



## **Storytelling for Improving Vocabulary and Motivation in Bilingual Third-Language Learners**

**Eva Reid**

Assoc. Prof., Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, [eva.reid@uniba.sk](mailto:eva.reid@uniba.sk)

**Timea Clark**

PhD. Student, Trnava University, Slovakia, [timea.clark@icloud.com](mailto:timea.clark@icloud.com)

This study investigated the impact of storytelling on English vocabulary acquisition among bilingual young learners in primary education, focusing on Slovak and Hungarian speaking children learning English as a third language. Recognising the motivational challenges of third-language learning, engaging storytelling activities were incorporated to improve learning outcomes. The qualitative action research was conducted over 16 English lessons using four books by Julia Donaldson. Each lesson combined warm-up activities, vocabulary pre-teaching, reading, video viewing, and interactive tasks such as games, drawing, character descriptions, and dramatization. Data were collected through classroom observations, focus group discussions, pupils' evaluations, and written vocabulary recall tasks. The finding revealed considerable improvements in vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and learner engagement. Pupils responded enthusiastically to the storytelling-based lessons, showing increased participation and motivation to use English actively. Overall, storytelling proved to be an effective pedagogical approach for improving vocabulary learning and motivation among bilingual young learners learning English as a third language.

**Keywords:** English language education, bilingual learners, motivation, storytelling, vocabulary acquisition

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Council of Europe emphasizes effective foreign language education from an early age, aiming to cultivate plurilingual and pluricultural individuals. The concept advocates for each EU member state to include the teaching of two foreign languages in their curriculum. While this goal promotes linguistic diversity and intercultural understanding, it may pose significant challenges for children who are already bilingual (such as those from minorities or immigrant backgrounds) by placing additional cognitive and linguistic strain on their development as they navigate multiple languages simultaneously.

In Slovakia, English is the most preferred foreign language taught in schools, with the majority of children learning it from either the first, or the third grade of primary

**Citation:** Reid, E., & Clark, T. (2026). Storytelling for improving vocabulary and motivation in bilingual third-language learners. *International Journal of Instruction*, 19(3), 749-768.

education. This paper examines English language education for young bilingual learners, specifically focusing on vocabulary acquisition by integrating children's stories. Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental component of foreign language learning and plays an integral role in overall language development. As noted by Read (2000), words serve as the foundational building blocks of language, enabling learners' comprehension and expression. Even with a limited vocabulary, learners can manage successful communication, making lexical competence a key part of communicative competence (Schmitt, 2000).

Young learners acquire vocabulary differently from older learners, they benefit most from learning concrete words, hearing and repeating their pronunciation, and recycling them in new and different contexts. A multisensory approach to vocabulary instruction is vital for young learners, as they grasp and retain words more effectively when presented alongside visual aids that depict their meanings. Reading children's stories emerges as a valuable approach for introducing new vocabulary to young learners. By contextualising language within narratives, learners gain a deeper understanding of word meanings. Furthermore, incorporating stories into English classrooms not only enriches vocabulary but also enhances learners' pronunciation and grammatical structures. While receptive language activities are primarily developed, integrating productive and interactive language exercises further reinforces communicative competences. Children's literature offers a wealth of resources for language education, providing learners with insights into diverse cultures and perspectives (British Council, n.d.). For example, the works of J. C. Donaldson, who served as the Children's Laureate between 2011 and 2013, exemplify how motivational and impactful children's stories can be in foreign language education for young learners.

In Slovakia, the largest minority ethnic minority is Hungarian, representing 7.75% of the country's population, however 8.48 % of Slovak citizens claim Hungarian as the first language, and Slovak as the second language (SODB, 2021). This substantial portion of the population mainly resides in the southern regions of the country, which border Hungary. Primary schools in these areas either use Slovak or Hungarian as the language of instruction, yet all children are required to learn Slovak. Introducing a foreign language from the third grade of primary school places additional strain on learners who are already bilingual. The motivation to learn a third language at a young age often presents a significant challenge.

To address challenges of English language education for bilingual (Slovak-Hungarian) young learners, we implemented an action research intervention focusing on storytelling, accompanied by activities primarily targeting vocabulary acquisition and pupils' engagement. In classroom observations and previous lessons, pupils consistently showed low motivation to learn English as a third language, often disengaging during language activities and tasks. The aim of the intervention was to increase motivation to learn English and improve vocabulary acquisition. In our action research, we employed four stories by Julia Donaldson, *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, *Stickman* and *The snail and the whale*, in teaching English as foreign language to young learners. These stories were selected because they provide engaging narratives, repeated linguistic

patterns, rhyming words, and opportunities for interactive and multisensory activities. Research questions derived from the objectives of this study are:

1. How do chosen children's stories by Julia Donaldson contribute to vocabulary acquisition among bilingual (Slovak-Hungarian) young learners?
2. How do chosen children's stories by Julia Donaldson affect the motivation of bilingual (Slovak-Hungarian) young learners to learn English as a third language?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Teaching vocabulary to young learners**

When learning a new language, vocabulary is the most crucial component. Wilkins (1972, p. 111) highlights this by stating that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Scrivener (2011) differentiates the terms lexis and vocabulary. Lexis encompasses single-word vocabulary items, collocations and multiword items (which are also connected to grammar), while vocabulary is concerned with single words, fixed two- to three-word combinations, and collocations. Despite these distinctions, most educators use these terms interchangeably. For the purpose of this paper, we also use the term vocabulary.

Vocabulary needs to be systematically addressed from the onset of foreign language education, which in our context involves young learners from the third grade of primary education. McKay (2006) defines young learners as primary school pupils aged 5 and 12, who exhibit a natural curiosity and eagerness to learn. For these young learners, self-confidence and morale increase as their vocabulary expands rapidly. Initially, vocabulary introduction should predominantly be oral, especially at the beginning stages of reading and writing. While young learners can quickly acquire new words, they can just as easily forget them if they do not have regular opportunities to practice. This underscores the importance of vocabulary recycling (Read, 2007). New words need to be introduced and their meaning understood, then practiced through various activities, and finally stored in memory and recalled for use in different contexts.

There are numerous teaching techniques for each phase of learning vocabulary (Butler, 2019; Harmer, 2015; Pokrivcakova, 2013; Scrivener, 2011; Steele & Mills, 2011; Le et al, 2023; Rajayi & Maleki; 2023). Effective teaching techniques for introducing new vocabulary to young learners include using pictures, flash cards, visuals, drawing, miming, describing, giving synonyms or antonyms, as well as utilizing picture books, songs, and stories. To practice and store new vocabulary, teachers can employ a variety of exercises such as matching words with pictures, identifying parts of lexical items, working with collocations and synonyms, completing crosswords and gap-filling exercises, creating mind maps, drawing pictures, engaging in TPR activities, playing vocabulary games, participating in role-plays and dramatizations, and conducting conversations and discussions.

### **Teaching English as a third language to young learners and issues of motivation**

Learning a third language is a common phenomenon worldwide. In Europe, for example, every country has at least one ethnic minority with its own language, and

many children grow up in mixed-language families or immigrant communities. Although some research has been conducted on teaching foreign languages as a third language, this remains underexplored despite its growing relevance in today's multicultural and multilingual societies. Existing studies on English language teaching to bilingual children have focused mainly on Bask-Spanish bilingual learners (Jessner & Cenoz, 2007; Cenoz, 2005; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008), multilingual speakers of heritage or immigrant backgrounds in Germany (Kopeckova & Poarch, 2021, 2022), and minority students in Norway (Alhassan, 2022). These studies consistently highlight that acquiring a third language presents additional challenges for learners, requiring the use of varied approaches, methods, and activities to raise motivation and make language learning both enjoyable and effective. However, third language learning is not solely defined by its difficulties, as bilingual learners often demonstrate advantages such as a wider repertoire of learning strategies and a higher level of metalinguistic awareness (Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; Ghezlou et al., 2019).

In Slovakia, there are several ethnic minority groups, with Hungarian being the largest. More than 500 schools at all levels, from kindergartens to secondary schools, use Hungarian as the language of instruction in the southern regions of Slovakia (Vyber školu..., 2024). Regardless of whether children in these areas attend Hungarian or Slovak schools, they must all learn Slovak. According to State School Inspection (2023), children attending Hungarian schools often struggle to master Slovak, the language of the majority. All schools in Slovakia must adhere to the National Curriculum, which mandates learning a first foreign language from the third year of primary school, with English being the most common choice (NIVAM, 2022). For children who have not yet mastered the majority language and must begin learning a third language, this presents a significant challenge and can potentially cause difficulties in further education.

Maluch and Kempert (2017) emphasise that achieving high proficiency in both the majority and minority languages is crucial for developing advantages in foreign language learning. In our research, the intervention was conducted in a primary school where Slovak was the language of instruction and all pupils were from the Hungarian minority, meaning that they were reasonably bilingual (speaking Hungarian at home and Slovak at school) before beginning to learn English.

Motivation in third language learning among bilingual pupils is shaped by both advantages and challenges. While managing two languages may strengthen metalinguistic awareness and self-confidence, insufficient proficiency in the majority language can increase cognitive demands and potentially reduce willingness to engage with an additional language. For Hungarian minority pupils in Slovakia, learning English as a third language may therefore represent both an opportunity and an additional burden. Research on multilingual motivation emphasises the importance of perceived competence, task enjoyment, and comprehensibility of input in sustaining engagement (Bui, 2023). In young learners especially, emotional involvement and meaningful, age-appropriate activities are crucial. If tasks are linguistically too demanding, motivation may decline despite successful learning outcomes. Reilly (2020) identified key motivational factors such as interest, perceived usefulness, and success

that influence learners' engagement with English classes. Maintaining an appropriate balance between interest, usefulness, challenge and comprehensibility is essential for supporting motivation in third language classrooms.

### **Storytelling in teaching English to young learners**

Storytelling is an everyday activity. People often talk about what happened at home, at school, at work, on public transport, or in their lives and lives of others. Whether factual or fictional, storytelling is an intrinsic human characteristic. According to Harmer (2015), storytelling is a vital part of any language user's ability and is very useful for language learners. It mirrors human activity and addresses a skill that everybody possesses, making it highly motivating for foreign language learners. Besides providing language input, stories connect our world with that of others, fostering understanding, respect and appreciation for different cultures, races, and religions. As we immerse ourselves in a story, our minds become stimulated, allowing us to absorb the content while also evoking emotions such as empathy, happiness, sadness, embarrassment as if it was our real-life drama (Heathfield, 2018).

In foreign language teaching, there is often a focus on minimising teacher talking time. However, storytelling is an excellent teaching technique that involves primarily teacher talking time (Scrivener, 2011). It resembles the parental activity of telling stories to children, or reading a bedtime story. Children love stories because they create magic and a sense of wonder of the world, but also teach important life lessons. According to Moeller (1995), one of the greatest advantages of children's books is their illustrations, which help pupils understand the meaning without the need for linguistic literacy. Stories usually focus on particular themes and frequently use words related to animals, human body, food, common adjectives. Ellis and Brewster (2014) believe that once children become familiar with a theme, understanding and learning new language comes more naturally.

Using stories not only entertains pupils but also plays a powerful role in developing language competences. According to Elmaghraby and Barakat (2025), storytelling has a positive impact on language acquisition, supporting learners' development of vocabulary and their ability to construct phrases and sentences more effectively. Pre-storytelling exercises, which draw pupils in and encourage participation, include activities such as describing pictures, making predictions, and building connections. Storytelling relies on visualisation, emotion, exaggeration, movement, and personal connections, making it an excellent aid for learning new vocabulary, grammar and syntax in the most natural way. Children acquire language patterns intuitively from context through repetition and constant exposure (Brun-Mercer, 2022).

Silverman (2007b) identifies three strategies used when learning vocabulary from storybooks: contextual, which relates to the meaning of words within the story; anchored, which focuses on the phonological and orthographical aspects (sound and form); and analytical, which involves the ability to use words in various contexts outside the story. By reading stories, new vocabulary is introduced in a context. Connecting words with the theme of the story helps children understand and relate to their meanings. Children's books are usually beautifully illustrated, which enables

children to understand stories better. The use of onomatopoeia for animals or machines present in the story can enrich emotional perception and understanding. However, teachers need to be careful about using the correct target language onomatopoeia (Reid, 2014). Showing, demonstrating, and acting out items from the story also help in understanding the words and the context. When a teacher reads the story repeatedly, the target vocabulary should be repeated out loud by pupils, who need to be able to distinguish between similarly sounding words (e.g. whale – vale, leave – live). Practicing and storing vocabulary with young learners involves continuous repetition and reinforcement through various activities and contexts. Acting out, drawing words, or matching words with pictures supports vocabulary learning. Using vocabulary in a different context can be practiced by drawing a picture based on the teacher's dictation. (Silverman, 2007a).

One of the greatest advantages of using stories in teaching is that they utilise emotions to stimulate the attention, motivation, and imagination of learners. Picture books topics and illustrations can positively impact on students' motivation and aid developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Miller et al., 2015). Vayanou et al. (2018) observed that using English picture books in classrooms leads to positive attitudes among learners. Additionally, Baryannis et al. (2018) claim that picture books enhance the motivation of low-achieving students. Optimal sitting arrangements, such as sitting in a circle, should be considered to ensure everyone can be immersed in the story as much as possible. Mala's (2019) advises that the storyteller or teacher should avoid interrupting the narrative with analysis or moralising, which can be done later by the learners. After the story is told, further work with the story should follow, such as analyses, discussions, reflections on the characters, dramatizations, role-plays, and more.

A research study conducted by Chen et al. (2023) on 192 sixth-grade pupils at elementary schools in Taiwan implemented interactive teaching methods combined with various activities aimed at creating a fun and enjoyable learning environment. The study observed active participation and learning performance in the classroom atmosphere. The findings indicate that interactive teaching approach with the use of picture books significantly effects pupils' motivation to learn English, inspires them to read, and encourages active participation in the classroom.

## **METHOD**

### **Research design, procedure and materials**

Qualitative participatory action research was chosen for this study. This method enables researchers to examine and improve their own pedagogical practices through the use of varied strategies, methods, tools, and materials. By identifying challenges, exploring solutions, and evaluating their impact, action research creates a meaningful connection between research and classroom practice, with action being central to investigating the situation (Morrison et al., 2018). Action research is typically conducted within small research groups, with teachers actively participating in the inquiry. The process is cyclical, participatory, qualitative, and reflective. Conclusions and findings are

formulated through critical reflection on the data, and are reported by descriptive narration with the reader in mind (McNiff, 2010).

For this study, a four-phase action research design was chosen: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Sagor, 2010). In the *planning* phase, we reflected on our experiences and designed the intervention. The *action* and *observation* phases involved implementing the designed interventions, adjusting teaching methods, and systematically monitoring the results. To measure vocabulary retention, pupils completed a written recall task at the end of each intervention, listing English words they remembered. This task measured immediate productive recall. Responses were collected and categorised according to target vocabulary sets. The *reflection* phase involved a critical review of the achieved outcomes and systematic gathering of feedback. Learner motivation and perceptions were explored through structured focus groups conducted in Slovak. The discussions centred on following questions: How did you like this story and activities? What did you like the most? What did you like/did not like during the lessons? What did you learn from the story? Quantitative feedback was gathered through pupils' evaluations where they rated didactic activities using a five-point rating scale by awarding stars (1 to 5 stars, with 5 being the best). If needed, we proposed improvements for future teaching. Both the focus group and pupils' evaluations were conducted after each intervention cycle to gather pupils' opinions, knowledge, and ideas about the lessons, informing any necessary adjustments and improvements proposed for future teaching cycle (Hennink, 2014). The intervention took place over 16 English lessons in a fourth-grade class at a primary school in southern Slovakia. These children, whose native language is Hungarian, speak Slovak as a second language and are learning English as a third language.

The intervention procedure incorporated four stories by Julia Donaldson, each accompanied by a variety of activities, including warm-up tasks, vocabulary pre-teaching, reading, listening, video-viewing, games, drawing, character descriptions, and dramatizations. Two teacher-researchers were present during all lessons, one conducted the intervention while the other observed the classroom interactions. The observation and focus group data were analysed using descriptive methods and coding. To increase the validity of the findings, the data were independently coded by both researchers (Morrison et al., 2018).

In this study, each story-based intervention represented one action research cycle. Thus, four cycles were conducted over the course of the study. After each cycle, the collected data were analysed, and reflections informed adjustments in the subsequent intervention. This process ensured that findings from one cycle were used to refine instructional strategies in the following cycle. Since the primary aim was to improve motivation and vocabulary acquisition through storytelling, modifications focused mainly on the task structure, pacing, and the level of linguistic support provided. Rather than repeating identical intervention, the study progressed through four consecutive reflective cycles, each building upon insights gained from the previous one.

### **Materials: Description, Selection and Pedagogical Rationale**

Julia Donaldson is one of today's most popular writers, renowned for her captivating picture books. Her works are among the most cherished children's literature worldwide, having been translated into over one hundred languages. Several of her stories have been adapted into beloved animated films. She was the UK Children's Laureate 2011-2013. Four picture books: *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, *The Snail and the Whale*, and *Stick Man*, all illustrated by Axel Scheffler, formed the core instructional materials.

The selection was grounded in linguistic and pedagogical considerations rather than literary popularity. These texts share several features that support vocabulary acquisition in young multilingual learners:

- Rhythmical and rhyming structures improve phonological awareness and pronunciation.
- Repetition of words and set expressions helps learners to remember lexis more naturally just by seeing the same patterns repeatedly.
- Vocabulary embedded in meaningful contexts promote contextualised learning rather than isolated memorisation.
- Predictable narrative structures reduce cognitive load and support comprehension in a third-language context.
- Dialogues provide opportunities for role-play and dramatization.

The repetitive and patterned structure of the texts allows learners to recognise and anticipate certain language patterns, which support both understanding and confidence (Horst et al. 2011). In the third-language context, such scaffolding is particularly beneficial, as learners connect new English input to their existing knowledge of their first and second languages. The stories also include humour, suspense, emotional moments, ethical themes, and relatable characters, which make them engaging for young learners. These features help maintain interest and encourage motivation to learn (Sahin & Yavuz, 2025). They are also well suited for games and group activities.

*The Gruffalo* (1995) tells a story of a clever mouse who outwits three predators - a fox, an owl, and a snake - who want to eat him. To protect himself, the mouse invents a story about a fearsome creature called the Gruffalo. But when the mouse unexpectedly meets the Gruffalo himself, he cleverly outsmarts him with another tale to escape the danger. This story delivers a powerful message: that being smart is more powerful than being big and strong. It encourages children to use their imagination and wisdom to solve problems and stay safe.

*Room on the Broom* (2001) is about a witch and her group of friends. Throughout the story, the witch meets various characters who help her to recover various possession, and as a token of gratitude, she invites them to join her on the broom. Children can grasp the moral message of the narrative, which emphasises the value of friendship and rewards of kindness.

*Stick Man* (2008) follows the journey of a wooden stick man who becomes separated from his family tree, encounters dangerous situations, and is ultimately rescued by Santa Claus, returning home just in time for Christmas. The book has earned its place as a modern Christmas classic, imparting a valuable moral lesson about the importance of patience and perseverance in achieving our goal.

*The Snail and the Whale* (2003) tells an adventurous tale about a tiny snail with big dreams of exploring the world, and enormous grey-blue humpback whale who gives him a ride on his tail. When disaster strikes and the whale becomes stranded in a bay, it is the tiny snail who comes to the rescue. The story carries a strong moral message about bravery and perseverance, reminding readers that with determination, anything is possible.

### **Participants**

As the aim of this study was not generalisability, we aimed to demonstrate, on a limited sample, that a different more relatable approach can motivate pupils from bilingual background to learn English as a third language. For this research, a sample of fifteen ten-year-old pupils from a fourth-grade class in a primary school located in a Hungarian minority area was selected. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure appropriateness, relevance, and access to useful information (Morrison et al., 2018). All participating children belong to the Hungarian minority, with Hungarian as their first language and Slovak as their second language. The primary school they attend uses Slovak as the language of instruction. However, not all children have attained high proficiency in Slovak and some struggle to follow the national curriculum. Consequently, learning a third language (English) poses a significant challenge, as they are still learning their second language (Slovak). The implementation of English stories aimed to provide alternative methods for learning English vocabulary and to create more enjoyable and engaging learning environments to motivate pupils to learn English.

### **Ethics**

Ethical considerations were integral to this research to ensure the rights, freedoms, and well-being of all participants (Morrison et al., 2018). The school management board, which also serves as an ethics committee, approved the planned intervention aimed at improving English language teaching. The school principal signed and informed consent form acknowledging the purpose and procedures of the intervention. Since none of the pupils were of legal age, written consent was also obtained from their parents, who were fully informed of the study and aware they could withdraw their child at any time. Participation was entirely voluntary. To maintain confidentiality, names and other identifying information were removed from the reported findings. All research procedures adhered to the ethical guidelines of the researchers' university and the Declaration of Helsinki, with special attention paid to obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity, and minimizing any potential impact on participants.

### **FINDING**

Each intervention followed a consistent structure: action, observation, focus group with pupils, and evaluation. Data collected were analysed using descriptive narrative and

coding. Over the course of 16 lessons, four books were utilized, incorporating activities focused on listening, reading, pronunciation, and practicing new vocabulary through various speaking and writing activities. Materials included printed authentic books by Julia Donaldson, YouTube videos of the books, vocabulary flashcards, activity worksheets, blank paper, and a projector.

The study consisted of four consecutive action research cycles, each corresponding to one story-based intervention. Every cycle followed the full sequence of planning, action, observation, and reflection, and the findings from each cycle informed adjustments in the subsequent one. This cyclical structure ensured a progressive refinement of teaching strategies across all four interventions.

### **Planning phase**

Due to the challenging learning environment of mastering two languages, the participating young learners lacked motivation to learn English as a third language. To address this, we decided to change our teaching practices and employ more engaging materials, methods and activities aimed at motivating pupils and enhancing their vocabulary acquisition. Storytelling, accompanied with related activities, has been proved to be a highly motivating teaching approach, which we decided to implement. Every lesson integrated a combination of warm-up activities, pre-teaching vocabulary using flashcards, teacher-led reading, watching stories on videos, pupils reading aloud, finding rhyming words, drawing chosen characters, describing characters, working with worksheets, dramatizing a story, and playing games. Each intervention was concluded with a focus group and pupils' evaluations.

### **Action phase**

The intervention consisted of 16 lessons, with two English lessons per week. Each lesson lasted 45 minutes, corresponding to the standard duration of English instruction at the participating school. Each of the four selected stories formed the thematic focus of four consecutive lessons.

The first lesson of each story typically introduced the narrative and core vocabulary through warm-up activities, pre-teaching with flashcards, and teacher-led storytelling. The second lesson focused on comprehension activities, vocabulary reinforcement, and pronunciation work, including identification of rhyming pairs. The third lesson emphasised productive use of vocabulary through games, drawing, speaking tasks, and worksheet activities. The fourth lesson consolidated learning through dramatization, communicative activities, final vocabulary recall task, followed by a focus group and pupil evaluation. This structured four-lesson cycle ensured systematic exposure, repeated practice, and gradual progression from receptive to productive and interactive language activities.

Warm-up activities were strategically implemented at the beginning of each lesson to introduce new vocabulary or revise previously taught items. A diverse range of teaching techniques and materials was employed to facilitate vocabulary practice and recall, including kinaesthetic and communicative methods. Visual aids such as pictures and

flashcards provided concrete representation of vocabulary items, while interactive games, including miming and *magic box* game to promoted active engagement.

During storytelling, pupils sat in a circle so that they could clearly see the illustrations and hear the teacher. This arrangement allowed them to share emotions, humour, suspense, and action. Pupils actively participated by repeating key vocabulary, naming pictures, and predicting story events. The teacher varied pace, tone, and volume, and used different voices to enhance dramatic effect. All stories are freely available on YouTube, and video viewing complemented the reading-aloud sessions. Pupils received their own copy of each book and took turns reading aloud, first in pairs and then as volunteers in front of the class.

Various motivating activities based on the stories and target vocabulary supported vocabulary retention and accurate language use. Games such as *What's missing*, miming, and vocabulary guessing encouraged active engagement and retrieval. Identifying rhyming pairs (a key feature of Donaldson's stories) was used regularly to support pronunciation and phonological awareness. Creative tasks, including drawing favourite characters, describing them orally, and using cut-outs or toys, allowed pupils to personalise their learning. Two stories (*The Snail and the Whale* and *Stick Man*) also included dramatization activities. Pupils worked in small groups, each performing a different part of the story using simple prompts. These dramatizations were highly motivating and promoted communicative use of the target vocabulary. At the end of each intervention, pupils wrote down all the words they remembered from the stories and activities on a piece of paper, which was subsequently collected by the teacher. An overview of the stories, their target vocabulary and corresponding rhyming pairs are provided in Table 1.

Table 1  
Target vocabulary and Rhyming words

Story 1	The Gruffalo
Target vocabulary	fox, mouse, snake, owl, tusks, jaw, claws, tail, horns, black tongue, green wart, orange eyes, purple, toes, lake
Rhyming words	fox/rocks, snake/lake, good/wood, mouse/house, nose/toes, black/back
Story 2	Room on the Broom
Target vocabulary	witch, broomstick, ginger hair, hat, stormy, bow, bird, wind, wand, frog, bog, dragon, cauldron, twig, bone
Rhyming words	Cat/hat, frog/bog/dog, cloud/loud, well/spell, sky/fly, cone/bone
Story 3	The Snail and the Whale
Target vocabulary	Snail, humpback whale, itchy foot, caves, waves, fins, lightning, thunderstorm, iceberg, ships, tide, sharks, shore, penguin, enormous
Rhyming words	Dock/rock, caves/waves, whale/snail/tail, cool/school, play/bay, race/place
Story 4	Stick Man
Target vocabulary	Stick, swan, fetch, lead, twig, nest, beach, flag, sword, hook, bow, bat, boomerang, snowman, chimney
Rhyming words	House/mouse, sad/dad, toys/boys, lost/frost, bag/flag, hand/sand

### Observation phase

The implementation of *The Gruffalo* and its accompanying activities was highly successful. Pupils showed strong enthusiasm, and all were actively engaged. Although some weaker learners were quieter and asked fewer questions, they still participated in all tasks. The rhyming activity, while the most challenging, offered an enjoyable opportunity to practise pronunciation.

In contrast, the second intervention was less successful. *Room on the Broom* proved too demanding, and pupils did not enjoy it to the same extent. Despite learning the target vocabulary and liking the characters, they struggled to understand the overall meaning of the story.

The third intervention, using *The Snail and the Whale*, was a resounding success. The learning atmosphere was positive, and pupils were attentive, enthusiastic, and actively involved in every activity. The storyline was easier for them to follow, and they could relate to the children helping to save the whale, which further increased engagement.

The final story, *Stick Man*, was generally well-received, though pupils expressed some reservations about its length and the number of unknown words, which made comprehension more difficult. Nevertheless, they still enjoyed the story and found Stick Man's journey engaging.

Throughout the interventions, pupils became increasingly familiar with the lesson procedures. When comprehension issues arose, the teacher provided clarification in Slovak to support understanding. Overall, the stories were well received, and pupils remained motivated and engaged across the intervention.

### Reflection and evaluation phase

Across the four interventions, pupils' evaluations and focus group responses indicated varying levels of success, largely influenced by the comprehensibility of each story. The first intervention of *The Gruffalo* story was evaluated as highly successful. All 15 pupils rated the lessons with five stars, and their most frequent comments are summarised in the table. Pupils showed clear enthusiasm and strong motivation to learn English, and vocabulary acquisition was both enjoyable and highly effective. They used the target vocabulary confidently and were able to recall most words when asked to write them down at the end of the lesson.

The second intervention of *Room on the Broom* story showed a noticeable decline in success. Three pupils rated the lessons with three stars, six with four stars and six with five stars. The primary challenge was the difficulty of the text, which hindered comprehension and consequently reduced pupils' enjoyment and motivation. Although vocabulary learning was still successful, the story itself was less accessible. For future cycles, replacing this story with an easier one may increase engagement.

The third intervention of *The Snail and the Whale* story received very positive evaluations, with all pupils rating the lessons with five stars. Feedback data confirmed success, indicating that the selected story was optimally suited to the pupils'

comprehension level, highly engaging on an emotional level, and strongly supported vocabulary learning, which was validated by post-intervention vocabulary recall tasks. Pupils appreciated and internalized the story's moral message, spontaneously applying its theme to their lives. Based on the strong and detailed positive findings, we concluded that this specific intervention requires no changes for its implementation in the future.

The fourth intervention of *Stick Man* story was somewhat more challenging, as reflected in pupils' ratings: ten pupils gave five stars, while five awarded three stars. Although the greater difficulty of the text affected comprehension, pupils remained enthusiastic and actively participated in all activities. Overall, the intervention can still be considered successful due to sustained engagement and effective vocabulary use.

At the end of each intervention cycle, pupils completed a vocabulary recall task, listing all the words they remembered from the respective story. The core target vocabulary comprised 15 words plus six rhyming pairs. The results were highly positive and demonstrated substantial vocabulary acquisition, with pupils recalling an average of 25 words per story. Of these recalled words, 90 % were the target vocabulary items. Occasional omission of certain target words appeared to reflect temporary retrieval difficulties rather than incomplete learning. Additionally, pupils consistently recalled several words that were not explicitly included in the target vocabulary list, suggesting considerable incidental vocabulary acquisition facilitated by the stories. Feedback from the four focus groups and pupils' evaluations is summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2  
Pupils' feedback from focus groups and evaluations.

Story 1	Gruffalo
How did you like this story and activities?	It was fun. The lesson was great.
What did you like the most?	Gruffalo, he was scary. The mouse, it was clever. Pictures.
What did you like/did not like during the lessons?	Rhyming words were difficult. I liked drawing my character. I liked the game.
What did you learn from the story?	Many new words. Learning words this was is more interesting than from a course book.
Pupils' rating	5 stars (100 %) = 15 pupils
Story 2	Room on the Broom
How did you like this story and activities?	Good, but difficult to understand. It was too long. Difficult words.
What did you like the most?	The witch, dog, frog, cat, bird, pictures.
What did you like/did not like during the lessons?	The story was very difficult. I liked the games. I liked words connected to the witch.
What did you learn from the story?	Many words.
Pupils' rating	5 stars (40 %) = 6 pupils, 4 stars (40 %) = 6 pupils, 3 stars (20 %) = 3 pupils
Story 3	The Snail and the Whale
How did you like this story and activities?	It was great. I liked it very much. It was touching.
What did you like the most?	The snail, the whale. Pictures from the sea, animals, penguins.
What did you like/did not like during the lessons?	Acting was the best.
What did you learn from the story?	Many different words. That the little snail can help a huge whale.
Pupils' rating	5 stars (100 %) = 15 pupils
Story 4	Stick Man
How did you like this story and activities?	It was a good story. I did not like it as much.
What did you like the most?	Stick Man, Santa Claus, animals, pictures.
What did you like/did not like during the lessons?	Acting out the story was very nice.
What did you learn from the story?	Many words.
Pupils' rating	5 stars (33 %) = 10 pupils, 3 stars (67 %) = 5 pupils

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to enhance vocabulary learning and increase motivation of bilingual young learners by integrating storytelling and associated activities into the curriculum. Four books by Julia Donaldson were utilized over a series of lessons to engage pupils and facilitate vocabulary acquisition. The research involved four interventions, each using a different story and accompanying activities implemented over four lessons.

The findings suggest that storytelling is a successful approach, particularly when the chosen story aligns with the learners' age, interests, and proficiency level. In this study,

success was reflected in several key indicators. Pupils demonstrated high engagement and motivation, actively participating in story-related activities such as reading aloud, predicting events, and dramatization. Their motivation and enjoyment were further confirmed through focus group feedback and star ratings. Vocabulary acquisition was another clear indicator of success. Pupils recalled an average of 25 words per story, including the majority of target vocabulary items, and occasionally additional incidental vocabulary, showing that repeated exposure in meaningful contexts facilitated deep learning. Comprehension and accurate use of new vocabulary also improved. By combining cognitive and affective indicators, the study demonstrates that storytelling can effectively enhance English language learning for bilingual young learners when materials are carefully selected and adapted to learners' needs.

Vocabulary learning was reinforced through a combination of storytelling and activities such as flashcards, videos, games, rhyming pairs, dramatizations, drawing, character descriptions, and worksheets. The multisensory approach, integrating auditory stimuli, visual aids, and kinaesthetic activities, proved effective in reinforcing vocabulary learning and making the lessons enjoyable. Pupils were able to recall and use new vocabulary effectively, indicating that repeated and varied exposure to words in meaningful contexts facilitated deep learning. Overall, using storytelling in English language learning, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, aligned with the literature findings and recommendations by Silverman (2007a, 2007b), Harmer (2015), Heathfield (2018), Scrivener (2011), Ellis and Brewster (2014), Brun-Mercer (2022), Pokrivcakova (2013), Steele and Mills (2011), and Butler (2019).

One primary observation was that storytelling significantly increased pupils' engagement and motivation to learn English. The storytelling interventions created a positive learning environment, encouraging active participation and self-expression. Pupils learned with ease and did not even realise they were learning. Engaging narratives captured their interest, making language learning enjoyable, and emotional connections to characters and plots enhanced intrinsic motivation. Pupils displayed enthusiasm for each story-based intervention, which contrasts with their initial lack of interest in learning English as a third language. These findings align with research emphasising the role of children's books in learning foreign languages, which enhance engagement and motivation (Miller et al., 2015; Baryannis et al., 2018; Mala, 2019; Chen et al., 2023).

Our findings also reinforce existing research on teaching English as a third language to bilingual children. Studies emphasise the importance of using varied materials, approaches, methods, and activities to enhance motivation and increase the effectiveness of learning (Jessner & Cenoz, 2007; Cenoz, 2005; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008; Ghezlou et al., 2019; Kopeckova & Poarch, 2021, 2022; Alhassan, 2022; Rahman et al., 2022). The results of our interventions clearly demonstrate that a combination of storytelling and diverse activities support these recommendations and contribute to successful vocabulary acquisition among bilingual learners.

Feedback from pupils, gathered through focus groups and star ratings, provided valuable insights into their learning experiences. While overall evaluations were very

positive with most activities rated with five stars, lower ratings for *Room on the Broom* and *Stick Man* highlighted the impact of text difficulty on learners' enjoyment and motivation. Although pupils were able to learn the target vocabulary successfully, the findings clearly show that overall story comprehensibility plays a crucial role in sustaining enjoyment, motivation and engagement. Therefore, selecting texts that are both accessible and engaging is essential. The results from a vocabulary recall tasks were highly positive and demonstrated substantial vocabulary acquisition. Pupils recalled an average 25 words per story. They did not only recall the target vocabulary, but also wrote down additional words encountered in the stories, indicating considerable incidental vocabulary learning.

A particularly significant finding concerns the clear contrast in pupils' ratings of the four stories. While *The Gruffalo* and *The Snail and the Whale* were rated with five stars by 100% of pupils, only 40% and 33% of pupils rated *Room on the Broom* and *Stick Man* with five stars, respectively. This difference highlights the crucial role of story comprehensibility and linguistic accessibility in sustaining learner motivation. Although vocabulary acquisition remained successful across all four interventions, the lower ratings for *Room on the Broom* and *Stick Man* suggest that increased lexical and narrative complexity may reduce overall enjoyment, even when learning outcomes remain positive. In contrast, when the story was well aligned with pupils' language proficiency and cognitive level, motivation, emotional engagement, and enjoyment were maximised. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of storytelling in third-language learning does not depend solely on the use of stories as such, but rather on the careful selection of texts that match learners' proficiency, cognitive maturity, and interests. The data therefore reinforce the importance of balancing linguistic challenge with comprehensibility in order to maintain high levels of intrinsic motivation.

The answers to the research questions are:

1. How do chosen children's stories by Julia Donaldson contribute to vocabulary acquisition among bilingual (Slovak-Hungarian) young learners?

Julia Donaldson's stories played a significant role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among bilingual Slovak-Hungarian young learners through various mechanisms. The stories facilitated vocabulary acquisition by providing an engaging, context-rich, and supportive learning environment. Repeated exposure to new words in different formats and contexts ensured that students not only learned but retained and effectively used new vocabulary.

2. How do chosen children's stories by Julia Donaldson affect the motivation of bilingual (Slovak-Hungarian) young learners to learn English as a third language?

Julia Donaldson's stories significantly influenced the motivation of bilingual Slovak-Hungarian young learners to learn English as a third language. The engaging nature of Donaldson's stories, characterised by captivating storylines and relatable characters, made the learning process enjoyable. By associating English learning with fun and interesting activities, pupils were more motivated to engage with the language. They expressed a desire to continue learning through similar story-based interventions, indicating that these positive experiences had a lasting impact on their motivation.

In conclusion, the series of interventions demonstrated that storytelling, coupled with supportive activities, is an effective method for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in young bilingual learners. Storytelling significantly increases learners' engagement and motivation to learn English, suggesting its potential as a valuable tool in foreign language education. The success of interventions is influenced by the choice of accompanying activities and reading materials. Our research findings indicate that storytelling bridges motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and English language learning.

## REFERENCES

- Alhassan, M. A. (2023). Teaching English as a Third Language to Minority Adult Learners in Norwegian Secondary Schools. *Athens Journal of Education*, 10(3), 447-462. <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.10-3-5>
- Baryannis, G., Validi, S., Dani, S., & Antoniou, G. (2018). Supply chain risk management and artificial intelligence: state of the art and future research directions. *International Journal of Production Research*, 57(7), 2179–2202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2018.1530476>
- British Council. (n.d.) Storytelling – benefits and tips. *Teaching English*. Retrieved 13 March, 2024 from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/managing-resources/articles/storytelling-benefits-and-tips>
- Brun-Mercer, N. (2022). Once upon a Noun: Using Stories to Teach Grammar. *World of better Learning*. Cambridge University press & Assessment. Retrieved 2 February, 2024 from <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2022/02/23/once-upon-a-noun-using-stories-to-teach-grammar%ef%bf%bc/>
- Butler, Y.G. (2019). Teaching vocabulary to young second- or foreign- language learners. What can we learn from the research? *Language Teaching for Young Learners*, 1(1), 4-33. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ltyl.00003.but>
- Bui, G. (2023). A Dual-Motivation System in L2 and L3 Learning: A Theoretical Framework and Pedagogical Application. *Languages*, 8(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010069>
- Cenoz, J., & Jessner, U. (Eds.). (2000). *English in Europe: The acquisition of a third language* (Vol. 19). Multilingual Matters.
- Cenoz, J. (2005). English in Bilingual Programs in the Basque Country. *International journal of the sociology of language*, 2005, 171. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2005.2005.171.41>
- Chen, T.I., H.C. Chung, & Lin, S.K. (2023). The Effect of Applying Language Picture Books in Reciprocal Teaching on Students' Language Learning Motivations. *Sage Open*, 13, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231218857>
- Donaldson, J. (1999). *The Gruffalo*. Macmillan Publisher.
- Donaldson, J. (2001). *Room on the Broom*. Macmillan children's books.
- Donaldson, J. (2003). *The Snail and the Whale*. Macmillan children's books.

Donaldson, J. (2008). *Stick Man*. Allison Green Books.

Ellis, G., & Brewster, J. (2014). *Teaching English. Tell it Again. The Storytelling Handbook for Primary English Language Teachers*. British Council. Retrieved 2 February, 2024 from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/resource-books/tell-it-again-storytelling-handbook-primary-english-language-teachers>

Elmaghraby, R. M. M., & Barakat, A. M. M. (2025). Effects of interactive story techniques in developing some language skills among early childhood children. *International Journal of Instruction*, 18(3), 299-316. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2025.18316a>

Ghezlou, M., Koosha, M., & Lotfi, A. R. (2019). Cross-linguistic Influence in the L3 Acquisition of English Adjective Properties by Azeri-Persian Bilinguals. *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(1), 1299-1318. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2019.12183a>

Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson (5<sup>th</sup> ed).

Heathfield, D. (2018). *Storytelling With Our Students*. Delta Publishing.

Hennink, M.M. (2014). *Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press.

Horst, J. S., Parsons, K. L., & Bryan, N. M. (2011). Get the story straight: contextual repetition promotes word learning from storybooks. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17(2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00017>

Jessner, U., & Cenoz, J. (2007). Teaching English as a Third Language. In: J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching*. (pp. 155-167). Springer.

Kopeckova, R., & Poarch, G. J. (2021). Teaching English as a third language in primary and secondary school: The potential of pluralistic approaches to language learning. In Y. Danilovich, & G. Putjata (Eds.), *Sprachliche Vielfalt im Unterricht: Fachdidaktische Perspektiven auf Lehre und Forschung im DaZ-Modul* (pp. 219-230). Springer.

Kopečková, R., & Poarch, G. J. (2022). Learning to Teach English in the Multilingual Classroom Utilizing the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures. *Languages*, 7(3), 168. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7030168>

Le, X. M., Hinh, B. M., & Le, T. T. (2023). Role-playing or retelling stories: Which one is preferable in the post-reading stage? - Answers from direct stakeholders in English classes. *International Journal of Instruction*, 16(4), 441-464. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2023.16426a>

Mala, P. (2019). Storytelling – vzdelavanie cez príbehy. *European Commission*. Retrieved 10 February, 2024 from <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/116296>

Maluch, J., T., & Kempert, S. (2017). Bilingual profiles and third language learning: the effects of the manner of learning, sequence of bilingual acquisition, and language use practices. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 22(7), 870-882. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1322036>

- McKay, P. (2006). *Assessing Young Language Learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- McNiff, J. (2010). *Action Research for Professional Development: Concise Advice for New and Experienced Action Researchers*. September Books.
- Miller, J., K. Andriacchi, A. Nockerts, M. Westerveld, & Gillon, G. (2015). *Assessing language production using SALT software. A Clinician's Guide to Language Sample Analysis*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). SALT Software LLC.
- Morrison, K., L. Manion, & Cohen, L. (2018). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge (8<sup>th</sup> ed.).
- NIVAM – National Institute for Education. (2022). *Inovovaný štátny vzdelávací program. Jazyk a komunikácia*. Retrieved 11 February, 2024 from <https://www.statpedu.sk/sk/svp/inovovany-statny-vzdelavaci-program/inovovany-svp-2.stupen-zs/jazyk-komunikacia/>
- Pokrivčáková, S. (2013). *Teaching Techniques for Modern Teachers of English*. ASPA.
- Rahman, F., Mahmud, I., Jiang, B., & Sarker, K. (2022). Extending the theory of planned behavior: a case of learning Chinese as a third language. *International Journal of Instruction*, 15(1), 945-964. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2022.15154a>
- Rajayi, S., & Maleki, R. (2023). On the impact of teaching vocabulary through asynchronous social media on EFL learners' vocabulary learning and retention. *Anatolian Journal of Education*, 8(2), 181-194. <https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2023.8212a>
- Read, J. (2000). *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press.
- Read, C. (2007). *500 Activities for Primary Classroom*. Macmillan Education.
- Reid, E. (2014). *Intercultural Aspects in Teaching English at Primary Schools*. Peter Lang Edition.
- Reilly, P. (2020). The Development of Student Motivation to Learn English at a University in Mexico. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(3), 401-416. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13328a>
- Ruiz de Zarobe, Y. (2005). Age and Third Language Production: A Longitudinal Study. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 2(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710508668379>
- Sahin, D. & Yavuz, M.A. (2025) Fostering effective vocabulary retention among primary school students: a case study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1594620. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1594620>
- Sagor, R. D. (2010). *The Action Research Guidebook: A Four-Stage Process for Educators and School Teams*. Sage Publication Ltd. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).
- Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching*. Macmillan Education (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

Silverman, R. (2007a). Vocabulary development of English language and English only learners in kindergarten. *Elementary School Journal*, 107(4), 365-383. <https://doi.org/10.1086/516669>

Silverman, R. (2007b). A comparison of three methods of vocabulary instruction during readalouds in kindergarten. *The Elementary School Journal*, 108(2), 97-113. <https://doi.org/10.1086/525549>

Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

SODB (Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov). (2021). Obyvatelia – Základné výsledky. *Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky (Statistical office of the Slovak Republic)*. Retrieved 8 March, 2024 from <https://www.scitanie.sk/obyvatelia/zakladne-vysledky/struktura-obyvatelstva-podla-narodnosti/SR/SK0/SR>

State school inspection. (2023). *Správa o stave a úrovni výchovy a vzdelávania v školách a školských zariadeniach v Slovenskej republike v školskom roku 2022/2023*. Retrieved 8 March, 2024 from <https://www.ssi.sk/sprava-o-stave-a-urovni-vychovy-a-vzdelavania/>

Steele, S.C., & Mills, M.T. (2011). Vocabulary intervention of school-age children with language impairment: A review of evidence and good practice. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 27(3), 354-370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659011412247>

Vayanou, M., Y. Ioannidis, G. Loumos, & Kargas, A. (2018). How to play storytelling games with masterpieces: from art galleries to hybrid board games. *Journal of Computers in Education*, 6, 79-116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-018-0124-y>

Vyber školu... (2013). *Zoznam škôl, Maďarský jazyk*. Retrieved 8 March, 2024 from <https://www.vyberskolu.sk/zoznam.php?jazyk=300>

Wilkins, D. (1972). *Linguistics in language teaching*. Arnold.