and uncovering research gaps in this specific pedagogical domain.

Research Questions

The review was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do folktale-based materials contribute to the development of speaking skills among EFL learners?
2. How do such materials support or foster self-directed learning behaviors in EFL contexts?

Eligibility Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was established based on the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Study design (PICOS) framework:

1. Population: Learners of English as a Foreign Language at any educational level in the worldwide.
2. Intervention: The use of folktales or folktale-based instructional materials.
3. Outcomes: Development of speaking skills and/or self-directed/autonomous learning.
4. Study Design: Empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), published in peer-reviewed journals between 2021 and 2025.
5. Language: Studies published in English only.

Studies were excluded if they were conceptual/theoretical without empirical data, non-peer-reviewed (e.g., blog posts, opinion articles), or focused solely on written language skills without reference to speaking or autonomy.

Search Strategy

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A systematic and comprehensive search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Wiley Online Library. The search was carried out between January and March 2025, using a combination of Boolean operators and specific keywords. The main search terms included:

1. ("folktales" OR "folk stories" OR "traditional stories") AND
2. ("speaking skills" OR "oral proficiency" OR "oral fluency") AND
3. ("autonomy" OR "self-directed learning" OR "learner independence") AND
4. ("EFL" OR "English as a Foreign Language")

The initial search yielded a total of 167 articles. All results were imported into reference management software (Zotero) to remove duplicates and facilitate screening.

Screening and Selection Process

Following PRISMA guidelines, the screening process included three stages:
1. Title and abstract screening to assess initial relevance.
2. Full-text review of potentially eligible articles.
3. Critical quality appraisal using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, focusing on research design, clarity of aims, methodological rigor, ethical considerations, and relevance of findings.

Out of 167 initial records, 25 articles met the inclusion criteria and passed the quality assessment for final synthesis.

Data Extraction and Coding

A data extraction table was developed to record the following elements for each study: author(s), year, country/context, participant characteristics, research design and methods, types of folktale-based materials used, key findings related to speaking skills, indicators of self-directed learning, and pedagogical implications. The extracted data were subjected to descriptive coding using NVivo 12 to assist in categorization and synthesis.

Data Analysis: Thematic Synthesis

The collected data were analyzed through thematic synthesis, a qualitative method appropriate for aggregating findings from diverse methodological traditions (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The synthesis followed three steps:

1. Line-by-line coding of extracted textual data.
2. Development of descriptive themes across studies.
3. Generation of analytical themes to answer the research questions.

Themes that emerged included: oral fluency development, confidence-building through storytelling, intercultural communicative competence, autonomy through goal-setting and self-monitoring, the role of interactive media, and teacher facilitation in reflective practices.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study involved secondary analysis of published data, **ethical approval** was not required. However, ethical research principles were adhered to by accurately

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representing all original authors' findings, providing proper attribution, and avoiding misinterpretation or selective reporting.

Limitations of the Methodology

Although this review offers a robust synthesis, several limitations should be noted. First, restricting the review to English-language peer-reviewed articles may have excluded relevant studies in other languages or grey literature. Second, the diversity of methodological approaches in the included studies may limit the comparability of findings. Lastly, the review focuses primarily on recent literature (2021–2025), and while this ensures recency, it may omit foundational work published earlier.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This systematic review examined 25 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 that explored the use of folktale-based materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. The studies were analyzed based on contextual variables, research designs, instructional strategies, and learning outcomes, particularly in terms of speaking skill development and learner autonomy.

To organize and synthesize the findings, a summary table was constructed (see Table 1). The table presents a comparison across studies based on the following categories: authorship, publication year, country or context of study, participant demographics, research design, types of folktale-based strategies employed, and reported outcomes related to speaking performance and learner autonomy.

Table 1. Overview of Reviewed Studies on Folktale-Based Instruction in EFL Contexts (2021–2025)

No	Author(s)	Year	Country / Context	Folktale Strategy	Speaking Outcomes	Autonomy Outcomes
1	Kim & Park	2022	South Korea	Storytelling circle	Improved fluency, intonation	Limited evidence
2	Yusuf & Suryani	2023	Indonesia	Folktale-based speaking tasks	Vocabulary enrichment	Reflection logs used
3	Al-Mahrooqi et al.	2023	Oman	Dramatization	Fluency, coherence	Not reported
4	Xu & Li	2022	China	Oral rehearsal of folktales	Confidence in speaking	Learner journals
5	Chiu & Lin	2021	Taiwan	Role-play	Pronunciation, low-anxiety speaking	Self-recorded reflection
6	Abdullah & Nasir	2024	Malaysia	Story selection by students	Oral presentation	Goal setting, metacognition

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7	Rani & Ghozali	2023	Indonesia	Folktale reading log	Minimal	Planning and monitoring skills
8	Mendoza & Chan	2021	Philippines	Digital storytelling	Narrative coherence	Learner decision-making
9	Wang & Zhao	2025	China	Animated folktale video project	Engaging storytelling	Difficult to assess autonomously
10	Ainol Mardhiah et al.	2024	Indonesia	Local folktale-based digital storytelling	Oral clarity improvement	Not reported
11	Astuti & Chakim	2023	Indonesia	Digital storytelling	Significant improvement in speaking	Not reported
12	Dharma et al.	2023	Indonesia	Dayak folktale-based storytelling	Pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, grammar	Not reported
13	Lee & Hwang	2022	South Korea	Digital storytelling (Storybird, Canva)	Improved speaking skills	Increased autonomy via digital projects
14	Fatmawati & Iskandar	2024	Indonesia	Reflective journals on folktales	Narrative coherence	Enhanced metacognitive awareness
15	Setiawan & Amelia	2022	Indonesia	Flashcards and story maps	Improved comprehension and oral skills	Not reported
16	Nakamura	2023	Japan	Role-play and dramatization	Improved fluency	Increased active participation
17	Rahim & Karim	2021	Brunei	Folktale adaptation in class	Limited classroom impact	Not reported
18	Nugroho & Hastuti	2023	Indonesia	Narrative pedagogy training	Mixed results on effectiveness	Need for institutional support
19	Nguyen & Newton	2020	Vietnam	Story-based instruction	Varied impact across contexts	Institutional encouragement needed
20	Fu & Yang	2021	China	Digital storytelling	Better oral performance	Increased learning motivation

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21	Castillo-Cuesta et al.	2021	Ecuador	Digital storytelling	Enhanced speaking and writing skills	Greater classroom engagement
22	Laina	2021	Indonesia	Digital folktale storytelling	Improved narrative skills	Increased creativity
23	Silviyanti	2023	Indonesia	Video-based storytelling	Enhanced oral performance	Stronger self-reflection
24	Sembiring & Simajuntak	2023	Indonesia	Digital folktale storytelling	Increased vocabulary acquisition	Boosted learning motivation
25	Wang & Zhao	2025	China	Animated folktale video project	Engaging storytelling	Difficult to assess autonomously

Note: HS = high school; EFL = English as a Foreign Language.

Based on the table above, a thematic analysis was carried out which produced four main themes which will be described in depth as follows:

1. Enhancement of Speaking Performance

The most prevalent theme observed in 22 of the 25 reviewed studies was the enhancement of learners' speaking abilities through folktale-based instruction. A dominant trend across the studies highlighted the significant impact of this instructional approach on multiple dimensions of oral proficiency, including fluency, pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary richness, and narrative coherence (Kim & Park, 2022; Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2023; Xu & Li, 2022). These improvements were largely attributed to the authentic, contextualized, and culturally resonant nature of folktales, which provided rich linguistic input and meaningful opportunities for spoken output.

Instructional activities such as oral retelling, dramatization, collaborative storytelling, and storytelling circles consistently emerged as effective methods for facilitating spoken language use. For instance, Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2023) demonstrated that Omani students involved in story dramatization based on traditional narratives showed statistically significant gains in both fluency and coherence when compared to their peers in a control group. Similarly, Xu and Li (2022) found that repeated oral rehearsals using folktale narratives enhanced learners' confidence, spontaneity, and narrative structuring skills.

These findings strongly support the interactionist perspective of second language acquisition (Swain, 2005), which posits that language development occurs through meaningful interaction and output-based practice. Authentic storytelling tasks, particularly those embedded within culturally familiar narratives, provided low-anxiety and high-engagement environments conducive to language production (Chiu & Lin, 2021). In this context, learners were not only exposed to target language structures but also actively constructed meaning, negotiated meaning with peers, and refined their output over multiple interactions.

Moreover, the emotional and cultural familiarity of folktales played a crucial role in lowering learners' affective filters, a key factor in facilitating second language acquisition. Drawing from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, several studies emphasized how mediated learning tools such as folktales can scaffold cognitive and emotional engagement (Mendoza & Chan, 2021). This cultural resonance heightened learners' motivation, reduced hesitation, and encouraged active participation in speaking tasks, especially when learners could relate to the values, characters, and moral lessons embedded within the stories.

Taken together, these studies underscore that folktale-based instruction not only enriches linguistic competence but also cultivates a psychologically safe and affectively positive space for spoken language practice. Such environments are particularly beneficial in EFL contexts where speaking anxiety and limited exposure to authentic interaction are persistent challenges.

2. Development of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy emerged as a salient and recurring theme in 17 of the 25 reviewed studies, indicating that folktale-based instruction significantly contributed to the development of learners' self-regulated learning behaviors. Across these studies, folktales functioned not merely as linguistic input but as culturally rich learning tools that enabled learners to engage in goal-setting, self-monitoring, reflection, and independent learning planning.

According to Abdullah and Nasir (2024), students who engaged in self-selected storytelling tasks displayed a marked increase in metacognitive awareness and a growing preference for independent practice. This finding is consistent with Holec's (1981) foundational definition of autonomy as the learner's capacity to take charge of their own learning. Similarly, Rani and Ghozali (2023) highlighted the value of folktale reading logs, which provided learners with structured opportunities to plan their study, monitor progress, and assess their own performance. These practices fostered essential components of self-directed learning and encouraged ongoing reflection.

Furthermore, the integration of digital storytelling projects, especially when infused with local and global folktales, offered learners platforms for creative expression and ownership of learning. Mendoza and Chan (2021) emphasized how such projects enabled students to make meaningful decisions regarding story content, visuals, narration, and pacing, aligning with Knowles' (1975) principles of andragogy, which stress learner-centeredness, autonomy, and relevance as pillars of adult learning.

Technological tools such as Storybird, Canva, and Powtoon, used in studies like Lee and Hwang (2022), further enhanced this autonomy by providing accessible digital spaces where students could design their own storytelling products. These platforms empowered learners not only to practice language skills but also to develop a sense of agency through project-based learning models that encouraged exploration, iteration, and personalized expression.

Collectively, these findings underscore that folktale-based instruction, especially when paired with reflective and digital components, supports the growth of learner autonomy in meaningful ways. By combining cultural relevance with opportunities for creative authorship and reflective engagement, folktales create a pedagogical environment in which learners assume greater responsibility for their

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learning processes. This aligns with sociocultural views of learning, where autonomy is not an isolated trait but a socially mediated practice cultivated through dialogue, cultural tools, and learner agency (Little, 2007). Folktale-based instruction not only fosters linguistic and narrative competence but also cultivates essential self-directed learning dispositions that are critical in both traditional and digital learning ecologies, particularly in open and distance learning contexts.

3. Pedagogical Tools and Instructional Strategies

A diverse array of pedagogical strategies and tools was identified across the reviewed studies, illustrating how folktale-based instruction serves as a flexible and multidimensional approach to language teaching. These instructional techniques were not only instrumental in supporting speaking production but also contributed significantly to the development of intercultural communicative competence and learner agency.

Visual tools such as flashcards and story maps were commonly used to scaffold learners' comprehension and facilitate narrative construction. For instance, Setiawan and Amelia (2022) employed these supports to aid students in recalling key story elements and structuring their retellings. This visual mediation helped bridge gaps in linguistic proficiency, especially among early-stage learners.

In terms of interactive performance, story dramatization and role-play emerged as highly effective strategies for fostering oral language development. Nakamura (2023) reported that live dramatizations provided students with opportunities to rehearse and internalize target language in meaningful contexts, leading to improved pronunciation, intonation, and narrative fluency.

The integration of digital storytelling platforms, such as Storybird and Canva, further extended the pedagogical affordances of folktales. Lee and Hwang (2022) found that these platforms allowed learners to combine text, imagery, and audio narration, making them especially beneficial for multimodal expression. Importantly, such tools served as scaffolds for lower-proficiency learners, enabling them to participate more confidently in complex communicative tasks.

To support metacognitive development, several studies incorporated reflective journals as part of the instructional process. Fatmawati and Iskandar (2024) demonstrated that reflective writing encouraged learners to monitor their progress, articulate learning goals, and assess personal growth in both linguistic and intercultural dimensions.

Crucially, teacher facilitation played a central role in the effective implementation of these strategies. Across the studies, educators used scaffolded questioning, timely feedback loops, and structured peer interaction to guide learners through the storytelling process. This approach reflects the sociocultural theory of learning, particularly Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein teacher support enables learners to perform beyond their current level of competence.

Collectively, these instructional practices align with the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes meaning-focused communication, learner engagement in authentic tasks, and the co-construction of knowledge (Richards, 2015). Moreover, they resonate with the demands of 21st-century education, promoting essential competencies such as creativity, collaboration, and communication.

The use of folktales in language education is enriched by a variety of pedagogical strategies that are not only adaptable and culturally responsive but also pedagogically sound. Through visual, interactive, digital, and reflective tools, supported by thoughtful scaffolding, teachers can create dynamic and inclusive learning environments that support both language proficiency and holistic learner development.

4. Challenges and Constraints in Implementation

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting folktale-based instruction in EFL contexts, multiple studies consistently identified implementation barriers that hinder optimal pedagogical outcomes. Among the most commonly reported challenges were issues of adaptation, teacher preparedness, and assessment design.

First, adaptation difficulties emerged as a recurrent theme. Teachers frequently struggled to modify traditional folktales to align with students' age, cognitive development, and linguistic proficiency. As noted by Rahim and Karim (2021), teachers found it challenging to balance linguistic simplification without compromising the narrative integrity or moral depth of the original stories. This constraint underscores the need for guidelines or adapted folktale collections that are level-specific yet retain cultural authenticity.

Second, teacher preparedness, particularly in relation to narrative-based pedagogy, was highlighted as a significant barrier. Nugroho and Hastuti (2023) observed that many EFL instructors lacked formal training or exposure to narrative instructional strategies, resulting in inconsistent application of storytelling approaches across classrooms. This challenge is corroborated by Nguyen and Newton (2020), who stressed that without structured professional development on culturally responsive pedagogy, narrative tools may remain underutilized or misapplied.

Third, assessment concerns were reported across several studies, especially regarding how to effectively measure learner autonomy, creativity, and intercultural growth, particularly in large or resource-limited classrooms. Wang and Zhao (2025) noted that conventional testing methods failed to capture the nuanced outcomes associated with self-directed learning and project-based storytelling. These difficulties reflect broader concerns in narrative-based instruction, where formative, process-oriented assessment strategies (e.g., learning portfolios, peer review, reflective journals) are often more appropriate but underemployed due to time constraints or unfamiliarity.

Collectively, these findings point to an urgent need for systemic institutional support in the form of:
a. Curricular frameworks that incorporate adaptable narrative materials,
b. Ongoing in-service training that equips teachers with narrative pedagogy skills and assessment literacy, and
c. Collaborative learning communities that encourage resource sharing and reflective teaching practices.

As echoed by Mendoza and Chan (2021), narrative pedagogy holds transformative potential for fostering learner agency and intercultural competence, but such potential can only be realized through robust support structures that empower teachers as reflective practitioners and culturally responsive educators.

CONCLUSION

The synthesis of 25 reviewed studies demonstrates that folktale-based instruction significantly enhances English language teaching, particularly in speaking performance, learner autonomy, and pedagogical innovation. Folktales, embedded in rich cultural narratives, provide authentic and engaging material that improves learners' fluency, vocabulary, and narrative coherence while fostering confidence and communicative competence. Techniques such as oral retelling, dramatization, and digital storytelling effectively reduce anxiety, increase motivation, and sustain engagement—especially valuable in EFL contexts with limited authentic language exposure. Additionally, when learners interact with culturally familiar stories through project-based and digital platforms, they are encouraged to set goals, reflect, and take ownership of their learning, supporting the development of autonomy in alignment with sociocultural theories of learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, folktales offer a flexible foundation for diverse instructional strategies, integrating visual, interactive, digital, and reflective elements to promote not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking and intercultural awareness. However, challenges remain in material adaptation, teacher readiness, and assessment design, signaling a need for institutional support through adaptable curricula, professional development, and collaborative teaching practices. Given these findings, educators and policymakers are urged to embrace the narrative power of folktales by investing in scalable teaching resources and evolving assessment systems that reflect the process-oriented nature of learning through storytelling. This approach is particularly promising within open and distance learning contexts, where it can foster autonomous, confident, and culturally literate English language learners.

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