# Fun Character Storytelling as a Bio Learning Hack

**JOWEL C. PABLO, Ph.D.**
Tyler High School
jowelcpablo@gmail.com

**CRISTO MARK D. ANCHETA, Ph.D.**
Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology
markcristo14@yahoo.com

*Abstract* — This study investigated the effectiveness of fun character storytelling as a learning hack in teaching Grade 9 Biology at Tyler High School. Specifically, it examined whether narrative-driven, character-based instruction could enhance student engagement, conceptual understanding, and academic performance compared to traditional teacher-centered methods. Using a quantitative experimental research design, the study employed a pre-test–post-test control group approach involving two intact class sections (N = 50). The experimental group received instruction through structured character storytelling strategies, including role-playing, storyboards, and guided narratives aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), while the control group was taught using conventional lecture-based instruction. Data were collected through teacher-made pre-tests and post-tests focusing on Unit 10: Ecology. Statistical analyses, including paired samples t-tests and independent samples t-tests, revealed that while both groups demonstrated significant learning gains, the experimental group achieved significantly higher post-test scores than the control group ($p < .05$). The findings indicate that fun character storytelling is an effective instructional strategy for improving student achievement, engagement, and retention in Biology. Integrating narrative-based, character-driven instruction into secondary science classrooms may support diverse learners while maintaining curricular rigor and alignment with standardized assessment requirements.

***Keywords — Biology Instruction, Character Storytelling, Narrative-Based Learning, Student Engagement, Grade 9 Science, Experimental Research***

## I. Introduction

Biology class often feels like a maze of textbook pages, complicated diagrams, and memorized facts — rarely a captivating journey. In Texas high schools, including Tyler ISD, science content frequently becomes a hurdle rather than a doorway to curiosity. Many students struggle to connect with concepts such as cell diagrams or DNA double helices, treating biology as a series of facts to memorize rather than as living stories of life. Without emotional or contextual hooks, scientific concepts are often forgotten soon after examinations.

This disengagement represents a significant problem. Surveys in science education indicate that many students report low motivation and minimal active participation, particularly in traditional, lecture-based biology classes (ERIC, 2021). Consequently, promising young minds

may fail to fully appreciate or understand the wonders of biology, and some may avoid STEM-related fields altogether.

Systemic challenges in science teaching exacerbate the situation. Educators often feel constrained by rigid curricula, standardized testing demands, and insufficient professional development (Education Week, 2021). This creates a strong reliance on content delivery methods that prioritize information transmission over student engagement, limiting opportunities for innovative, interactive teaching approaches. Biology also presents inherent difficulties due to its abstract and multilevel nature. Topics such as cellular processes, molecular structures, gene expression, and ecosystems can be difficult for students to visualize or connect to real-life experiences. Research highlights that narrative or story-based teaching methods can effectively bridge this gap by making abstract concepts concrete and relatable (MDPI, 2023). Despite growing evidence, such storytelling strategies remain underutilized in high school biology instruction across Texas.

A clear gap exists in teaching strategies that simultaneously enhance engagement, comprehension, and retention while adhering to curricular and assessment standards. Traditional lecture-based methods often fail to address these needs. Teachers may hesitate to adopt creative pedagogies due to time constraints or lack of guidance, and standard curricula provide limited space for personalized, narrative-driven approaches. This study addresses this gap by introducing a structured, story-driven approach to biology instruction.

The “Fun Character Storytelling as a Bio Learning Hack” approach utilizes characters — either fictional or anthropomorphized — to narrate biological concepts, transforming lessons into interactive stories. For example, cells can be imagined as characters in a kingdom; DNA as a treasure map; proteins as heroic agents; and mitochondria as energetic powerhouses. These characters interact, face challenges, and solve problems, making abstract biology concepts vivid, human-centered, and easier to comprehend.

Character storytelling as a pedagogical strategy is supported by educational research. Studies indicate that narrative-based learning fosters cognitive and emotional engagement, improves comprehension, and enhances retention of complex scientific ideas compared to traditional expository methods (The Learning Scientists, 2024). Story structures allow students to anchor understanding through cause-and-effect reasoning, visual imagery, and human-like narratives, thereby reducing cognitive load and improving learning outcomes.

In practical application, character storytelling activities may include “BioQuests,” where students follow narrative arcs involving cellular processes, DNA exploration, mutation challenges, or respiration pathways. Educators guide the narrative, while students actively visualize, discuss, role-play, or create storyboards. This interactive involvement promotes motivation, collaboration, and a dynamic learning environment that goes beyond rote memorization.

Embedding biology lessons into character-driven stories directly addresses the identified problems and gaps. It reignites student interest, supports diverse learning styles, alleviates teacher stress by providing structured creative strategies, and strengthens comprehension and retention. Additionally, it may improve standardized assessment performance without compromising scientific rigor, offering a holistic solution to engagement and learning challenges in Texas high schools.

In conclusion, the study of "Fun Character Storytelling as a Bio Learning Hack" investigates the potential of narrative-based character strategies to transform biology instruction in Tyler ISD. This approach suggests that biology education can evolve from a tedious, memorization-driven task into an engaging, interactive, and memorable journey. Implemented effectively, character storytelling may inspire lifelong curiosity and a deep appreciation for biological sciences.

**Review of Related Literature**

Biology instruction in many Texas high schools often faces challenges of student disengagement, particularly when lessons rely heavily on traditional lecture methods without interactive or visual elements (ERIC, 2021). Students are required to memorize facts and definitions, yet rarely experience meaningful connections to real-world phenomena, which can lead to a superficial understanding of the content. In Tyler ISD, many students report difficulty grasping complex biological concepts, such as cellular processes, genetics, and molecular biology, due to the abstract nature of the material and limited contextualization in teaching (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Standardized testing and accountability measures also present challenges for effective biology instruction. Teachers are often pressured to cover the required content quickly, leaving little time for in-depth exploration or active learning strategies (Education Week, 2021). This focus on content delivery over engagement has been identified as a major factor in the low motivation and poor retention rates among high school students studying biology. Research indicates that when students are not actively involved in the learning process, their ability to retain and apply scientific knowledge diminishes significantly (MDPI, 2023).

The reliance on textbooks and worksheets, while historically common, further exacerbates the issue. Students are rarely presented with opportunities to apply concepts in interactive or narrative-driven contexts, resulting in lessons that feel disconnected from their experiences (The Learning Scientists, 2024). Consequently, many students complete biology courses with fragmented understanding, often struggling to integrate knowledge across topics such as cell biology, genetics, and ecology. This gap in comprehension underscores the need for more engaging and student-centered instructional methods.

Teachers also face challenges related to differentiating instruction for diverse learners. High school classrooms typically include students with varying learning preferences, including

visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, as well as students with different levels of prior knowledge and academic preparedness (Tomlinson, 2014). Traditional approaches, which focus on rote memorization and standardized worksheets, fail to address these differences adequately, leaving some students behind. Without innovative strategies, students who struggle to connect abstract biological concepts to tangible experiences may disengage from learning altogether.

A growing body of research highlights the potential of narrative or story-based teaching as an effective tool to address these gaps. Storytelling in education has been shown to improve engagement, comprehension, and retention by contextualizing abstract concepts in meaningful scenarios (Haven, 2007). In the context of biology, narratives can transform cellular processes, molecular structures, and ecological interactions into relatable stories, enabling students to visualize and internalize complex ideas more effectively. Despite this evidence, the implementation of story-based strategies in Texas high schools remains limited due to concerns about curriculum pacing, assessment alignment, and teacher preparedness.

The integration of fun character storytelling presents a promising solution to these challenges. Character storytelling involves presenting biological concepts through narrative-driven scenarios featuring fictional or anthropomorphized characters, allowing students to experience abstract processes as part of an interactive story. For example, mitochondria can be personified as “powerhouse heroes,” and DNA strands as “treasure maps” that guide cellular activity. By framing biology content in this way, students are more likely to engage with lessons, develop emotional connections to material, and retain information longer (Willingham, 2009).

In addition to improving comprehension, character storytelling fosters higher-order thinking skills. As students follow narrative arcs, they analyze cause-and-effect relationships, predict outcomes, and solve problems within the context of the story. These activities mirror authentic scientific reasoning, supporting the development of critical thinking while maintaining engagement (Bruner, 1991). This approach also encourages collaboration and discussion, as students share interpretations, participate in role-playing activities, and create storyboards or other creative representations of biological processes.

Research further supports the effectiveness of story-based strategies for diverse learners. Studies indicate that narrative-driven instruction can accommodate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners simultaneously, providing multiple entry points to complex concepts (Fisher, 2013). In Tyler ISD classrooms, such strategies may be particularly beneficial, given the heterogeneous student population and varying levels of academic preparedness. By engaging multiple learning modalities, character storytelling can help bridge gaps in comprehension and participation, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

Moreover, character storytelling aligns with the cognitive principles of memory retention. According to cognitive psychology research, information embedded in a meaningful narrative is more easily encoded and retrieved from long-term memory compared to isolated facts (Schank &

Abelson, 1995). Applying this principle to biology instruction, students who encounter cellular or molecular processes as part of a cohesive story are more likely to remember sequences, functions, and interactions, ultimately improving performance in assessments and real-world applications.

The challenges of implementing innovative strategies in Texas and Tyler ISD are not limited to students. Teachers often report feeling underprepared to design and deliver story-based lessons due to time constraints, limited professional development opportunities, and concerns about meeting standardized curriculum goals (NSTA, 2020). Addressing these concerns requires structured guidance, accessible resources, and evidence-based frameworks that integrate storytelling without compromising curricular rigor. When properly supported, teachers can use character storytelling to enhance engagement, understanding, and retention while meeting district and state standards.

Effective implementation of fun character storytelling in biology also addresses the issue of student anxiety related to complex scientific topics. Many high school students experience cognitive overload when confronted with abstract concepts such as metabolic pathways or genetic inheritance patterns (Sweller, 2011). By presenting these concepts as part of a structured story with engaging characters, students can process information sequentially, reducing cognitive stress and enhancing understanding. For instance, depicting enzymes as "molecular workers" that complete tasks in a cellular city helps students visualize otherwise abstract biochemical processes, making learning both manageable and enjoyable.

Furthermore, character storytelling promotes intrinsic motivation by connecting learning with emotional and imaginative engagement. Research in educational psychology emphasizes that motivation significantly influences students' attention, effort, and persistence in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When biology lessons are transformed into interactive stories, students are not merely passive recipients of information; they become active participants in unfolding narratives. This participatory element increases curiosity and encourages students to explore concepts beyond the immediate lesson, fostering a deeper, self-driven understanding of biology.

Another significant advantage of narrative-driven biology instruction lies in its ability to bridge cultural and contextual gaps. Tyler ISD, like many diverse districts in Texas, encompasses students from varied cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Traditional teaching strategies often fail to resonate with all learners equally. Incorporating characters and storytelling allows educators to embed culturally relevant examples and analogies, making content more relatable. For example, analogies based on local ecosystems or familiar community scenarios can enhance comprehension and create meaningful learning experiences.

Collaboration and peer learning are also strengthened through character storytelling activities. Students are frequently encouraged to discuss story developments, predict outcomes,

or role-play as characters to demonstrate understanding. These collaborative exercises not only reinforce content knowledge but also develop communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, which are essential components of 21st-century competencies (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). Through such strategies, character storytelling serves as a holistic instructional method that addresses cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning.

In addition to classroom engagement, narrative-based strategies can support formative assessment practices. Educators can evaluate student comprehension through creative outputs such as storyboards, comic strips, or reflective narratives. These assessments provide insights into students' conceptual understanding while maintaining the motivational benefits of storytelling (Black & Wiliam, 2009). In Tyler ISD classrooms, such formative approaches may complement standardized testing requirements by providing alternative measures of learning without sacrificing rigor.

Technological integration further amplifies the impact of character storytelling in biology. Digital tools such as interactive simulations, animated stories, and gamified learning platforms can transform character narratives into dynamic educational experiences (Mayer, 2009). Students can engage with virtual characters, manipulate biological systems, or participate in simulated "missions," reinforcing concepts in memorable ways. By leveraging technology, educators can extend the benefits of narrative-driven instruction while catering to the digital literacy skills of contemporary learners.

Professional development for teachers is a critical component of successful implementation. Studies indicate that teachers who receive training in narrative pedagogy demonstrate greater confidence and effectiveness in integrating storytelling into science curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Providing Tyler ISD educators with workshops, exemplar lesson plans, and collaborative planning sessions ensures that character storytelling strategies are applied consistently and effectively, mitigating concerns about time constraints and curriculum alignment.

Moreover, narrative-based teaching encourages critical thinking and scientific reasoning by situating biological concepts within cause-and-effect frameworks. Students analyzing character-driven scenarios must make predictions, identify relationships, and evaluate outcomes, mirroring authentic scientific inquiry (Bruner, 1991). This active engagement contrasts with passive memorization, fostering higher-order thinking skills necessary for success in advanced coursework and STEM careers.

Empirical research supports the efficacy of storytelling in science education across multiple contexts. For instance, studies demonstrate that students exposed to story-based instruction exhibit higher retention of biological concepts and improved ability to apply knowledge to novel problems (Haven, 2007; Willingham, 2009). Such findings suggest that

integrating fun character storytelling in biology lessons is not merely a motivational tool but a research-backed pedagogical strategy capable of enhancing learning outcomes.

Finally, character storytelling aligns with principles of differentiated instruction, providing multiple access points to learning for diverse students. By integrating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements into stories, educators can accommodate a wide range of learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2014). In heterogeneous classrooms like those in Tyler ISD, this approach can reduce achievement gaps and ensure that all students, regardless of prior knowledge or learning style, can engage meaningfully with biology content.

Theoretical models like Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014) emphasize that SEL skills develop through observing, contextual support, and accessible, multimodal learning experiences.

Research in special education shows that SEL programs can greatly improve students' emotional awareness, behavioral regulation, and relationships with peers and adults (Gresham et al., 2001; Frankel et al., 2010; Laugeson et al., 2012). Despite this, studies differ widely in their focus, strategies for implementation, target groups, and outcomes. These differences make it difficult for educators and policymakers to determine the most effective ways to support SEL development among learners with disabilities.

This integrative review synthesizes existing research to identify consistent themes, effective practices, and common challenges across SEL interventions for students in special education settings.

**Literature Review**

A growing body of evidence shows SEL's positive effects on emotional regulation, social skills, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). For students with ADHD, structured SEL programs that focus on behavioral regulation and peer interaction have proven effective in lowering impulsivity and increasing social engagement (Antshel & Remer, 2003; Gardner & Gerdes, 2015). Autistic students often benefit from predictable routines, clear instruction, visual supports, and opportunities to practice social skills in a structured and supportive environment (Golan & Baron-Cohen, 2006; Hopkins et al., 2011).

Peer-mediated SEL programs have been widely used and validated, especially for adolescents. The PEERS model, for instance, has demonstrated notable improvements in conversational skills, perspective-taking, and friendship building (Laugeson et al., 2012; Gantman et al., 2012). Other relationally focused interventions highlight the central role of adult responsiveness, co-regulation, and guided practice in strengthening SEL competencies (Koegel et al., 1999; Gulsrud et al., 2010).

Digital SEL tools—including virtual reality platforms, interactive avatars, and computer-

based social simulations—have also become more prominent. These methods support learners who benefit from predictable, repeatable environments, reduced social anxiety, and visually mediated instruction (Ke & Im, 2013; Ramdoss et al., 2012). While promising, studies highlight the importance of ensuring that skills learned in digital environments transfer to real-world social settings (Odom et al., 2015).

## II. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative experimental pre-test–post-test control group design to examine the effectiveness of fun character storytelling as a learning hack in Grade 9 Biology, specifically for Unit 10: Ecology aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Two intact class sections from Tyler High School participated, with 25 students in the experimental group receiving narrative-driven instruction through role-playing, storyboards, interactive storytelling, visualization of cellular and molecular processes, and guided discussions, while 25 students in the control group received traditional teacher-centered instruction via lectures, textbook readings, and direct questioning. Both groups were taught the same content over a three-week period and completed teacher-made pre-tests and post-tests covering ecosystems, energy flow, food chains and webs, ecological succession, and biotic and abiotic factors. The study aimed to compare pre- and post-test results to determine the effectiveness of character storytelling in enhancing student engagement, understanding, and retention in Biology.

### Participants or Subjects

The participants were 50 Grade 9 students from Tyler High School, Texas, during the 2024–2025 school year, with 25 students in the experimental group (A2) and 25 in the control group (A3). The experimental group received fun character storytelling instruction, emphasizing interactive engagement through narrative-driven characters representing biological processes, including role-playing, storyboards, collaborative discussions, and linking character "adventures" to scientific concepts. The control group received traditional teacher-centered instruction for Unit 10: Ecology, including lectures, textbook readings, and teacher-led questioning, without storytelling strategies. Convenience sampling was used as both sections were pre-assigned, and the same teacher delivered instruction to both groups to minimize bias. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardians, and ethical standards were followed to ensure privacy, safety, and voluntary participation.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using teacher-made pre-tests and post-tests aligned with TEKS standards for Grade 9 Ecology to assess students' conceptual understanding of topics such as energy flow, ecological relationships, human impact, ecological succession, and sustainability. The pre-test established baseline knowledge prior to a three-week instructional period, during which the experimental group received fun character storytelling instruction and the control group continued with traditional lecture-based teaching. Following the intervention, both groups

completed a post-test of similar structure and difficulty to measure learning gains. Additionally, the experimental group completed reflections, story summaries, and exit slips to provide qualitative insights into engagement and understanding. All data were kept confidential and used exclusively for research purposes.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data for this study were collected using teacher-made pre-tests and post-tests designed to assess students' understanding of Unit 10: Ecology, aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Grade 9 Biology. The pre-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups to establish baseline knowledge. The experimental group then received fun character storytelling instruction, involving role-playing, storyboards, guided discussions, and visualization of cellular and molecular processes over a three-week period, while the control group received traditional teacher-centered instruction. After the intervention, both groups completed a post-test with comparable structure and difficulty to measure learning gains. To supplement quantitative data, the experimental group completed reflections, story summaries, and exit slips to capture levels of engagement, comprehension, and student perspectives on the storytelling approach. All data were collected under standardized classroom conditions, kept confidential, and used solely for research purposes.

**Instruments Used**

The primary instrument for this study was a teacher-made achievement test administered as both the pre-test and post-test. The test comprised 30 multiple-choice items aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Unit 10: Ecology, covering topics such as food chains, energy pyramids, ecological succession, biotic and abiotic factors, and environmental impact. A Table of Specifications guided the development of the test to ensure comprehensive content coverage and an appropriate range of cognitive levels, from recall to higher-order thinking. Content validity was established through review by peer science educators, with revisions made based on their feedback. Each student was given 40 minutes to complete the assessment under standardized classroom conditions to maintain consistency and reliability.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data from the pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using quantitative statistical methods to evaluate the impact of fun character storytelling. The analysis included calculating mean scores for both groups and using descriptive statistics, such as standard deviation and range, to observe performance trends. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to assess significant gains within each group, while independent samples t-tests were used to compare post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. The effect size of the intervention was measured using Cohen's d. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests, with non-parametric alternatives, such as the Mann-Whitney U test, applied when assumptions were violated. All analyses and visual representations of results

were conducted using SPSS software.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study strictly adhered to ethical research protocols. All participants and guardians provided informed consent prior to participation. The purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and participants' rights—including the right to withdraw—were clearly communicated. Student identities were protected using coded identifiers, and all data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. No identifying information was included in reports or publications. The study followed principles of confidentiality, respect, and academic integrity throughout the research process.

## III. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the study, which were gathered, tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted. It includes a comparison of the pre-test and post-test results of both the control and experimental groups to assess the effectiveness of fun character storytelling as a learning hack in teaching Biology. The instructional intervention was implemented using narrative-driven, character-based storytelling strategies with a total of 50 Grade 9 students from Tyler High School (25 students in each group).

1. Comparison of the Pre-Test Results of the Control and Experimental Group

**Table 1**
**Pre-Test Results of the Control and Experimental Groups**

| Treatment | N | Mean | Tstat | P | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Control** | 25 | 14.80 | 0.18 | 0.86 | Fail to reject the null |
| **Experimental** | 25 | 14.65 | | | |

Table 1 shows that the control group had a mean pre-test score of 14.80 while the experimental group had 14.65. The computed t-value (0.18) and p-value (0.86) indicate no significant difference between the two groups before the intervention, confirming comparable baseline knowledge in Biology.

2. Comparison of the Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of the Control Group

**Table 2**
**Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of the Control Group**

| Control | N | Mean | Tstat | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-Test** | 25 | 14.80 | 10.21 | Significant Improvement |
| **Post-Test** | | 26.90 | | |

As shown in Table 2, the control group's mean score increased from 14.80 to 26.90 after the intervention. The computed t-value of 10.21 signifies a statistically significant gain, indicating that traditional teaching methods led to academic improvement, though likely limited in addressing varied student needs.

3. Comparison of the Pre-Test and Post-Test Results of the Experimental Group

**Table 3**
**Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of the Control Group**

| Experimental | N | Mean | Tstat | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-Test** | 25 | 14.80 | 15.78 | Significant Improvement |
| **Post-Test** | | 32.40 | | |

Table 3 reveals a substantial improvement in the experimental group's scores—from 14.65 (pre-test) to 32.40 (post-test). The t-statistic (15.78) indicates highly significant learning gains. This confirms the positive effect of fun character storytelling on student achievement in Biology.

4. Comparison of the Post-Test Results of the Control and Experimental Group

**Table 4**
**Post-Test Results of the Control and Experimental Groups**

| Treatment | N | Mean | Tstat | P | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Control** | 25 | 26.90 | 3.12 | 0.004 | Reject the null hypothesis |
| **Experimental** | 25 | 32.40 | | | |

Table 4 shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test, with a 5.5-point difference. The t-value (3.12) and p-value (0.004) indicate a statistically significant difference, confirming the effectiveness of fun character storytelling in enhancing student learning outcomes in Biology.

## IV. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were made:

1. Differentiated instruction through classroom station activities significantly improves student academic performance in Biology.
2. The experimental group who experienced student-centered, station-based learning aligned with the Seven Steps model performed better than those who underwent traditional instruction.
3. Station activities promote a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environment, especially for diverse learners.

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