Boosting Speaking Skills through Chain Story Game in Rwanda

*Spéciose Ngirabakunzi Ndimurugero, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7029-6906
Centre for Language Enhancement, University of Rwanda
Email: ngspeciose@gmail.com

Gloriose Mugirase, PhD
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4322-2467
Centre for Language Enhancement, University of Rwanda
Email: gmugirase@gmail.com

Eustache Hagenimana
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9022-7953
Centre for Language Enhancement, University of Rwanda
Email: hageneusta26@yahoo.fr

Estelle Kezimana
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5192-5355
Centre for Language Enhancement, University of Rwanda
Email: kezimanaestelle@gmail.com

*Corresponding author: ngspeciose@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigated whether the chain story game enhances English-speaking proficiency among students at the University of Rwanda. The study was guided by the theory of gamification of learning and adopted a qualitative case study design. The target population consisted of 389 first-year students from the College of Science and Technology, who were participating in the 2024 induction program. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 40 respondents. Data was collected through classroom observations and focus group semi-structured interviews and was analyzed inductively. The study indicates that chain story game provided opportunities for students to actively engage in spoken English and supported the development of confidence, pronunciation and vocabulary. Therefore, the study recommends that chain story game be considered as a supportive speaking activity in English language classes in Rwanda to strengthen students' English-speaking proficiency.

Keywords: Chain story game, English proficiency, speaking skills, university students.

Introduction

English has become a dominant lingua franca in the current globalization era (Al Riyami, 2021) and has enjoyed the status of medium of instruction in many higher learning institutions around the globe. In Rwanda, English was adopted as the language of instruction from the primary education level onwards since October 2008. Students are expected to be proficient in the language for academic activities. Nevertheless, proficiency can be achieved better if students are given opportunities to practice.

Using English as a medium of instruction has, however, proven challenging for countless students in non-English speaking countries (Tang, 2020; Hategekimana et al., 2024). A study by Tang (2020) revealed that students experience linguistic, cultural, structural and identity-related problems. This is the reason why appropriate strategies ought to be devised to enable them develop proficiency in the target language. The study focused on speaking, an essential skill for enhancing English proficiency (Deliana & Ganie, 2025). The language enhances effective interaction with people around the globe, facilitating access to information (Sikubwabo et al., 2024).

According to Deliana and Ganie (2025), English proficiency is a multifaceted concept, which involves a variety of components, such as grammar, pronunciation and fluency. Some of these components are difficult to master and result in limited speaking proficiency. In Indonesia, the study of Muamaroh and Rahayu (2022) revealed that students experience linguistics (limited vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation skills) and psychological related issues (lack of confidence, nervousness and passiveness), which prevent them from developing English speaking proficiency. In Iran, students had limited English-speaking proficiency due to lack of acquaintance with vocabulary, grammatical, spelling and pronunciation knowledge (Akbari, 2016). In the Philippines, students mispronounced words and uttered grammatically inaccurate sentences, which impaired the understanding of conveyed messages (Eslit & Valderama, 2023).

Due to persisting language barriers, some countries, where English is second language, have established intervention strategies. In Malaysia, for example, students entering university are given language support through intensive programs. Despite these efforts, Malay students express poor proficiency, lacking adequate communication skills to perform their work after they have graduated (Al Riyami, 2021). In Nepal, English is taught as a compulsory subject at the university level, but students continue to display limited speaking proficiency (Chand, 2021). In Ethiopia, where the educational system has put a lot of emphasis on the teaching and learning of English, proficiency remains poor as they experience anxiety when speaking the foreign language (Rajendran et al., 2024).

Rwanda, one of few countries in the world where almost all people speak one language (Kinyarwanda) (Rosendal & Amini Ngabonziza, 2023) faces similar language-related challenges. University educators have observed that university graduates demonstrate poor English proficiency. Given that the Rwandan linguistic environment may hinder the acquisition of English-speaking skills, particular strategies have been developed to overcome communication barriers. The strategies include shift from knowledge-based to competence-based curriculum in secondary schools and language support provided at the university. In the competence-based curriculum, students are encouraged to perform interactive tasks, mostly speaking activities, using the target language. The University of Rwanda offers English for General Purposes, English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes modules to first-year, second-year and third-year undergraduate students, respectively, to promote English proficiency. In all three modules, students' speaking skills are emphasized through class presentations, debates, group discussions and sketches. A component of presentation skills is taught to postgraduate students to keep on boosting their oral communication skills. Further interactive spaces, such as English clubs exist.

Nevertheless, despite the Rwandan Government's efforts to increase students' English proficiency and although instruction is offered through English medium right from primary school, university students still exhibit limited communication skills in English language (Mugirase, 2020; Hagenimana et al., 2024). This challenge prevents learners from achieving anticipated performance, which is also true for a good number of university students. Persistent limited performance in English has prompted educators to continuously search for strategies to enable students upgrade their English-speaking fluency. Lecturers of English at the University of Rwanda have strived to work out various techniques to strengthen English-speaking skills. The problem has persisted, however, as the strategies have failed to achieve the expected outcomes (Ingabire et al., 2024; Ndizeye, 2022). This is evident when finalists must publicly defend their dissertations (Ndimurugero et al., 2024; Mugirase et al., 2025).

Moreover, many university graduates in Rwanda cannot compete in the job markets successfully because job interviews are conducted in English (Mugirase & Ndimurugero, 2020a). Even those who secure jobs have difficulties communicating

effectively at their workplace (Bigirimana, 2023; Mugirase & Ndimurugero, 2020b).

Concerned about students' persistently low English performance despite all invested efforts, the researchers in this study, who are also educators of the earlier mentioned English modules, introduced an additional strategy, believing that assigning daily speaking activities would help boost proficiency in English. They integrated memory chain, particularly chain story game, at the beginning of every session during the July 2024 induction program for prospective Year 1 students at the University of Rwanda. Chain story game is assumed to contribute to the promotion of speaking skills as it requires students to repeat a sentence and extend it progressively to encourage them to speak (Octavia et al, 2023). Therefore, this study sought to explore whether chain story game, a strategy that has never been investigated in the Rwandan context, enhances English speaking skills among students at the University of Rwanda.

Literature Review
The Concept of Chain Story
Chain story game refers to a technique whereby a student utters a meaningful unit of words which is passed along to another student, who adds on their own part, and the chain continues in a coherent manner (Nirmalasari, 2022). Uktolseja and Garpersz (2019) define chain story game as a group of activities in which each person contributes a sentence to the story and forwards it to the next. According to Jhija (2024), students take turns completing parts of the story by repeating phrases that have been conveyed by fellows freely…while maintaining the storyline (p. 34). The game goes on until the last partner adds his/her own statement that closes the story. Ork et al. (2024) highlighted that through chain story practice, the speaker first perceives the information, then the brain automatically tries to make sense out of what has been heard prior to producing a meaningful response to the message received.

Chain story game is, thus, perceived a method that makes the speaking activity a relaxed and enjoyable experience. Jhija (2024 maintains that chain story activities make classes enjoyable and provide students with opportunities to freely tell logical stories, using their own words. Students progressively learn how to talk about their feelings and share their opinions, which enables them to speak English more fluently (Meilinasari, 2025) and

confidently (Nirmalasari, 2022), enhancimg creativity (Arningtyas, 2019). Chain story is a suitable technique that could help teach students who are generally reluctant to use English (Uktolseja & Garpersz, 2019), supporting them to improve pronunciation skills (Meilinasari, 2025).

Chain story game appears to have a number of benefits. It is likely to be pragmatic, interactive and collaborative and may help develop language proficiency, self-confidence, creativity, pronunciation and team spirit. In line with this, Rohmah et al. (2023) argued that the use of chain upgrades students' speaking skills, creativity and way of thinking, enriching vocabulary. A study in Indonesia revealed that this approach motivates students to actively engage in classroom speaking activities using English (Uktolseja & Garpersz, 2019). The activities were conducted in teams and group members helped each other to construct sentences. As a result, students could bravely and confidently speak English.

Malihah's (2025) study on whether the implementation of chain story improved students' ability to speak English tested students' oral abilities in two cycles, 1 and 2 (Malihah, 2025). The researcher found out that 68% of the students in Cycle 1 scored above the minimum mastery criterion (mean=68.5) while in Cycle 2, 78% met the success criteria (mean=78.5). The study concluded that chain story could be an effective strategy for speaking skills. A study by Iponiasih's (2018) showed that chain story had contributed to the development of speaking skills. The study drew conclusion after comparing results from an oral pre-test and oral post-test activities.

In this study, chain story game was adapted to the teaching and learning context in large classes of more than 150 students. Students were put in pairs and tasked to gradually build stories. One group member uttered a sentence which served as a hint. The partner had to repeat that statement and continue the story by adding his/her own words. Pair members took turns to repeat what had been said and added a new sentence. They built on each other's contribution and the game went on until one pair member forgot the logical sequence of the story. The task was assigned 10 minutes after which lecturers gave a signal showing the end of pair work. Two to three pairs had to role play their stories in front of the entire class that evaluated them in accordance with the provided instructions with

much more focus on students' sentence correctness, the intent behind the use of chain story (Jhija, 2024).

Story Completion Activity and Challenges

Chain story game might be challenging during the learning process despite its many benefits (Octavia et al., 2023). For example, Rohmah et al.'s (2023) study disclosed that most of respondents were unfamiliar with chain story game strategies, had little knowledge of how it works and were confused by such a new activity in their learning experience. According to Fitri et al. (2023), many of students displayed low speaking learning outcomes and some of them were confused about the use of the chain story teaching and learning approach, thus failing to actively participate in the game. Wulandari et al.'s (2018) study showed low participation, inhibition and the use of mother tongue throughout the activity. The authors observed that some students kept quiet as they did not feel comfortable using English. Students' attitude appeared to be normal as their brain was obligated to perform multiple tasks, including memorization of sentences and spontaneous expansion of the story. Lack of confidence and limited vocabulary prevented students from paying attention to the chain story activities (Fitri et al., 2023). Octavia et al. (2023) identified more challenges during the learning process while using chain story. The challenges included noise that made the learning environment inconducive and distraction as students were likely to chat with classmates about unrelated topics while waiting for their time to speak.

Methodology

This section deals with the research design, population and sampling, instruments used to collect the data, data analysis, research ethics and validity and reliability.

Design

This study employed the case study design to examine the effectiveness of the chain story game in boosting students' English-speaking skills. Case study design enables researchers to gain deep understanding of phenomena (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). To gain such insights, the researchers introduced the chain story practice in their English language classrooms as a warm up activity from the first day of the induction program until its end.

Population and Sampling

The research population was 389 students from the College of Science and Technology. A total number of 40 respondents was selected based on department and gender, using purpose sampling procedures. Table 1 presents the population and sample.

Table 1: Participants by department and gender

S/N	Department	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
1	Biotechnology	1	2	3
2	Biochemistry	1	1	2
3	Conservation Biology	2	1	3
4	Analytical Chemistry	3	1	4
5	Computer Sciences	2	2	4
6	Architecture	1	3	4
7	Visual Design	2	2	4
8	Industrial Design	2	2	4
9	Estate Management and Valuation	3	1	4
10	Quantity Survey	2	2	4
11	Civil Engineering	3	1	4
	Total	**22**	**18**	**40**

Therefore, 22 males and 18 females from different departments constituted the sample. The researchers selected students who were actively engaged in the activity and who could provide relevant information.

Instruments

The study used observations and focus group semi-structured interviews to collect data. As they were conducting the chain story game activity, the researchers concomitantly made covert observation of the phenomenon. Covert research originates from the researchers' willful choice not to disclose their own identity or reveal that the research is

occurring (Kluczewska & Lottholz, 2023). The researchers moved around, monitoring the chain story game activity while jotting down their observations. The second part of the study was overt since interviews were conducted after students' consent was obtained. Focus groups (N=5) consisted of 8 students each. According to Cortini et al. (2019), an ideal number should vary between 8 and 12 subjects. This grouping generally enables researchers to collect a large amount of data within a short time (Masadeh, 2012) as well as rich and deep insights in social contexts (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). During group members' interactions, the researchers took notes of student participants' responses in diaries.

Data Management

In this study, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were observed as measures for quality data and authentic findings. Credibility was guaranteed through prolonged engagement, as the researchers made observations in English classrooms throughout the two-week induction program and proceeded with focus group interviews to understand the phenomenon from the students. Thus, triangulation was assured through the combination of data collection methods that reinforced the accuracy and authenticity of the results.

The issue of transferability was also addressed in that the researchers provided a clear and detailed description of the research context, participants and procedures. The researchers specified the population, sampling procedures, institutional setting and the nature of the chain story activities carried out during the induction program. Therefore, this rich contextual description allows readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to similar educational settings. The researchers followed a systematic and transparent research process throughout the study. In fact, they used similar guiding principles for all participants during observations and interviews. In addition, the researchers coded the data and identified themes that were later compared. They discussed their analyses while identifying most recurring patterns. This was done to ensure the stability and consistency of the results. The researchers independently relied on direct observations and participants' views. Individually, they coded the data and categorized it into typologies according to similarities and differences prior to the final interpretations that were based on

commonly identified patterns. Biases were minimized as the findings were grounded in the data rather than the researchers' assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, a number of ethical considerations were observed in both the covert and overt parts of the study. In both cases, the collected information was neither declared nor disclosed to a third party.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the themes that emerged.

Prior Knowledge of Chain story Game

The respondents' views of chain story game varied considerably. Twenty-four respondents out of 40 claimed not to have any idea about this practice before its introduction in the classroom. One of them (S5) confessed that it was his first time he had seen such an activity: "It is my first time to see this activity. I think it is for memorizing more than it is for enhancing language. So, if I were a teacher I would not conduct this activity very much." According to the excerpt, the respondent though that chain story does not improve the students' speaking skills but only enables them to refresh memory. In other words, such a practice served memorization purposes only. However, as students had to spontaneously build up coherent texts, they had to listen carefully to what they were told, retain it and produce new meaningful sentences by maintaining a logical sequence of the provided ideas.

On the other hand, 16 student respondents stated that they had knowledge of chain story game. For example, S9 asserted, "Chain story game is a practice through which one individual utters a meaningful unit of words and the listener repeats the same words before adding their own." In the same vein, S7 posited, "Chain story occurs when two people are interacting, by repeating each individual's words while adding their own thoughts and the exercises continues until one interlocutor forgets the beginning of the conversation." The participants' perceptions seem to comply with Nirmalasari (2022), who refers to chain story as a learning technique that involves two students where one utters a meaningful unit of words that is passed along to another and the latter repeats exactly the same text while adding on their own part in a coherent manner. The S7's definition of chain

story is more of an inference from ways in which the game was played in the daily English classes during the induction period than previous knowledge about the practice.

S1 viewed the game as a confusing practice in that students could produce many sentences and end up forgetting their utterances. In contrast, S2 found the chain story amusing even through it required "high usage of language and high capacity to follow what the other had said". S3, S4 and S6 believed that chain story game was perfect, cool and useful. They respectively stated: "I think this activity was perfect because it helps us interact with our fellow students and then it opens up our mind, think further than we do in the actual life" (S3). The activity was pretty cool as it opened our mind and we shared something that we wouldn't have known" (S4). "I think the exercise was very useful. I can carry it out in my language class because this strategy helps us to keep memory, again for effective communication" (S6).

The extracts imply that chain story game allowed students to socialize, interact, open up their mind and improve their memorization skills. Furthermore, unlike S5 who stated that chain story would fit for memorization only, S6 reckoned its role in developing students' language skills.

Enhancement of English-Speaking Skills

Findings show that chain story contributed to improvement of the students' speaking skills in various ways. For example, 19 respondents out of 40 reported that chain story raised their confidence while speaking: "Chain story reduced my shyness and helped me speak English well" (S2). Furthermore, S22 reported, "Not only that chain story removes students' fear to speak, it increases interest to learn to speak and confidence in speaking English as learners feel relaxed and consider the activity enjoyable." S40 revealed that he gradually became self-confident as he gained the necessary techniques used to start a conversation with another person in an appropriate manner for the first time.

In line with this, S15 and S34 admitted that chain stories made them gain public speaking skills, such as knowing how to introduce oneself in public and communicating efficiently. S34 asserted that students' public speaking skills significantly improved, noting that many students were shy when they started university due to lack of interactive activities at secondary school. Chain

story game is, therefore, likely to contribute to students' improved speaking skills. Similarly, research has shown that chain story technique significantly enhances students' speaking proficiency, creativity and confidence (Bilak & Henrietta, 2024; Jhija, 2024; Meilinasari, 2025). It also makes the learning fun (Fitri et al., 2023) even though, the researchers observed that some pairs were lost and interacted in Kinyarwanda, their home language.

Findings further indicated that chain story acquainted students with vocabulary and improved their flow of ideas, rhythm and pronunciation skills. For example, S19 and S27 asserted that the exercise was very fruitful as they learnt a lot from it, like vocabularies and that it proved to be a fun and effective learning strategy. The students added that chain story helped them to improve their pronunciation skills through repetition and they learnt a lot from their partners. S14 stated that partners involved in the conversation gained new vocabulary from one another whereas S15 affirmed, "Chain story has improved flow and rhythm and developed complex though. It generally instilled in me communication techniques like rapid generation of vocabularies." This implies that chain story is an enjoyable activity that arouses students' interest to learn from peers and improves skills, such as pronunciation, vocabulary and story building. Similarly, Meilinasari's (2025) findings indicated that chain story developed students' vocabulary, pronunciation and creativity.

Additionally, chain story game promoted students' social interaction and critical thinking skills. For instance, S15 posited, "Chain story improved my social skills and allowed me to gain more friends through discussions." Similarly, Meilinasari (2025) reported that the collaborative nature of chain story activities enhanced social interaction and inclusive classroom environment. In harmony, the researchers observed that chain story activities were so engaging that students appeared to have acquainted with one another, providing desires to socialize with new interlocutors.

Challenges in Practicing Chain Story Game

Students encountered challenges, such as short memory retention, language difficulties, the nature of the game and shyness while practicing the chain story game. For instance, S7 and S33 respectively stated, "Memory problem was the challenge I met while doing the exercise" and "I usually forgot what

was said at the beginning and it becomes difficult for me to memorize everything." S19's response further indicates how challenging memory retention was: "Remembering wasn't easy. One of the main challenges is to forget where we started from. There was unbalanced sentence structure, where someone is pressured to remember what was being said earlier."

Obviously, as the chain grew longer, the respondents had difficulty recalling what they had heard earlier so as to add on new sentences. Their views comply with Wulandari et al.'s (2018) findings that students' retention ability was not at a satisfactory level because they failed to repeat sentences and expand thoughts in a logical way. In line with this, the researchers noticed that some students made short sentences to avoid losing track and failing to interact.

As far as language-related difficulties are concerned, there is a possibility that S1 was challenged by his partners' wrong accent while S7 and S30 faced the issue in peers' limited listening, speaking and understanding skills. Furthermore, S5 confessed that his grammatical errors, where poor vocabulary impaired chain story activities conducted in the classroom. Apparently, language-related difficulties served as an umbrella term for the aforesaid challenges.

The nature of chain story activities was considered a big challenge as well. According to S7, chain story was demanding in that it required all the involved parties to pay a lot of attention and be very concentrated. The respondent went on to say, "at some point, students lost focus and interest, particularly after failure to recall all the previous sentences." Equally, S9 claimed, "It is not easy to do this for a long period of time" whereas S6 admitted, "when you start this activity, you find it easy, but when you continue you feel tired and stop it." All these views imply that the longer the activities became, the less focus and interest students experienced.

In response to these challenges, Fitri et al. (2023) suggested that chain story activities are effective when they do not last long. S24 maintained, "The challenge that I have seen so far is that students repeat the same conversation they had on day one over and over again, which limits the use of vocabularies and language." In accordance with this, Fitri et al. (2023) cautioned that students are generally not familiar with English lexicon, which

indicates a need to gradually vary speaking activities in order to provide exposure to a wide range of vocabulary and enable learners to upgrade the speaking skill.

Conclusions and Recommendations
Conclusions
Based on the findings, the study concludes that the chain story game was largely unfamiliar to most students at the beginning of the induction programme, although some demonstrated partial awareness of the practice. When introduced in the classroom, the activity created opportunities for learners to actively use English within a supportive and interactive environment, thereby fostering the development of confidence, fluency, and oral interaction. Consequently, the chain story game enhanced students' English-speaking skills. From a social interaction perspective, the collaborative nature of the activity promoted peer engagement and participation, enabling students to interact meaningfully while jointly constructing coherent stories. Nevertheless, despite its pedagogical value, the activity posed several challenges, including difficulties related to memory retention, limited language proficiency, sustained concentration, and its cognitively demanding nature—particularly when implemented for extended periods. These challenges underscore the importance of thoughtful and strategic integration of chain story activities into language classrooms.

Recommendations
Based on the study's conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. First, given that the chain story game was unfamiliar to many students, targeted workshops and professional development sessions should be organized for language instructors to raise awareness of the strategy and equip them with practical skills for its effective classroom implementation. Second, in light of the game's role in promoting active oral participation, it is recommended that the chain story game be integrated as a supportive speaking activity in English language classes to enhance learners' confidence and fluency. Third, considering the challenges related to memory load and concentration, chain story activities should be time-bound and carefully structured, with topics aligned to students' interests in order to stimulate motivation and minimize fatigue. Finally, language-in-education policymakers and other education

stakeholders are encouraged to support the adoption of interactive speaking strategies, such as the chain story game, as part of broader initiatives aimed at strengthening students' English-speaking proficiency.

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