

REVIEW

Storytelling in English Language Education in China: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research from the Past Decade (2014–2024)

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ABSTRACT

The storytelling approach has been widely recognised as an effective pedagogical approach in English language education (ELE). In China, storytelling has received considerable attention as an instructional method, aligning with national policies emphasising innovative and interactive learning. However, while empirical research on storytelling in China's ELE has grown, there is a lack of systematic reviews synthesising relevant studies in this context. This gap limits the understanding of how storytelling has been implemented and evaluated within China's unique socio-cultural and educational settings. Thus, based on three databases (Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar), this systematic review addresses this gap by examining 24 empirical studies published in the past decade, from 2014 to 2024. The findings reveal storytelling is predominantly used in primary and secondary education, with fewer studies in tertiary and special education. Research interests span curriculum integration, material adaptation, stakeholder perceptions, and learning outcomes. Effective strategies primarily focus on the selection and adaptation of stories for instruction and the implementation of storytelling through methods such as guided reading, autonomous reading, and the use of multimodal support, though challenges such as inadequate teacher training, resource limitations, and misaligned activities with curriculum goals remain prevalent. With quantitative and qualitative designs underpinning most previous studies, the review highlights the importance of expanding the research agenda for a more comprehensive understanding. Implications for educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers include addressing resource gaps, enhancing teacher training, and fostering collaboration to optimise storytelling practices in China's ELE.

Keywords: Storytelling; English Language Education; Pedagogies; China; Systematic Review

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1. Introduction

English has become a vital skill for Chinese citizens, which facilitates global engagement in education, business, and cultural exchange. As China's role on the world stage continues to expand, English proficiency is increasingly recognised as essential for both personal development and national competitiveness^[1]. This recognition has led to the prioritisation of English language education (ELE) within China's broader educational strategy^[2]. Consequently, the government has enacted comprehensive reforms aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of ELE and ensuring its alignment with the nation's social and economic goals. Several key policies have guided these reforms and shaped the teaching and learning of English across different educational levels, ranging from K-12 to higher education, such as the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education*^[3], the *General Senior Secondary School English Curriculum Standards*^[4], and the *Guidelines for College English Teaching*^[5]. These policies collectively emphasise the importance of fostering students' comprehensive language skills, critical thinking, and cultural understanding through innovative and contextualised teaching methods that create authentic learning experiences.

Within these policy frameworks, the storytelling approach has emerged as a particularly relevant and promising pedagogical strategy in ELE in China. Storytelling, broadly defined, refers to the use of narrative techniques to convey information, concepts, or experiences in a structured and engaging manner^[6]. In the context of English language teaching, it involves embedding language instruction within meaningful and culturally resonant stories, creating a natural and immersive environment for language acquisition^[7] and enabling students to internalise language structures more effectively while also stimulating their imagination and engagement^[8]. Particularly, storytelling aligns closely with China's curriculum's emphasis on contextualised and interactive learning. Storytelling, which involves embedding language instruction within narratives^[9], aligns closely with the curriculum's emphasis on contextualised and engaging learning. By situating language use within meaningful stories, this approach fosters not only vocabulary acquisition and grammar application but also oral communication skills, creativity, and intercultural awareness^[10]. Furthermore, storytelling offers a dynamic platform for students to explore cultural themes and develop

critical thinking^[11], aligning with the policies' broader goals of holistic language development and cultural integration.

Despite its potential, however, the practical application and outcomes of storytelling in China's English language classrooms remain poorly understood in literature. Existing research on storytelling in ELE often focuses on isolated case studies or specific classroom interventions^[12, 13], without providing a comprehensive understanding of its broader implementation and impact across different educational levels. As a result, there is limited insight into how storytelling is implemented and what effects it has on various learning aspects. This lack of systematic analysis creates a gap in both academic literature and practical knowledge, hindering the effective integration of storytelling into English teaching practices. To address this gap, this systematic review aims to synthesise existing research from the past ten years (2014 to 2024) on the use of storytelling in China's ELE, focusing on the following questions: (1) What are the educational levels where the storytelling approach is applied? (2) What are the foci of previous studies on the storytelling approach? (3) What are the research designs utilised in these studies? (4) What are the effects of the storytelling approach on various aspects of learning? (5) What are the methods of the implementation of the storytelling approach? (6) What are the challenges encountered by teachers and students within the storytelling approach? By addressing these questions, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of storytelling as a pedagogical approach, identify gaps in the literature, and propose directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The storytelling approach has gained recognition as an effective pedagogical strategy in foreign language education, including ELE. Storytelling refers to the use of narrative techniques to convey information, experiences, or concepts in a structured and engaging manner^[6]. In the context of foreign language teaching, storytelling involves embedding language instruction within meaningful and contextually rich stories to create an immersive learning environment^[14, 15]. This approach leverages the universal appeal of stories to make language learning more engaging, memorable, and relatable for learners. By presenting language in narrative contexts, storytelling helps learners internalise linguistic structures

and develop both comprehension and production skills.

Different story types can be chosen for teaching, such as sentence stories using a limited number of sentences to focus on specific grammatical structures, theme stories centred around a particular topic or concept to expand vocabulary and thematic understanding, descriptive stories that emphasise vivid descriptions to enhance learners' ability to use adjectives and sensory language, picture stories inspired by sequential images that guide learners in storytelling and creative thinking, and grab-bag stories created using random elements or prompts to stimulate creativity and spontaneous language use^[6, 7]. However, the success of the storytelling approach depends on several critical factors, such as the alignment of story types with learning objectives, the engagement level of the narratives, and the teacher's ability to facilitate meaningful interactions^[10]. Therefore, various teaching strategies have been proposed, such as using pre-story activities (e.g., brainstorming sessions, vocabulary pre-teaching, or discussing related themes) to activate learners' prior knowledge and build interest, engaging learners in during-story tasks (e.g., guided listening or reading with comprehension questions, predicting story outcomes, noting key vocabulary and structures for later discussion) to maintain focus and comprehension, and incorporating post-story activities (e.g., story re-telling, role-playing scenes, creative writing based on the story, or group discussions) to reinforce learning outcomes and encourage creative application^[16–18].

Several theoretical frameworks underpin these proposed strategies and the overall storytelling approach. Key among these is constructivism, which posits that learners construct knowledge through active engagement with meaningful experiences^[19]. Stories serve as authentic and relatable contexts where learners can connect new language input with their existing knowledge, enabling the storytelling approach to foster deeper understanding and retention^[7]. Another theoretical basis is narrative theory, which emphasises the cognitive and emotional impact of stories on human learning^[20]. Narratives naturally engage learners' attention, stimulate imagination, and enhance memory by organising information into coherent sequences that are easier to process and recall^[21]. Additionally, sociocultural theory highlights the role of interaction and cultural context in language learning^[22], with storytelling providing opportunities for learners to explore cultural meanings and practices embedded in language^[23]. In addition to

general theories, those specific to second language acquisition underpin the storytelling approach, such as the Input Hypothesis^[24] (stories presented at a level slightly beyond learners' proficiency provide meaningful input for natural language learning), the Output Hypothesis^[25] (activities like re-telling or creating stories promote active language use, accuracy, and fluency), the Affective Filter Hypothesis^[24] (storytelling lowers anxiety and fosters a positive learning environment), and Task-Based Language Teaching^[26] (storytelling involves authentic tasks requiring purposeful language use). Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for the storytelling approach and demonstrate its benefits in different dimensions of language learning.

For example, linguistically, storytelling provides learners with contextualised language input and enables the natural and meaningful acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation^[15]. By embedding language structures within narratives, learners internalise these elements more effectively, enhancing their overall language proficiency. Cognitively, storytelling stimulates imagination and critical thinking^[16], as students analyse characters, plotlines, and themes, while the sequential nature of narratives aids memory retention and comprehension. Culturally, storytelling serves as a bridge to the target language's cultural context and allows learners to explore cultural elements embedded in narratives^[21]. This not only deepens their understanding of the language but also fosters intercultural competence and empathy. The approach also significantly impacts learners' motivation and enjoyment^[14], with the engaging nature of stories capturing their attention and making the learning process more enjoyable and less intimidating. Furthermore, storytelling facilitates social interaction through collaborative activities such as co-creating stories or role-playing^[11], which encourage meaningful communication among learners. These interactions support the development of communicative competence and teamwork skills and make storytelling a comprehensive and impactful strategy for foreign language instruction.

These understandings have been well documented in global academia, wherein Ghafar's^[27] and Jeyasakthi and Mishra's^[28] reviews highlight the widespread adoption of storytelling as an effective pedagogical approach across diverse educational contexts with positive effects on students' learning outcomes, cognitive thinking skills, and cultural understanding. However, a limitation of these reviews is

their exclusive focus on literature from the Western world, particularly English-speaking countries, while neglecting other socio-cultural contexts where the storytelling approach has gained significant traction. For instance, in China, where local educational policies have provided top-down support for the use of storytelling in ELE^[12], scholars have explored diverse perspectives. In addition to highlighting the potential benefits of this approach, they have proposed various methods for effective storytelling implementation, such as employing the situational teaching method to create authentic and relatable scenarios that immerse learners in meaningful contexts^[29], adopting a language-oriented approach to contextualise vocabulary and grammar instruction^[11], and integrating multimodal storytelling tools to enhance learner engagement and address diverse learning styles^[30]. These works have presented a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the storytelling approach by synthesising pedagogical frameworks and second language acquisition and learning theories and aligning them with the unique needs of China's ELE system.

However, according to Chen^[10] and Zhu^[31], the implementation of the storytelling approach in China awaits a more nuanced understanding derived from empirical classroom research. While theoretical frameworks and anecdotal evidence have underscored its potential, there remains a need for systematic investigations into how storytelling unfolds in real classroom settings. Empirical studies could provide valuable insights into how teachers navigate the practical challenges of integrating storytelling into their lessons, how students respond to different story types and strategies, and what specific factors influence the approach's effectiveness. Therefore, this gap in literature justifies a prompt review of previous studies to provide a foundation for future empirical research and equip stakeholders with evidence-based strategies to optimise storytelling as a pedagogical tool and adapt it to the unique cultural and educational context of China.

3. Methodology

The review was underpinned by the approach of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses^[32], which has been widely used in systematic

review of foreign language studies^[33]. As shown in **Figure 1**, three stages were included in the review. In the first identification stage, preliminary studies were searched with three databases, namely Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and Google Scholar. The reasons for choosing these databases were their complementary strengths in providing access to relevant literature. WoS and Scopus are widely recognised for indexing high-quality, peer-reviewed research articles, ensuring the inclusion of studies with rigorous methodologies and significant academic contributions. However, these databases do not support full-text search, which may result in the omission of studies that include relevant content in their body text but lack explicit mention of key terms in the title or abstract^[34]. To address this limitation, Google Scholar was included due to its more extensive coverage, which allowed for a broader and more comprehensive search.

The search strings used were (*“storytelling*” OR “story*”*) AND (*“China*”*) AND (*“English”*) for WoS and Scopus, and *“storytelling” OR “story” AND “China” AND “English”* for Google Scholar. For WoS and Scopus, the string was applied within the categories of article titles, abstracts, and keywords, while in Google Scholar, a general full-text search was conducted using the same string to capture a broader range of relevant studies. As a result, 66, 224, and 1,000¹ records were initially identified from WoS, Scopus, and Google Scholar, respectively, from 2014 to 2024. After manually removing duplicates ($n = 219$) from the initial search, the remaining records were screened based on their titles, abstracts, keywords, and literature type to determine whether they principally focused on the use of the storytelling approach in Mainland China's ELE and whether empirical evidence was presented. This screening process resulted in the removal of 856 records, including 544 records that were outside the scope of the review, 312 records that were indexed as reviews or other non-empirical type (e.g., notes, theoretical articles).

The full texts of the remaining records ($n = 215$) were then retrieved. Except for those that could not be accessed ($n = 6$), the remaining records underwent further screening based on the inclusion criteria: the record must be empirical research, peer-reviewed, focused on the storytelling approach, and contextualised within Mainland China's ELE.

¹According to Brown^[34], Google Scholar typically generates a significantly higher number of results compared to other databases. This is likely due to its extensive coverage and the fact that it indexes the full text of articles. Moreover, Google Scholar displays only the first 1,000 search results and lacks a search history feature, which makes it difficult to compare or refine searches.

Following this screening, 39 records were excluded for being primarily theoretical or perspective articles, 14 were removed for being grey literature (e.g., working papers, reports) or theses without traditional peer review, 104 were excluded for not focusing on storytelling as a pedagogical approach, and 29 were removed for being situated in socio-cultural contexts unrelated to China or ELE. The final set of records ($n = 23$) underwent an additional review by a panel of experts for quality assurance. The panel assessed whether each study adequately addressed the research questions and whether the evidence presented was trustworthy based on the research methodology, results, and conclusions. All remaining records were deemed academically rigorous and were included in the review. The selected records were organised using a software programme and analysed thematically in alignment with the review objectives. Following the template provided by Riley-Brown^[35], a matrix summarising the research purposes, designs, and findings of the selected articles is presented in **Appendix A**.

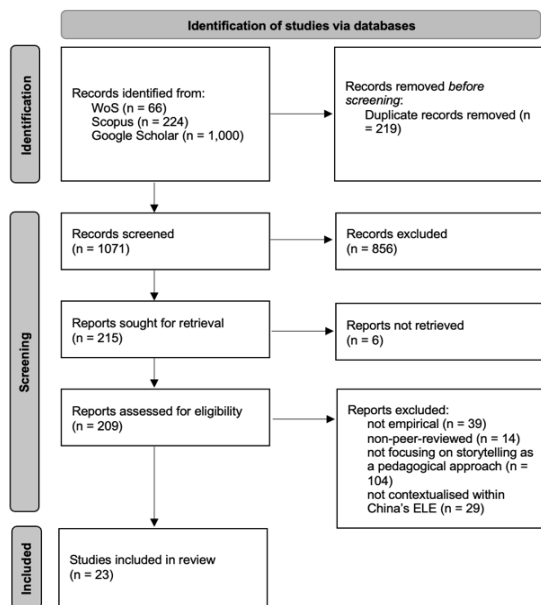


Figure 1. Flow of Identifying Studies.

4. Findings

4.1. Educational Levels of Storytelling Implementation

The analysis of the past ten years' empirical research on the storytelling approach reveals that it has been pre-

dominantly implemented within China's compulsory education stage, particularly in the primary school setting. A significant number of studies, such as those by Ao and Zhang^[36], Chen^[37], Duan and Sun^[38], Huang^[39], Liu and He^[40], Xiong and Nasri^[41], Yan^[42], Yang and Yang^[43], and Zhu and Guo^[44], highlight the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy for younger learners in primary schools. This widespread focus reflects the emphasis on building foundational language skills and engaging young learners in interactive and imaginative ways during the early stages of education. The primary school context provides an ideal environment for storytelling, given its ability to foster engagement and align with the developmental needs of children in this age group.

In contrast, there are relatively fewer studies examining the storytelling approach in secondary school settings. Research by Gong^[45], Liu and Cheung^[46], Yang et al.^[47], and Zhang et al.^[48] represents this smaller body of work. The implementation of storytelling in secondary education appears to be more limited, potentially due to the increased academic demands and curriculum constraints at this level. However, these studies indicate that storytelling continues to play a role in secondary education, albeit less prominently than in primary schools, and suggest a need for further exploration of its potential in engaging older learners and addressing their more advanced linguistic and cognitive requirements.

Beyond the compulsory education stage, several studies have examined the use of storytelling in tertiary-level ELE in China. Research by An^[49], Cai^[50], Qiu^[51], and Shen et al.^[52] demonstrates how storytelling has been integrated into higher education contexts, where it is often used to promote critical thinking, cultural awareness, and advanced language proficiency. Specifically, storytelling has been applied in seminar discussions to help students analyze and evaluate complex ideas, in project-based learning to encourage collaborative exploration of cultural narratives, and in academic writing tasks to develop coherence and creativity. These studies emphasize the versatility of storytelling in addressing the diverse needs of university students. For instance, the use of historical or professional narratives allows students to engage with subject-specific content while enhancing their ability to articulate nuanced arguments, thereby preparing them for academic and professional communication demands. By tailoring storytelling approaches to align with the intellectual

and linguistic challenges of higher education, educators can create more engaging and impactful learning experiences. Interestingly, storytelling has also been explored in the context of special education. Xia and Wu^[53] conducted a study examining how the storytelling approach could be adapted to meet the unique cognitive and linguistic needs of students in special education settings. This highlights the broader applicability of storytelling beyond traditional educational contexts and suggests its potential to support diverse learner populations.

4.2. Areas of Research Interest

The analysis reveals a range of research interests within the use of the storytelling approach in ELE in China, highlighting its application across various contexts. One prominent area of research focuses on the integration of storytelling into curricula and the adaptation of materials to support its implementation. Studies such as An^[49] and Zhang et al.^[48] explore how storytelling is embedded in educational frameworks, including College English curricula and creative classroom activities. Similarly, research by Ao and Zhang^[36], Xia and Wu^[53], Wang et al.^[54], and Zhu and Guo^[44] examines the design and adaptation of storytelling resources, such as chapter books, picture books, and trans-edited novels, to align with learners' cognitive and linguistic needs. Another significant research interest lies in understanding the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding storytelling. Studies such as Cai^[50], Ye^[55], and Liu and He^[40] investigate how students perceive storytelling as a learning tool and focus on its role in cultural understanding and language development. Concurrently, teacher-focused studies explore the challenges they face, including the need for professional training and the selection of appropriate stories for classroom use.

The effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy is another key area of interest, which encompasses its impact on learning outcomes, engagement and motivation, and cultural awareness. Research by Chen^[37], Qiu^[51], and Yang, Tong^[47] evaluates how storytelling enhances language proficiency, while Liu and Cheung^[46] and Shen, Hao^[52] investigate its role in fostering learner engagement and communication skills. Additionally, studies such as Cai^[50] and Zhang and Chai^[56] focus on storytelling's ability to promote cultural learning and intercultural competence. The chal-

lenges of implementing storytelling in classroom settings form another critical area of inquiry. Researchers such as Huang^[39] and Yan^[42] examine obstacles such as the inappropriate selection of stories and the neglect of certain linguistic aspects, calling for greater teacher training and support in this regard. These studies underscore the importance of addressing practical barriers to enhance the efficacy of storytelling in teaching.

4.3. Designs of Previous Research

The research designs employed in the studies on the storytelling approach reflect a range of methodological approaches tailored to their specific research objectives. Many studies utilised qualitative case study designs to explore nuanced aspects of storytelling implementation, such as its integration with teaching practices, teacher and student perceptions, and challenges in specific contexts. For example, Ao and Zhang^[36] examined storytelling with chapter books through classroom observations and document analysis, while Xia and Wu^[53] developed storytelling instructional approaches for special education by analysing teaching materials and lesson plans. Qualitative designs are frequently applied in primary and secondary education studies, such as Gong^[45], Shen, Hao^[52], and Ye^[55], where interviews and reflective journals provide rich, contextual insights into storytelling practices.

Several studies employed quantitative survey designs, particularly to capture broader perspectives from teachers and students. For instance, Liu and He^[40] and Wang et al.^[54] collected data from primary English teachers through structured questionnaires, focusing on storytelling practices and material adaptation. Similarly, Zhang and Chai^[56] and Xie et al.^[57] conducted surveys to evaluate storytelling's impact on cultural understanding and pedagogical effectiveness in classroom settings. Moreover, studies investigating the effects of storytelling on specific learning outcomes, such as grammar and speaking proficiency, often adopted quasi-experimental designs. For example, Liu and Cheung^[46], Qiu^[51], and Yang et al.^[47] employed controlled experimental setups to measure storytelling's impact on learner engagement and speaking performance.

Mixed-methods designs were also used in research aiming to integrate quantitative and qualitative insights. An^[49] combined curriculum analysis with student surveys to evalu-

ate outcome-based storytelling approaches, while Cai^[50] employed concurrent mixed methods to assess students' cultural understanding through storytelling. Sequential explanatory designs, as used by Chen^[37] and Xiong and Nasri^[41], provided a structured approach to exploring storytelling's effects, beginning with experimental or survey data and followed by qualitative interviews to deepen understanding. However, mixed-methods designs were less common compared to purely quantitative or qualitative approaches. This trend is also evident in the study of Zhu and Guo^[44], which utilised narratological analysis to adapt novels for storytelling instruction, and the research by Zhang et al.^[48], which applied iterative design methods to develop storytelling-based games and evaluate their pedagogical value through classroom implementation.

4.4. Effects of the Storytelling Approach

Based on the areas of previous research, effects in this section are considered as a broad concept that encompasses various dimensions. One of the most prominent aspects is the effects of the storytelling approach on students' English learning outcomes. Numerous studies have highlighted how storytelling enhances linguistic proficiency, including vocabulary acquisition, grammar mastery, and speaking skills. For instance, Chen^[37] found that primary school students instructed using storytelling with picture books significantly improved their English proficiency across listening, reading, and speaking compared to those taught through conventional methods. Similarly, Qiu^[51] demonstrated that storytelling tasks using pictures effectively improved university students' speaking accuracy, lexical complexity, and structural complexity, with particularly strong results among higher-proficiency learners. Xiong and Nasri^[41] explored the storytelling approach's impact on grammar learning in primary schools, revealing that students performed better in grammar tests and found the approach engaging and meaningful.

Beyond linguistic outcomes, storytelling has shown potential to foster learner engagement and motivation. Digital storytelling, in particular, has been highlighted as a tool for enhancing strategic engagement and self-regulation. Liu and Cheung^[46], for example, found that year-six students using digital storytelling were more inclined to follow class norms and exert mental effort, although no significant improve-

ments in affective or behavioural engagement were observed. Shen et al.^[52] further noted that digital storytelling promoted university students' willingness to communicate in English, suggesting its role in creating an interactive and communicative learning environment. Stakeholder attitudes can also be affected by the storytelling approach, encompassing the perceptions of both teachers and students as well as parents. Teachers often regard storytelling as a versatile tool for enhancing classroom engagement and achieving linguistic and cultural learning objectives, with Liu and He^[40], Yan^[42], and Wang et al.^[54] revealing that primary school teachers viewed storytelling with picture books as highly effective for improving children's English proficiency. Likewise, students' perceptions of storytelling have been overwhelmingly positive, with Cai^[50] and Ye^[55] reflecting their enthusiasm for the interactive and engaging nature of the approach. Parents, another critical stakeholder group, have also shown supportive attitudes toward storytelling in ELE, with Liu and He^[40] finding that parents of primary school students believed storytelling was an effective means of enhancing children's overall English proficiency and cultural awareness.

Another key area of research has been the cultural and intercultural learning effects of storytelling. Cai^[50] explored the use of project-based storytelling in College English classrooms, finding that students developed a greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese cultures through the approach. Similarly, Zhang and Chai^[56] evaluated the task-based storytelling model in higher education, showing that it not only improved students' cultural understanding but also fostered their cultural self-confidence in alignment with China's ideological and political education trends. Studies have also examined the pedagogical impacts of storytelling, particularly its ability to engage learners in creative and critical thinking tasks. For instance, Zhang et al.^[48] developed storytelling-based games for secondary students and found that these activities enhanced creative language use and encouraged learners to actively participate in class. Gong^[45] proposed storytelling-integrated classroom activities in secondary schools and emphasised the importance of linguistic and cultural elements in fostering meaningful classroom interactions. Moreover, Li^[58] explored storytelling through drama, highlighting its effectiveness in secondary education as a medium for improving English proficiency while promoting collaboration and creative expression.

4.5. Strategies of Implementing the Storytelling Approach

The strategies for implementing the storytelling approach can be summarised into two broad categories: planning strategies and teaching strategies, reflecting the emphasis of different studies. Several studies focused on designing and preparing storytelling activities to align with curriculum objectives and learner needs. Ao and Zhang^[36] highlighted the importance of selecting chapter books with appropriate text difficulty, relevant story topics, and rich teaching resources. Xia and Wu^[53] underscored the need for story selection that considers students' cognitive and linguistic levels, particularly in special education settings. Wang, Saihong^[54] emphasised the adaptation of materials, such as picture books, by leveraging teachers' awareness of the interplay between illustrations and text to enhance storytelling. Zhu and Guo^[44] explored trans-editing novels to make complex stories more accessible for young learners while retaining their narrative richness. These planning strategies collectively stress the importance of selecting or adapting materials that are meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate.

Teaching strategies focused on how storytelling is delivered in classrooms to maximise its impact on learning. Yang and Yang^[43] identified the effective use of picture books to support English reading and speaking while noting the need to integrate grammar and vocabulary instruction. Xia and Wu^[53] proposed diverse teaching techniques such as teacher-guided reading, student autonomous reading, group/paired reading, and collaborative storytelling. Li^[58] explored storytelling through drama, where students actively participated in enacting stories, blending creativity with language practice. Gong^[45] recommended classroom activities that integrate linguistic and cultural elements, ensuring that storytelling fosters both engagement and contextual understanding. Additionally, Shen et al.^[52] examined digital storytelling as a tool to promote communication skills, leveraging multimedia to engage learners interactively. These studies collectively suggest that successful teaching strategies for storytelling hinge on adaptability, interaction, and alignment with learning goals. Whether through traditional methods such as guided reading or innovative techniques such as multimedia storytelling, these strategies provide educators with a toolkit for delivering impactful and engaging lessons that go beyond rote learning to foster critical thinking, cultural awareness,

and language proficiency.

4.6. Challenges in Implementing the Storytelling Approach

The implementation of the storytelling approach in has revealed several challenges, as highlighted by existing research. One of the most prominent challenges is the inappropriate selection of stories for classroom use. Huang^[39] and Xia and Wu^[53] both emphasised the importance of choosing stories that align with learners' cognitive and linguistic levels. However, many teachers lack the necessary expertise or resources to identify and adapt stories effectively. For instance, Xie et al.^[57] found that teachers often default to popular materials such as *Oxford Tree Reading* without fully considering their suitability for students' language proficiency levels. Similarly, Zhu and Guo^[44] highlighted the difficulty of adapting novels for younger learners, particularly when the language complexity exceeds their understanding. Another critical issue is the lack of teacher training in implementing the storytelling approach. Liu and He^[40] noted that while primary English teachers generally view storytelling as effective, most have not received formal training in using picture books or other storytelling materials in their teaching. This lack of professional development limits teachers' ability to fully leverage storytelling's potential for enhancing language learning.

The neglect of linguistic and curriculum integration further complicates storytelling's implementation. Huang^[39] pointed out that teachers often fail to connect storytelling activities with meaningful linguistic contexts, such as grammar and vocabulary instruction. Similarly, Yang and Yang^[43] observed that storytelling is often treated as an auxiliary activity rather than an integral part of the curriculum, resulting in missed opportunities to develop comprehensive language skills such as writing and listening. Also, resource constraints and logistical issues pose challenges. Ao and Zhang^[36] highlighted the importance of having rich teaching resources to support storytelling-based lessons, yet many schools face limitations in accessing diverse and high-quality materials. Furthermore, Shen et al.^[52] noted that digital storytelling, while effective, requires technological infrastructure and teacher proficiency in multimedia tools, which may not be readily available in all educational contexts.

Lastly, engaging learners consistently across diverse

contexts remains a challenge. Liu and Cheung^[46] reported that while digital storytelling promoted strategic engagement, it did not significantly impact affective or behavioural engagement, suggesting that not all storytelling methods resonate equally with students. This variability underscores the need for tailored approaches that consider individual learner preferences and classroom dynamics.

5. Discussion

The systematic review has raised some important points for consideration. The first centres around the educational levels that can accommodate the storytelling approach. The findings indicate that storytelling has been predominantly implemented in primary and secondary education, where it aligns well with young learners' cognitive and linguistic developmental stages. Storytelling appears particularly well-suited for young language learners because the inherent structure and emotional resonance of narratives capture children's attention and sustain their engagement^[11, 31], with storytelling tapping into young learners' cognitive processes by providing contextualised language input that supports their understanding and retention of vocabulary and grammar^[43]. More importantly, storytelling is a powerful tool for developing foundational language skills such as listening and speaking^[13, 57], which are crucial for young learners. Through active listening to and retelling stories, children are exposed to enriched language input and output activities. Primary schools, in particular, provide a fertile ground for storytelling due to these developmental factors and the flexibility of primary curricula, which often allow for creative, play-based, and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching^[41]. However, the application of storytelling at higher educational levels, such as tertiary education, remains less explored, even though some studies, such as Cai^[50] and Shen et al.^[52], have demonstrated its potential to enhance cultural understanding and communication skills in college students. While young learners may benefit from the engaging and imaginative qualities of storytelling, older learners might gain from adaptations that focus on more complex linguistic, critical thinking, and cultural competencies. This suggests that storytelling, while particularly suitable for young learners, can also be effectively adapted to meet the needs of older students in higher education contexts.

While the effects of the storytelling approach have been established in previous research, especially the effects on overall English proficiency^[50, 59], grammar and vocabulary learning^[41], motivation and engagement^[12], and critical thinking skills^[54], another point of issue to consider is the variability in its implementation across different educational and cultural contexts. The effectiveness of storytelling is not merely tied to the pedagogical method itself but also to how well it is integrated into the specific learning environment. For instance, the success of storytelling depends heavily on the teacher's ability to select, adapt, and deliver stories that resonate with learners' linguistic levels and cultural backgrounds. As highlighted by Huang^[39], the lack of training in material selection and adaptation often results in the use of unsuitable or overly complex stories, which can hinder learners' comprehension and engagement. Similarly, the cultural relevance of stories plays a critical role, especially in settings such as China, where learners' familiarity with and interest in the story's context can significantly affect their motivation and understanding. Moreover, the storytelling approach requires thoughtful integration into language curricula to ensure its alignment with broader learning goals, as Gong^[45] and Yang and Yang^[43] note that when storytelling is treated as a supplementary activity rather than a core instructional method, its potential to foster comprehensive language skills is often underutilised. This raises questions about how storytelling can be systematically embedded into language teaching frameworks to maximise its impact across all linguistic domains.

Equally important to the integration of the storytelling approach is the question of how it can be effectively implemented. The review has revealed several strategies for facilitating the use of this approach, such as teacher-guided reading, autonomous reading, group or paired storytelling activities, drama-based storytelling, and digital storytelling^[12, 47, 50, 52]. A common feature of these strategies is that they emphasise active learner engagement and allow students to interact with stories in meaningful ways that enhance various aspects of their learning. However, effective implementation extends beyond simply adopting these strategies; it requires addressing several challenges that could hinder the storytelling approach from reaching its full potential. Insufficient teacher training is one of the hurdles. As highlighted by^[57], many teachers lack the expertise re-

quired to select, adapt, and deliver stories effectively, often resulting in storytelling activities that are misaligned with curriculum goals. This challenge is further compounded by the lack of appropriate teaching resources^[10, 11], particularly materials that are relevant to China's socio-cultural context and students' linguistic levels^[49], as well as teachers' lack of expertise in fostering comprehensive development through storytelling^[46]. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes professional development for teachers and investment in culturally and linguistically appropriate resources to facilitate the integration of existing ELE curriculums with storytelling.

An interesting point generated in the review is that the success of the storytelling approach not only resides in students and teachers but also involves other stakeholders, such as parents, who generally exhibit a positive attitude toward the use of storytelling in English classrooms^[42, 51, 60]. This suggests that involving parents in formal education creates opportunities for meaningful collaboration between families and schools, and parents can serve as valuable allies in formal educational settings by contributing to the selection of culturally relevant stories, supporting storytelling events, and participating in school-organised activities that promote narrative-based learning. However, the relevant studies did not delve deeply into how parental involvement can be systematically integrated into the educational frameworks supporting storytelling. While positive attitudes from parents have been noted, there is a lack of research on specific mechanisms through which parents can actively contribute to the storytelling process in schools. Therefore, there is a need to explore how schools can establish sustainable models for parental involvement in storytelling and focus on creating inclusive and accessible opportunities for collaboration.

The last point for consideration centres on the designs underpinning storytelling research. Qualitative designs, such as case studies, were commonly employed to explore the nuanced dynamics of storytelling in classrooms, shedding light on teacher practices, student perceptions, and contextual factors influencing the approach^[53, 57]. These studies, while valuable, are limited in their generalisability. Quantitative designs were also widely used, either to investigate students' and teachers' perceptions through surveys or to examine the effects of the storytelling approach using quasi-experiments^[37, 40, 51]. However, these approaches often lack

the contextual richness provided by qualitative methods. This highlights the importance of mixed-methods research in addressing both the "what" and "how" questions surrounding storytelling, effectively bridging the gap between measurable outcomes and the underlying processes that drive them. Although only a few mixed-methods studies exist in the current literature^[11, 61], they exemplify the potential of combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the complexities of storytelling.

Despite the contributions of existing designs, there remain gaps in the methodologies used in storytelling research, generating implications for researchers. For instance, longitudinal studies are notably scarce, leaving questions unanswered about the long-term effects of storytelling on language learning and cultural understanding. Additionally, many studies rely on small sample sizes or single-site research, limiting the generalisability of their findings. Expanding the scope of research to include larger and more diverse populations could offer a broader perspective on the applicability of storytelling across different educational contexts. Another underexplored area is the use of participatory research designs that actively involve teachers, students, and other stakeholders in the research process. Such approaches could provide more practical insights into how storytelling can be tailored to meet the specific needs of diverse learning environments. By prioritising collaborative and inclusive research methods, researchers can contribute to more actionable recommendations for integrating storytelling into language education.

Implications for teachers are equally important. Professional development programmes should focus on equipping educators with the skills needed to effectively integrate storytelling into their classrooms. This includes training in story selection and adaptation, strategies for aligning storytelling activities with curriculum objectives, and methods for fostering student engagement through narrative techniques. Curriculum planners and policymakers need to consider embedding storytelling more systematically into language education frameworks. This involves designing curriculum guidelines that explicitly highlight the role of storytelling in achieving language learning outcomes and providing access to high-quality, culturally relevant teaching materials. Additionally, policymakers should allocate resources for teacher training and the development of storytelling tools, particu-

larly in under-resourced schools, to ensure equitable access to this approach.

Overall, China's socio-cultural educational context presents both opportunities and challenges for implementing the storytelling approach. On one hand, a deep-rooted tradition of folktales, historical legends, and Confucian classics can serve as culturally resonant material that fosters students' linguistic development and cultural identity^[13, 39]. Students often respond with higher engagement and motivation when narratives reflect their heritage, allowing them to connect language learning with personal and communal values. On the other hand, China's highly examination-oriented system may limit the classroom time allocated to narrative-based pedagogies, particularly in upper levels where high-stakes examinations take precedence^[9]. Teachers under pressure to cover test-related content may view storytelling as a supplementary rather than integral part of curricula, which can constrain its potential benefits^[38]. Nonetheless, recent shifts in educational policy and growing emphasis on holistic language competencies indicate that storytelling could be increasingly integrated into formal curricula, offering a means to balance traditional academic expectations with more creative, student-centered learning experiences.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of empirical research on the storytelling approach in China's ELE highlights its predominant use in primary schools, where it effectively supports young learners' foundational language development and engagement. Its implementation in secondary schools is less common, often constrained by curriculum demands, while studies at the tertiary level demonstrate storytelling's potential to foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and advanced linguistic skills. Special education contexts also reveal its adaptability to diverse learner needs. Research interests encompass curriculum integration, material adaptation, and the exploration of perceptions and impacts on learning outcomes, motivation, and cultural understanding. Effective strategies for implementation include planning techniques such as selecting appropriate materials and teaching methods such as drama-based and digital storytelling. However, challenges persist, including inadequate teacher training, resource limitations, and difficulties in aligning storytelling with curriculum goals.

These findings underscore the need for enhanced teacher support, tailored resources, and collaborative efforts among stakeholders to maximise the potential of the storytelling approach in diverse educational settings.

Regarding the review itself, a significant limitation lies in its exclusion of Chinese databases such as Wanfang Data and the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure, which index a substantial body of literature on the development and application of the storytelling approach in China's ELE. This omission may result in an incomplete representation of the research landscape within the Chinese academic community, potentially overlooking studies that offer valuable insights into locally developed storytelling practices, teacher training programmes, and culturally specific materials. Future reviews would greatly benefit from incorporating these databases to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the storytelling approach within China's socio-cultural and educational contexts and allow researchers to access a broader spectrum of empirical evidence, theoretical analyses, and practical strategies, thereby enriching global perspectives on storytelling in ELE.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.Z.; methodology, L.Z.; software, L.Z.; validation, H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; formal analysis, L.Z.; investigation, L.Z.; resources, L.Z.; data curation, L.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, L.Z.; writing—review and editing, H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; visualization, L.Z.; supervision, H.H.I., H.H. and Z.B.A.; project administration, H.H.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Appendix A

Source	Indexing	Research Purpose/Objective	Research Design	Main Findings
An ^[49]	Google Scholar	to design and evaluate the integration of the outcome-based storytelling approach into the College English curriculum	mixed methods approach with a development, design, and research method (involving analysis of relevant documents such as curriculum standards and 525 students' questionnaire responses)	By inviting students to review and analyse meaningful stories and engage in written and oral production based on the stories, the research integrated the storytelling approach into popular textbooks used in College English teaching, with students had positive perceptions of this approach in improving their English proficiency.
Ao and Zhang ^[36]	Google Scholar	to design and develop a storytelling approach for primary English learners with the use of chapter books	qualitative case study design (involving document analysis of teaching materials and lesson plans and conversational analysis of classroom observations)	The researchers highlighted the educational value of the story topic, the difficulty of the text language and form, the appropriateness of the story content, and the richness of teaching resources when designing storytelling-based lessons. Moreover, the researchers proposed the process of triggering student interest, analysing the language components, and engaging in language production in the implementation of the storytelling approach.
Cai ^[50]	Google Scholar	to explore students' perceptions of using the project-based storytelling approach in enhancing their understanding of Chinese cultures	concurrent, mixed-methods design (involving questionnaire surveys with 985 College English learners and interviews with selected students)	Students using the project-based storytelling approach to learn English had positive attitudes to it and had perceived greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese cultures.
Chen ^[37]	Google Scholar	to explore the effects of the storytelling approach using picture books on students' English proficiency and interest in learning English and to explore students' perceptions of this approach	mixed methods, sequential explanatory design (involving primary school students completing questionnaires and English tests before and after intervention, and selected students attending interviews)	Compared with students instructed by regular approaches, students instructed by the storytelling approach significantly improved their English proficiency (e.g., listening, reading, speaking) and interest in learning English. They also had positive perceptions on the storytelling approach. However, the findings highlight the importance of choosing appropriate stories for instruction.
Duan and Sun ^[38]	Google Scholar	to explore primary students' attitudes to the storytelling approach	qualitative case study (involving five students attending interviews)	Students had very positive attitudes to the storytelling approach, especially their affective and behavioural attitudes, and supposed the storytelling approach was interesting and effective.
Gong ^[45]	Google Scholar	to present a plan of classroom activities integrated with storytelling in secondary schools	qualitative case study (involving document analysis of lesson plans)	The research indicated the importance of linguistic and cultural elements when using the storytelling approach and highlighted the analysis of stories and student response as evidence of students engaging with selected stories.
Huang ^[39]	Google Scholar	to identify the challenges of implementing the storytelling approach in the primary school context	qualitative case study design (involving teachers' observations and students' reflections)	The challenges included unsuitable stories chosen for using the storytelling approach when teaching English and the neglect of the meaningful linguistic context (e.g., grammar) during teaching. The importance of teacher scaffolding was particularly highlighted, given that young learners' cognitive and linguistic constraints.
Li ^[58]	Google Scholar	to investigate how storytelling through dramas was implemented and explore students' and teachers' perceptions	qualitative case study design (involving 45 secondary students and one teacher who attended interviews and kept reflective journals)	Drama provided an effective medium for integrating storytelling into English teaching and was perceived to be effective in improving learners' English proficiency.
Liu and Cheung ^[46]	WoS, Scopus, Google Scholar	to investigate the effect of digital storytelling on English learners' engagement	quantitative, quasi-experimental design (involving 70 year-six students who completed questionnaires)	Students instructed by the storytelling approach were more inclined to follow class norms and arrangements while also putting in mental effort to engage strategically and practice self-regulation. However, no significant differences were observed in affective engagement or behavioural engagement, specifically in terms of effortful class participation.

Source	Indexing	Research Purpose/Objective	Research Design	Main Findings
Liu and He ^[40]	Google Scholar	to explore the status quo of using picture books in storytelling in primary English classrooms and to examine parents' perspectives of storytelling teaching in school	quantitative survey design (involving primary English teachers and parents completing questionnaires)	Teachers supposed the storytelling approach was highly effective and used picture books as the main materials for teaching, but most received no training on how to use picture books for storytelling instruction. Parents also supported the use of picture books and the storytelling approach in school, believing this could improve children's overall English proficiency.
Qiu ^[51]	WoS,	to investigate the effects of picture-based storytelling tasks on students' English speaking performance	quantitative, quasi-experimental design (involving 60 university English learners who completed an English speaking task as the instrument)	Short speech tasks improved participants' speaking accuracy and lexical complexity and were particularly effective in enhancing structural complexity among higher-proficiency learners.
Shen et al. ^[52]	WoS, Scopus, Google Scholar	to explore the effects of digital storytelling in promoting English learners' willingness to communicate through transmediation	qualitative case study (involving 69 university students who completed writing tasks and attended interviews)	Digital storytelling was perceived to be effective in improving students' willingness to communicate in English.
Wang et al. ^[54]	Google Scholar	to explore the factors influencing material adaptation for storytelling	quantitative survey design (involving 352 primary English teachers)	Teachers' awareness of the potential of picture books as teaching materials, their benefits for supporting students' bilingual development, and their understanding of the interplay between illustrations and text can greatly enhance teachers' ability in adapting stories for storytelling teaching.
Xia and Wu ^[53]	Google Scholar	to develop a storytelling instructional approach for special education	qualitative case study design (involving document analysis of teaching materials and lesson plans)	The researchers highlighted the importance of choosing appropriate stories that not only accounted for students' cognitive and linguistic levels but also aimed to inspire students. The research also proposed effective strategies for storytelling, including teacher-guided reading, student autonomous reading, group/paired reading, and evaluation and display of stories.
Xie et al. ^[57]	Google Scholar	to explore primary English teachers' abilities in using the storytelling approach via the medium of graded reading materials	quantitative survey design (involving 103 teachers completing questionnaires)	Oxford Tree Reading was the most popular material for storytelling. However, due to a lack of training, many teachers were unaware of choosing appropriate stories in accordance with students' linguistic levels for classroom instruction.
Xiong and Nasri ^[41]	Google Scholar	to explore and understand the effect of storytelling in teaching grammar to primary school students	mixed methods, sequential explanatory design (involving an experimental group and a control group taking grammar tests, classroom observations, and interviews with selected cases)	Students instructed by the storytelling approach performed better in grammar learning than those instructed by regular approaches. Students believed that the storytelling approach was engaging and interesting, providing a meaningful context for grammar learning and intention and acquiring cultural knowledge.
Yan ^[42]	Google Scholar	to explore the status quo of primary English teachers using the storytelling approach via the medium of picture books	quantitative survey design (involving primary English teachers who completed questionnaires)	Using picture books to facilitate storytelling was popular among primary English teachers, while they focused on teaching reading and cultural knowledge and somehow neglected grammar and vocabulary instruction.
Yang and Yang ^[43]	Google Scholar	to explore the status quo of primary English teachers using the storytelling approach via the medium of picture books and to identify effective instructional strategies	mixed methods concurrent design (involving primary English teachers completing questionnaires, interviews with parents, and classroom observations)	Teachers mainly used picture books as auxiliary materials for storytelling, the implementation of which focused on English reading and speaking, neglecting areas such as listening, writing, and vocabulary and grammar learning. Moreover, the storytelling approach was less used in classroom than textbook-based instruction.
Yang et al. ^[47]	Google Scholar	to examine the effect of storytelling on learners' English speaking performance	quantitative, quasi-experimental design (involving 10 secondary school students who completed an English speaking test)	Storytelling could significantly improve students' English speaking proficiency.
Ye ^[55]	Google Scholar	to explore pupils' perspectives on the effects of using the literature-based storytelling approach	qualitative case study design (involving five primary students attending semi-structured interviews)	Students supposed that the storytelling approach not only improved their English proficiency in phonological knowledge, semantic knowledge,

Source	Indexing	Research Purpose/Objective	Research Design	Main Findings
Zhang and Chai ^[56]	Google Scholar	to evaluate the effect of the task-based storytelling model on university students' cultural understanding against China's ideological and political education trends.	quantitative survey design (involving 118 College English learners who completed questionnaires)	Students instructed by the task-based storytelling model, wherein stories were analysed with following written and verbal presentation of the stories, significantly improved their understanding of various aspects of Chinese cultures, such as history, ideological value, and improved their cultural self-confidence.
Zhang et al. ^[48]	Scopus, Google Scholar	to design a storytelling games for practicing creative language use and examine its effects	mixed methods, iterative design (involving 36 secondary students who participated in classroom evaluation, completed questionnaires, and attended interviews)	The storytelling-based game was effective in enhancing students' language use and was perceived to be engaging by learners.
Zhu and Guo ^[44]	Scopus, Google Scholar	to explore the practice of trans-editing novels for storytelling teaching	qualitative, narratological case study (analysing the text of a novel)	The literature for young Chinese English learners could be occasionally linguistically difficult, and adapting materials for storytelling teaching should account for learners' cognitive and linguistic needs.

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