

# Holistic Literacy Through Narratives: Engaging Bilingual Primary Learners in Ukrainian-English Storytelling

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This article explores how narrative-based instruction within a bilingual learning environment can foster holistic literacy development among primary learners. Drawing on the Integrated Literacy Development Approach (ILDA), it illustrates how bilingual story charts, character mapping, and emotionally grounded storytelling activities can deepen students' comprehension, emotional intelligence, and expressive abilities in both Ukrainian and English. Using the story of Ania and Vasyl—first introduced in Ukrainian and later mirrored in English—learners are guided through a structured process of narrative construction involving facts, thoughts, feelings, dialogue, and actions. This approach not only supports linguistic development but also encourages empathy, critical thinking, and personal engagement with the learning process. The article provides a practical framework for integrating bilingual narrative strategies into early literacy instruction.

**Keywords:** bilingual education, holistic literacy, narrative-based learning, Integrated Literacy Development Approach (ILDA), emotional literacy, language integration

## Introduction

In recent years, the need to reconceptualize literacy in multilingual and multicultural classrooms has gained significant attention, particularly in regions affected by crisis, displacement, or systemic transformation. In these contexts, traditional notions of literacy—focused narrowly on decoding and encoding print—prove insufficient. For primary learners in bilingual educational environments, such as Ukrainian-English programs, literacy development must be approached as a multifaceted process that integrates linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. This broader, more inclusive perspective is encapsulated in the term *holistic literacy*, which frames literacy not merely as a technical skill, but as a dynamic, meaning-making activity grounded in lived experience.

Narratives and storytelling play a pivotal role in advancing holistic literacy. As both cognitive tools and cultural practices, stories provide young learners with an accessible, engaging medium through which they can explore concepts, articulate emotions, and construct knowledge in two languages simultaneously. In the bilingual Ukrainian-English context—often shaped by artificial bilingualism where Russian is the home language, Ukrainian is the medium of instruction, and English is taught as a foreign language—storytelling creates a flexible

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linguistic space. It allows children to activate their entire linguistic repertoire, connect personal and academic experiences, and build identities as competent communicators across languages.

While prior studies have examined bilingual literacy and narrative-based learning, there is a *notable gap* in empirical research that integrates narrative pedagogy with systematic scaffolding in both languages for early primary learners in crisis-affected contexts. Few approaches address the intersection of sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic development through bilingual storytelling in environments where multilingualism is not naturally balanced but constructed through educational policy and practice. This article seeks to address that gap by introducing the Integrated Literacy Development Approach (ILDA)—a narrative-based methodology designed specifically to support Ukrainian-English bilingual learners in developing holistic literacy.

ILDA is informed by sociocultural theory, cognitive psychology, and systemic functional linguistics. It offers a structured progression from vocabulary development and concept mapping, through cognitive engagement via Bloom's Taxonomy, to genre-based narrative production scaffolded in both Ukrainian and English. Emotional engagement and socio-emotional learning are integral to this process, reflecting the belief that language learning must connect with students' identities, experiences, and feelings.

The purpose of this article is to describe the implementation of ILDA in a Ukrainian-English bilingual primary classroom, using storytelling and narrative practices as core tools for instruction. It explores how learners build conceptual understanding, develop storytelling competence, and engage in cross-linguistic expression while participating in academically oriented tasks. The article also positions ILDA within current theoretical frameworks and recent literature, including the authors' previous work (Tokareva & Tsehelska, 2023), to demonstrate its effectiveness. Ultimately, this study contributes to the field by offering a pedagogical model that uses narratives as bridges—between languages, subjects, and selves—to nurture the holistic development of young bilingual learners.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Derivation**

The conceptual grounding of the Integrated Literacy Development Approach (ILDA), as applied to bilingual storytelling, is built on an interdisciplinary foundation that weaves together literacy theory, sociocultural learning, systemic functional linguistics, cognitive psychology, and bilingual education. Central to this framework is the understanding of literacy as a dynamic, meaning-making process rather than a discrete set of technical skills (Cambourne, 2000; Kilag et al., 2023; Groenewald, 2024). In this light, storytelling emerges as a potent pedagogical strategy (Vogt et al., 2021) that fosters holistic literacy by engaging learners cognitively, emotionally, socially and linguistically (Anderson et al., 2021; Sutriani, 2025; Thompson et al., 2021).

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) underscores the role of social interaction and cultural tools in the development of higher psychological processes, including language and literacy. Storytelling, as a shared activity, provides rich opportunities for learners to internalize language structures and cultural norms through meaningful dialogue and guided participation. Bruner (1990) and Harris (2000) further assert the narrative mode as foundational to human cognition, identity, and imagination, positioning stories as ideal vehicles for developing complex language and thought.

Narrative development itself is a scaffolded process. Berman and Slobin (1994), Kim and Park (2020), Smith and Johnson (2021), Sutriani (2025), and Isbell et al. (2004) emphasize the progression in children's storytelling abilities, including the ability to sequence events, elaborate characters, and draw causal connections—all of which

contribute to oral and written language competence. These narrative skills align closely with academic literacy practices needed in school contexts, especially when supported by explicit teaching and modeling (Kucer, 2014; Kim & Park, 2020; Nguyen & Patel, 2023; Smith & Johnson, 2021).

In bilingual settings, Cummins (2000), García (2009), Nguyen & Patel (2023) advocate for pedagogical approaches that recognize and build upon learners' entire linguistic repertoires. Translanguaging practices within storytelling allow Ukrainian-English bilingual learners to draw meaning from both languages, fostering deeper conceptual understanding and identity affirmation. Language development is not merely additive but interdependent across linguistic domains, reinforcing cognitive and academic growth.

The theoretical lens of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (1994) and extended by Schleppegrell (2004), further supports the integration of genre-based language instruction into storytelling. Understanding how language functions to achieve specific purposes in texts empowers young learners to analyze and produce various narrative genres. Vogt et al. (2021) highlights how children learn language by using it functionally in social contexts, an insight directly applicable to oral and written storytelling in bilingual classrooms.

Cognitive theories of learning also inform this approach. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy provides a structured pathway for developing higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) through storytelling activities—such as classifying characters, comparing story versions, and evaluating moral dilemmas (see also: Thompson et al., 2021; Kilag et al., 2023). Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory and Mayer's (2009) multimedia learning theory support the use of visual supports like concept maps and storyboards to aid memory and comprehension, especially for young bilinguals navigating two linguistic systems.

Finally, literacy must be viewed through the lens of emotional and social development. Zins et al. (2004) and Denham (2006) demonstrate the critical link between social-emotional competence and academic success. When storytelling involves personal experiences, empathy, and shared values, it not only enhances language use but also supports emotional expression and classroom belonging. Jennings et al. (2017) and Kilag et al. (2023) highlight the importance of teacher awareness and care in fostering environments where learners feel safe to express themselves bilingually and creatively.

Together, these theoretical strands converge in ILDA to support bilingual learners' literacy development through narrative-based learning that is cognitively rigorous, emotionally meaningful, socially embedded, and linguistically rich.

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### Sample

The study involved a purposive sample of 18 second-grade students, aged 7 to 8 years, enrolled in a Ukrainian-English bilingual primary school located in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine. This cohort represented a heterogeneous population in terms of academic performance and language proficiency, with students demonstrating varying levels of competence in Ukrainian—their first language—and in English, which functioned as the medium of instruction for selected subjects, including Science and Art.

The sample included 10 female and 8 male learners. Most participants had received English instruction since the first grade and were thus familiar with routine classroom language, basic vocabulary, and simple sentence patterns in English. Nonetheless, their academic language development in English, especially regarding extended discourse and written narrative production, was still in the early stages. While students had prior informal exposure to storytelling practices in both Ukrainian and English, none had participated in structured narrative instruction grounded in genre-based pedagogy or had been explicitly introduced to the principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

The selection of this specific group was guided by the study's objective to explore the intersection of bilingual education, early literacy, and functional language awareness through narrative practices. The bilingual school context and the developmental stage of the learners provided a unique opportunity to investigate how holistic literacy strategies could support young bilinguals in becoming storytellers across languages.

Informed parental consent was obtained for all participants prior to the commencement of the study. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process, including the anonymization of participant data and the assurance of voluntary participation, with the right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

### Research Methods and Techniques

This study employed a qualitative action research methodology to investigate the impact of narrative-based instruction—supported by visual scaffolding and a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-informed approach to character development—on the holistic literacy development of primary-grade learners in a bilingual Ukrainian-English educational context. The choice of action research was informed by its cyclical, reflective nature, which allows practitioner-researchers to explore context-specific pedagogical questions through systematic cycles of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. This approach is particularly suitable for educational settings where the goal is to generate situated, actionable insights that inform ongoing instructional practice.

### Data Collection Techniques

To ensure methodological rigor and capture the multifaceted nature of classroom interactions, a triangulated data collection strategy was employed, incorporating four principal sources:

- Classroom Observations

Systematic observations were conducted over a four-week instructional period. The teacher-researcher recorded detailed field notes during narrative-focused lessons, paying particular attention to indicators of learner engagement. Observational data captured students' verbal interactions, the incorporation of narrative elements in

both oral and written language, the articulation of emotions, and participation in whole-class discussions and collaborative storytelling tasks.

- Learner Artifacts

A diverse range of student-generated materials was collected and subjected to qualitative analysis. These artifacts included completed worksheets, co-constructed story maps, emotion wheels, and both oral and written narrative texts. The analysis examined the ways in which students represented characters' emotions, thoughts, actions, and dialogue, as well as the extent to which they applied genre-specific conventions to structure their narratives coherently and purposefully.

- Video and Photographic Documentation

Selected instructional episodes were documented through video recordings and photographs to capture significant moments of learner engagement and classroom interaction. These visual records included instances of students working with visual organizers, responding to illustrated prompts, and engaging in peer collaboration. This data proved especially valuable in documenting non-verbal behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and interaction with peers and materials, offering an additional lens through which to understand student engagement.

- Teacher-Researcher Reflections

A reflective journal was maintained throughout the duration of the study, serving as a space for documenting instructional adjustments, capturing learners' evolving responses to narrative tasks, and recording emergent pedagogical insights. These reflections facilitated a meta-cognitive layer of analysis and supported the identification of cross-cutting themes across data sources. They also contributed to iterative refinements of the instructional approach in line with the principles of action research.

Through the integration of these data sources, the study sought to construct a nuanced and comprehensive picture of how bilingual primary learners engage with narrative-based instruction when it is enriched with visual and linguistic scaffolds. The cyclical structure of the action research process further enabled ongoing adaptations in response to classroom dynamics and learner needs.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. Coding categories were derived from the study's conceptual framework, focusing on four core dimensions: (1) understanding and application of narrative structure, (2) expression and interpretation of emotions, (3) use of SFL-informed character analysis, and (4) implementation of selective storytelling strategies.

Learner artifacts were analyzed for the presence and coherence of narrative elements, emotional nuance, and linguistic features—including the use of descriptive and process verbs, conjunctions, and indicators of mental or verbal processes. Observational and visual data were triangulated with written outputs to identify developmental trajectories, moments of conceptual clarity, and instances of learner difficulty. Particular attention was given to the ways in which meaning was constructed through the interplay of linguistic, visual, and emotional modalities.

By synthesizing insights across multiple data sources, the analysis aimed to elucidate how bilingual learners construct and communicate meaning through narrative, and how this process supports their broader holistic literacy development.

## Results

The analysis of classroom observations, learner artifacts, video documentation, and teacher reflections yielded several key findings regarding the influence of narrative-based instruction on the holistic literacy development of young bilingual learners. The results are organized into four interrelated domains: emotional engagement, development of narrative structure, progression in bilingual literacy, and functional language awareness.

### Emotional Engagement and Empathy Development

One of the most salient outcomes of the storytelling approach was the enhancement of students' emotional engagement and their emerging capacity for empathy. Learners increasingly demonstrated the ability to articulate a range of emotions—such as joy, sadness, fear, and curiosity—across both oral discussions and written responses. Instructional tools such as emotion wheels and character feeling charts facilitated students' identification and verbalization of emotional states, both for fictional characters and for themselves, thereby fostering deeper personal connections with the narratives. This emotional resonance was further observable during storytelling performances, where students employed expressive intonation, gestures, and facial expressions, indicating a growing sensitivity to character perspectives and emotional nuance.

### Development of Narrative Structure

The data revealed significant gains in learners' ability to construct coherent and logically organized narratives. Visual scaffolds such as story maps, which illustrated the sequence of "Orientation–Complication–Resolution", were instrumental in supporting students' internalization of narrative conventions. By the conclusion of the four-week instructional cycle, most students were able to independently compose or retell short stories with clearly sequenced events, identifiable protagonists, and basic cause-and-effect relationships. Moreover, students began to incorporate target language features introduced during instruction—such as temporal connectors ("then," "after that," "suddenly") and contrastive expressions ("but," "however")—which enhanced the cohesion and flow of their narratives.

### Bilingual Literacy Progression

The dual-language presentation of stories—initially in Ukrainian, followed by English—contributed to learners' bilingual literacy development by supporting cross-linguistic transfer and reinforcing key vocabulary. The narrative of *Ania and Vasyl*, presented in both languages, enabled students to draw parallels between equivalent linguistic structures, such as greetings, emotional descriptors, and expressions of surprise. Learners who initially relied on Ukrainian as a planning language began to construct sentences and dialogues increasingly in English, using Ukrainian as a scaffold. Instances of code-switching in early drafts were frequent but gradually decreased, signaling a transitional phase that supported the shift toward more sustained English-language narrative production by the end of the study.

### Functional Language Awareness Through SFL

The integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-informed strategies fostered learners' emerging awareness of language as a functional and meaning-making resource. Instructional emphasis on character-based linguistic analysis—focusing on what characters *think, feel, do, and say*—enabled students to distinguish among mental, behavioral, relational, and verbal processes. This, in turn, encouraged more deliberate grammatical choices in both spoken and written language. Learners began experimenting with structures such as mental

processes (“Ania thought she was lost”), relational clauses (“Vasyl was a kind boy”), and verbal expressions (“He said, ‘Don’t worry’”), reflecting a growing meta-linguistic sensitivity. Although still developing, this awareness suggests the formation of foundational skills for understanding how language functions across genres to construct meaning.

### **Pedagogical Design**

The pedagogical design of the holistic literacy project implemented at Interclass Bilingual Primary School is grounded in an integrated, bilingual approach to storytelling. By combining emotionally resonant narratives with structured concept charts, students engage in reflective, cross-linguistic meaning-making processes that enhance both their language development and emotional intelligence.

This section outlines the instructional progression designed to guide bilingual learners through the comprehension and creation of narratives. The sequence is organized into three interconnected stages, each building on the previous and culminating in the students’ ability to independently construct coherent, emotionally nuanced stories in both Ukrainian and English.

#### **Stage 1: Laying the Foundation—Understanding Core Story Elements**

The initial instructional phase focused on familiarizing students with the essential components of narrative structure. Through interactive and visually supported tools such as story cards and guided class discussions, learners explored the foundational elements of storytelling: setting (time and place), characters, problem, and solution. These concepts were introduced using age-appropriate examples and reinforced through tactile activities such as sorting and matching exercises. This stage aimed to render abstract structural elements concrete and accessible, enabling learners to recognize and begin applying the narrative architecture common to all stories. By the end of this phase, students were able to identify story elements in familiar narratives and began experimenting with story mapping in supported contexts.

#### **Stage 2: Embodied Emotions—Exploring Feelings Through Expression and Behavior**

The second stage deepened learners’ narrative understanding by focusing on the emotional and psychological dimensions of character development. Particular emphasis was placed on linking internal emotional states with external, observable behaviors, thereby enhancing students’ ability to interpret and represent emotion within a narrative framework.

Using multimodal resources—such as illustrated emotion charts (see Figure 1)—students practiced identifying and analyzing the ways characters express emotions through facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Instruction guided learners to interpret each character’s emotional response through four interconnected dimensions:

- Felt—recognizing the emotional state;
- Thought—inferring the internal dialogue or belief;
- Said—examining dialogue as a reflection of both cognition and emotion;
- Did—identifying actions as expressions of internal states.

This stage not only fostered empathic insight but also laid the foundation for creating more fully realized, multidimensional characters. Classroom discussions helped students understand how emotions influence behavior and drive narrative events, thus enriching both comprehension and original composition.

#### **Stage 3: Constructing Narratives—From Visuals to Text**

In the final stage, students transitioned from narrative analysis to story creation. Instruction focused on

supporting learners in composing original narratives using visual sequencing tools (e.g., picture stories) and structured graphic organizers (e.g., narrative tables). These scaffolds enabled students to organize story elements—setting, characters, problem, and solution—while integrating each character’s thoughts, feelings, dialogue, and actions in response to the unfolding events.

The central instructional material for this phase was a bilingual narrative entitled “*Аня і Василь: перший день у новій школі*” (*Ania and Vasyl: The First Day at a New School*). Initially presented and collaboratively analyzed in Ukrainian, the story was then introduced in English, allowing for both linguistic reinforcement and conceptual transfer. Centered on themes of social integration, emotional resilience, and empathy, the story was closely aligned with the socio-emotional realities of young learners, making it a powerful vehicle for both language development and personal reflection.

To support learners in organizing narrative content and deepening character understanding, the Ukrainian version of a narrative chart was co-constructed with students. This chart was structured around five interrelated categories that guided learners in unpacking character behavior and emotional development:

- Факт (Fact)—the situational context or event;
- Відчув (Felt)—the character’s emotional reaction;
- Подумав (Thought)—the internal dialogue or belief;
- Сказав (Said)—the character’s spoken response;
- Зробив (Did)—the action taken as a result.

This chart served as both a cognitive scaffold and a bilingual bridge, helping students analyze and construct character-driven events with emotional depth and narrative coherence.

Назва оповіді: \_\_\_\_\_

Факти		Відчув	Подумав	Сказав	Зробив	
Вчителька зайшла в клас з новою дівчинкою	 Аня Василь	Одного сонячного вересневого ранку вчителька Марія Петрівна зайшла в клас з новою дівчинкою	Аня: страшно (тіло зіщулилось, голова опущена)	Аня: Скільки незнайомих! І як я тут буду вчитись.....Хочу назад в свій клас, своє місто.....	Аня: Добрий день – тихенько	Аня: пройшла на місце
На перерві всі пішли до їadalні і сіли за столи, Аня обідала одна.	 2	Коли пролунав дзвоник, діти весело юрбюю пробігли до їadalні. Василь їш у компанії з друзями, Аня сиділа сама.	Аня: сум	Аня: Навіть їсти не хочеться.....	Аня: _____	Аня: сідла, втіпивши очі в стіл
Після занять однокласники пішли грати у баскетбол, Аня сіла на лавці читати книжку.	 3	Уроки закінчились пообід, і однокласники виїшли зловити осінні промені сонця і пограти в баскетбол.	Аня: самотність	Аня: Щось і книжка не читається.....	Аня: _____	Аня: сідла, дивлячись на розкриту книгу
Василь пішов до Ані і запитав, чи не хоче вона пограти з ними.	 4	Побачивши, що Ася самотньо сидить на лавці, Василь вирішив запропонувати їй пограти в команді.	Аня: подив, підняла на Василя здивовані очі	Аня: Що він хоче?	Аня: Так, залюбки!	Аня: подумала і відповіла
Ані погодилась і почала грати з однокласниками.	 5	Аня радо погодилась і вже через хвилину сміялась, отримавши вдалого паса від Василя.	Аня: радість	Аня: Зловила!	Аня: Bay!	Аня: зловила мяч
			Василь: задоволення від доброго вчинку	Василь: Пасую Ані!	Василь: Молодчина!	Василь: підскочив від задоволення

Figure 1. Ukrainian narrative chart.

Students completed the chart collaboratively, using it as a support for comprehension, discussion, and eventual retelling.

The corresponding English narrative chart mirrored the structure of the Ukrainian version, reinforcing students' understanding of narrative elements while supporting cross-linguistic transfer. It enabled learners to analyze character experiences in parallel across both languages, enhancing bilingual comprehension and expression. Sample entries from the English chart included:

- Fact: The teacher came into the classroom with a new girl.
- Felt (Ania): scared (her body was hunched, her head down)
- Thought (Ania): So many strangers! How will I study here? I want to go back to my class and my city...
- Said (Ania): "Good morning," she whispered.
- Did (Vasyl): He followed her with his eyes.

This bilingual narrative chart served as a powerful instructional tool, helping students develop nuanced character analysis and apply emotional insight to their own storytelling in both Ukrainian and English.

**Title:** A New Girl at School

Facts	Feelings	Thoughts	Words	Actions	Feelings
The teacher came into the classroom with a new girl.	 Ania      Vasyl	<b>Anya:</b> scared (She looked small and kept her head down.) <b>Vasyl:</b> surprised (His eyes were wide open.)	<b>Anya:</b> So many strangers! How will I study here? I want to go back to my class, to my city... <b>Vasyl:</b> A new girl! I wonder who will sit with her?	<b>Anya:</b> "Good morning." (quietly) <b>Vasyl:</b> (He said nothing, just looked.)	<b>Anya</b> walked to her seat. <b>Vasyl</b> watched her go.
At lunch, everyone went to the cafeteria. Anya ate alone.	 2	<b>Anya:</b> sad <b>Vasyl:</b> felt sorry for her	<b>Anya:</b> I don't even feel like eating... <b>Vasyl:</b> Maybe I should ask her to sit with us... but there's no space at our table.	<b>Anya</b> was quiet. (Vasyl didn't say anything.)	<b>Anya</b> looked at her plate. <b>Vasyl</b> answered his friends without really listening.
After school, the classmates went to play basketball. Anya sat on a bench with a book.	 3	<b>Anya:</b> lonely <b>Vasyl:</b> worried about her	<b>Anya:</b> I can't even read this book... <b>Vasyl:</b> Maybe I should invite her to play?	<b>Anya:</b> (silent) <b>Vasyl:</b> "Guys, I'll be right back."	<b>Anya</b> looked in the open book. <b>Vasyl</b> walked over to her.
Vasyl went up to Anya and asked if she wanted to play.	 4	<b>Anya:</b> surprised (She looked up at Vasyl with big eyes.) <b>Vasyl:</b> happy he had the courage	<b>Anya:</b> What does he want? <b>Vasyl:</b> How should I ask her?	<b>Vasyl:</b> "Do you want to play basketball with us?" <b>Anya:</b> "Yes, I'd love to!"	<b>Anya</b> smiled and stood up. <b>Vasyl</b> smiled too.
Anya joined the game and played with her new classmates.	 5	<b>Anya:</b> happy <b>Vasyl:</b> proud of his kind action	<b>Anya:</b> Got it! <b>Vasyl:</b> I'll pass to Anya!	<b>Anya:</b> "Wow!" <b>Vasyl:</b> "Good job!"	<b>Anya</b> caught the ball. <b>Vasyl</b> jumped with joy.

Figure 2. English narrative chart.

This bilingual approach promoted vocabulary retention and drew attention to structural and grammatical differences between Ukrainian and English. Learners were encouraged to notice verb tenses, sentence forms, and emotional expressions in both languages.

The dual use of narrative charts proved instrumental in transforming learners from passive consumers of stories into active, selective storytellers. By empowering students to choose which narrative elements and emotional expressions best suited their intended story, the approach promoted intentionality, creativity, and

narrative fluency. Ultimately, students gained the ability to construct stories that were not only structurally sound but also emotionally engaging and linguistically nuanced.

### Representative Markers of Success

To assess the effectiveness of the narrative-based instruction within a bilingual and SFL-informed framework, several representative markers of success were identified and analyzed across the domains of emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development:

#### 1. Emotional Expression and Empathy

- Marker: Ability to identify and articulate emotions of story characters and self.
- Evidence: Use of feeling charts, emotion wheels, and expressive language during retelling or dramatization (e.g., “Ania felt scared because she was lost”).

#### 2. Narrative Structure Mastery

- Marker: Construction of coherent stories following the basic structure of Orientation–Complication–Resolution.
- Evidence: Completion of story maps with appropriate event sequencing and resolution strategies in both oral and written narratives.

#### 3. Use of Functional Language (SFL)

- Marker: Use of language to reflect characters’ mental, emotional, relational, and verbal processes.
- Evidence: Inclusion of sentences such as “*Vasyl thought Ania needed help*” or “*She was happy when she saw her house*”, showing an emerging grasp of experiential meanings.

#### 4. Bilingual Proficiency and Transfer

- Marker: Ability to transfer narrative knowledge and language structures from Ukrainian to English.
- Evidence: Parallel stories composed in both languages, with increasing independence in using English for planning, storytelling, and writing.

#### 5. Engagement and Participation

- Marker: Active participation in storytelling activities, collaborative group work, and willingness to contribute ideas.
- Evidence: Frequency and quality of student input during discussions, group planning, and dramatization sessions.

#### 6. Creative and Critical Thinking

- Marker: Evidence of imaginative expansion, cause-effect reasoning, and moral reflection in stories.
- Evidence: Original endings, character reflections, and the inclusion of personal opinions about the story events or character actions.

### Generalized Results of Polymodal Marker Demonstrations

The analysis of the absolute frequency of polymodal marker demonstrations—encompassing linguistic, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral indicators—revealed consistent patterns of learner development across the bilingual storytelling cycle. The polymodal data sources included students’ oral and written narratives, visual storytelling aids (charts and maps), classroom interaction records, and teacher observations.

Quantitative coding of these artifacts focused on the occurrence of specific markers within each narrative output and learning event. Table 1 summarizes the aggregate frequencies observed during the four-week instructional period.

Table 1

*Frequency of Polymodal Marker Demonstrations (N = 18 Students)*

Marker Category	Indicator Example	Mean Frequency per Learner	Total Occurrences
Emotional Expression	Use of emotion words, emotion charts	6.3	113
Narrative Structuring	Orientation-Complication-Resolution elements	5.8	104
Functional Language Use (SFL)	Verbal, mental, relational process verbs	4.9	88
Bilingual Language Transfer	Equivalents in Ukrainian/English narratives	4.2	76
Cognitive Reasoning	Cause-effect, moral reflections	3.6	65
Collaborative Engagement	Peer feedback, group planning contributions	5.1	92

The **highest frequency** was observed in the domain of *Emotional Expression*, indicating students' strong engagement with the characters' internal states and the socio-emotional dimensions of storytelling. This was followed by solid integration of *Narrative Structuring* and increasing confidence in the use of *Functional Language* processes informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Interestingly, *Bilingual Language Transfer* demonstrated a slightly lower mean frequency, suggesting that while learners were capable of transferring narrative structures across languages, this remained a developing competence requiring continued scaffolding.

Overall, the frequency data validate the effectiveness of the polymodal instructional design in promoting a broad range of literacy-related behaviors, with **notable progress** in emotional awareness, narrative logic, and functionally motivated language use across languages.

### Interpretation of Statistical Results

The statistical findings derived from the frequency analysis of polymodal marker demonstrations provide significant insights into the impact of narrative-based, bilingual literacy instruction on early primary learners. The results indicate a consistent pattern of growth across several key dimensions of holistic literacy: emotional engagement, structural coherence, functional language application, and bilingual transferability.

The **high frequency of emotional expression markers** ( $M = 6.3$  per learner) suggests that learners were able to internalize and articulate the affective dimensions of character development, which were explicitly scaffolded through visual tools such as emotion charts and guided classroom discussions. This trend is particularly important given the emphasis placed on socio-emotional learning in early literacy development and highlights the effectiveness of incorporating emotional literacy into storytelling practices.

The **frequent use of narrative structuring elements** ( $M = 5.8$ ) demonstrates learners' developing ability to organize their ideas according to established narrative genres. The explicit use of narrative charts, bilingual story templates, and genre modeling contributed to learners' understanding of the Orientation–Complication–Resolution pattern, a foundational skill in narrative literacy. This structural awareness is further supported by the presence of cause-effect reasoning ( $M = 3.6$ ), indicating a progression toward more sophisticated cognitive processing in storytelling.

Moreover, the presence of **functional language use**, as reflected in the application of verbal, mental, and relational process verbs ( $M = 4.9$ ), confirms learners' growing metalinguistic awareness. This progress can be attributed to the integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) principles, which emphasized the role of language as a resource for meaning-making in context. The relatively strong presence of these functional markers affirms the viability of introducing SFL-informed instruction at the primary level, even in bilingual settings.

The **lower, but still notable, frequency of bilingual transfer markers** ( $M = 4.2$ ) indicates that while students could draw parallels between Ukrainian and English narrative constructions, this transfer was not fully automatic and often required teacher mediation. The dual presentation of stories, such as the narrative of Ania and Vasyl, played a central role in promoting cross-linguistic connections. Continued bilingual reinforcement is needed to strengthen learners' ability to transfer narrative competence across languages more independently.

Finally, **collaborative engagement indicators** ( $M = 5.1$ ) provide evidence of the social nature of the learning process, with students actively participating in group planning, peer feedback, and co-creation of narratives. These behaviors are essential for fostering communicative competence and reflect the classroom's emphasis on dialogic, student-centered instruction.

Taken together, the statistical results underscore the pedagogical efficacy of a polymodal, narrative-based approach to bilingual literacy development. The balanced presence of emotional, structural, linguistic, cognitive, and collaborative markers illustrates the integrated nature of the literacy practices promoted and supports the conclusion that such instruction fosters a broad spectrum of learner competencies.

## Discussions

The findings of this study illuminate the significant pedagogical potential of narrative-based literacy instruction, particularly when grounded in bilingual contexts and informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This section explores the implications of the results for early primary education, addressing three interrelated dimensions: emotional-cognitive development, genre awareness, and bilingual narrative transfer.

### Emotional and Cognitive Engagement in Storytelling

One of the most salient outcomes of the research was the emergence of emotional engagement as a foundational pillar in narrative construction. As evidenced by the high frequency of emotion-related markers, students were not only able to identify and name emotions, but also embed them meaningfully within their stories. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the centrality of affect in the development of higher-order thinking (1978). The integration of visual tools such as emotion charts and role-based storytelling activities supported learners in bridging personal affective experiences with narrative representations, fostering both emotional literacy and deeper cognitive involvement.

Furthermore, this study confirms that emotional engagement acts as a catalyst for more complex reasoning, including causal explanation and moral reflection, both of which are essential features of coherent and meaningful storytelling. These cognitive gains suggest that literacy instruction in primary settings must be designed not only to develop decoding and comprehension skills but also to cultivate empathetic and reflective capacities.

### Developing Genre Awareness Through SFL-Informed Instruction

A central objective of the instructional intervention was to enhance learners' awareness of narrative genre structures and the functional use of language within them. The results show that young learners were capable of grasping core genre features such as orientation, complication, and resolution when provided with consistent visual and oral scaffolds. The ability to employ various types of process verbs—mental, verbal, and relational—indicates an early sensitivity to the interpersonal and ideational functions of language as outlined by Halliday's metafunctions (1994).

The success of introducing SFL-informed concepts at the primary level challenges the perception that such instruction may be too abstract for young learners. Instead, when these principles are mediated through age-

appropriate resources—such as story charts, guided mapping, and collaborative drafting—they become accessible and meaningful. This suggests a broader applicability of functional linguistic approaches in early language and literacy curricula.

### **Bilingual Transfer and Literacy Development**

The bilingual design of the instruction—featuring parallel storytelling activities in Ukrainian and English—revealed important insights into cross-linguistic transfer. While learners demonstrated the ability to apply narrative structures in both languages, the transfer of complex functional language required intentional scaffolding. This finding supports Cummins' interdependence hypothesis (2000), which posits that literacy skills developed in one language can positively influence literacy in another, provided there is adequate cognitive and instructional support.

The story of *Ania and Vasyl*, presented first in Ukrainian and then mirrored in English, served as a crucial tool for this transfer. It allowed students to explore not just vocabulary equivalents but also syntactic parallels and discourse strategies. However, the limited spontaneous transfer suggests that bilingual storytelling needs to be coupled with explicit contrastive analysis to help learners consciously recognize and utilize linguistic resources across languages.

### **Social Interaction and Collaborative Meaning-Making**

The prominence of collaborative engagement markers in the data underscores the fundamentally social nature of literacy development. Learners were frequently observed negotiating meaning, sharing narrative responsibilities, and building on each other's ideas. These interactions reflect Bakhtin's dialogic principle (1986), affirming that meaning emerges through social interaction. Classroom structures that encouraged peer dialogue—such as partner storytelling and group performance—proved especially effective in enhancing narrative coherence and creativity.

Moreover, these collaborative practices facilitated the co-construction of academic identity, enabling learners to see themselves as authors and meaning-makers. This development is particularly critical in bilingual environments, where students may feel less confident using a foreign language without supportive social contexts.

### **Implications for Pedagogy**

The findings of this study yield several pedagogical implications for the design and implementation of literacy instruction in bilingual primary classrooms. These implications pertain to instructional design, teacher roles, material selection, and the integration of linguistic theory into early education practice.

#### **Narrative as a Core Pedagogical Tool**

Firstly, the study underscores the efficacy of narrative as a central organizing principle for literacy development. When narrative instruction is strategically embedded within the broader curriculum, it enables learners to consolidate linguistic, cognitive, and emotional competencies in a cohesive manner. Teachers are encouraged to employ stories not only as a medium for reading comprehension but also as a generative framework for writing, speaking, and personal expression. Importantly, stories should be chosen or developed with attention to cultural and linguistic relevance to foster learner identification and motivation.

#### **Integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics in Early Literacy**

The study demonstrates that core concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly those related to genre structure and transitivity, can be meaningfully introduced to young learners when adapted

through visual and experiential modalities. Pedagogues should not shy away from theoretically grounded linguistic models; rather, they should seek developmentally appropriate pathways—such as guided story maps, verb sorting, and character dialogue planning—that allow children to experience language as a system of meaning-making. This empowers learners to make deliberate language choices and enhances their metalinguistic awareness from an early age.

### **Bilingual Storytelling and Contrastive Language Awareness**

The bilingual dimension of storytelling emerged as both a strength and a challenge. While narrative served as a bridge between languages, spontaneous transfer was limited without explicit instructional intervention. This suggests that bilingual storytelling activities should be accompanied by contrastive analysis tasks that help learners recognize how language functions similarly and differently across linguistic systems. Teachers should guide students in identifying equivalent narrative structures, emotional expressions, and grammatical patterns, thereby deepening their cross-linguistic competence.

### **Emotion-Driven Literacy Practices**

The consistent presence of emotional engagement markers in student work affirms the need to foreground affective dimensions in literacy pedagogy. Literacy instruction should incorporate emotion-focused tools—such as feeling charts, role-play, and reflective discussions—that allow children to connect with stories at a personal level. Doing so not only enhances comprehension and retention but also supports the development of empathy and social-emotional learning, particularly crucial in the context of bilingual and multicultural education.

### **Collaborative Story-Making as Social Literacy**

Finally, the observed benefits of peer collaboration suggest that storytelling should be approached as a socially situated act. Classroom practices that promote dialogic interaction—through co-authoring, group performances, or story-based games—support not only literacy acquisition but also interpersonal communication and shared meaning-making. Teachers must thus foster a classroom culture where children are encouraged to negotiate, revise, and celebrate stories collectively.

In sum, these pedagogical implications advocate for a reimagining of early literacy not as a discrete set of skills, but as a holistic, emotionally resonant, and socially co-constructed endeavor. The integration of narrative, bilingual instruction, and functional linguistics offers a promising direction for cultivating empowered, reflective, and literate learners from the earliest years of schooling.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings of this study offer promising insights into the integration of narrative-based instruction and systemic functional linguistics in bilingual literacy development, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the study was conducted in a specific educational context—a Ukrainian-English bilingual primary school—which may limit the generalizability of the results to other multilingual or monolingual environments. The cultural and linguistic characteristics of the learners played a significant role in shaping their responses to the instructional approach, and similar interventions in different contexts may yield varied outcomes.

Second, the sample size was relatively small, comprising a limited number of classrooms and learners. While rich qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, student work samples, and teacher reflections, the absence of broader quantitative measures means that the conclusions drawn remain illustrative rather than statistically generalizable.

Third, although the instructional approach emphasized bilingual storytelling, the depth of linguistic transfer from Ukrainian to English was not uniform across learners. Some students demonstrated high levels of narrative fluency in both languages, while others relied more heavily on their dominant language. This variability suggests the need for further investigation into individual learner differences and the role of prior language proficiency in bilingual narrative development.

Finally, the duration of the study was relatively short, focusing on one unit of instruction. Longitudinal research would be necessary to assess the sustained impact of the Integrated Literacy Development Approach (ILDA) on learners' literacy trajectories over time.

Acknowledging these limitations provides a foundation for future research and reinforces the need for continued exploration of narrative-based, functionally grounded instruction in diverse bilingual settings.

## Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the role of narrative-based instruction, supported by visual scaffolding and informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), in fostering holistic literacy among young learners in a Ukrainian-English bilingual primary school. The findings underscore the transformative potential of narrative pedagogy to not only enhance language development but also to support learners' emotional expression, intercultural understanding, and metalinguistic awareness.

By centering storytelling in both Ukrainian and English, the instructional approach provided learners with meaningful opportunities to navigate two linguistic systems while constructing personal and fictional identities. The introduction of character-focused narrative building, guided by polymodal tools such as story charts, emotion graphs, and dialogue planners, contributed to learners' ability to comprehend and produce extended texts. The bilingual adaptation of the same narrative—told first in Ukrainian, then in English—served as a scaffold for cross-linguistic transfer, helping students internalize story structure, thematic development, and the linguistic realization of meaning.

Quantitative indicators, including the frequency of successful emotional and linguistic markers, confirmed that young learners can indeed engage with sophisticated literacy practices when given developmentally appropriate support. Furthermore, qualitative observations highlighted the power of storytelling to stimulate engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking, even among emergent bilinguals.

Ultimately, this research supports the reconceptualization of early literacy education as a multifaceted process, wherein language is not merely acquired but lived through stories. Pedagogical approaches that integrate narrative, emotion, and functional language awareness are not only effective but necessary for equipping children with the skills to thrive in linguistically and culturally complex contexts. Future studies are encouraged to expand this line of inquiry across diverse educational settings and age groups, and to explore how narrative and SFL-informed methods can further support inclusive, learner-centered literacy development in bilingual environments.

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