A LABOVIAN NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF TED TALKS ON PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL SPEAKING AND PRESENTATION SKILLS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

This study applied Labov's (1972) six narrative elements – abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda – to analyze the discourse structure of four TED Talks on personal development. Using qualitative content analysis, 122 discourse units (DUs) from official English transcripts were deductively coded, with excellent inter-rater reliability (Cohen's **K** = .91). Evaluation was the most frequent narrative element (42.6%), followed by orientation (18.0%), complication (13.1%), resolution (11.5%), coda (10.7%), abstract (4.1%), and non-narrative units (3.3%). The findings indicate that evaluation is the defining feature of TED Talk discourse, enabling speakers to connect personal experiences with broader audience understanding while enhancing persuasion and credibility. Based on these findings, the study proposes a discourse-based instructional framework for university-level EFL speaking and presentation courses. By extending Labov's model to TED Talks, the study contributes an evidence-based framework for discourse-level instruction and assessment beyond linguistic accuracy.

Keywords: Labov's narrative framework, TED Talks, EFL speaking, presentation skills, discourse analysis

Introduction

The development of speaking and presentation skills has been a challenge for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the university level. Several undergraduate EFL classes rely on controlled speaking assignments that minimize opportunities for students to express natural discourse (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This issue mostly occurs in Thai EFL students with high levels of speaking anxiety and limited familiarity with academic discourse (Daflizar, 2024; Woodrow, 2006; Kalra & Siribud, 2020; Liu, 2021). The adoption of TED as an academic language learning tool is increasing gradually.

TED Talks is an instruction form of oral discourse offering public accessibility, convenient format, simple registration, and personal stories with emotional impacts. This channel introduces effective public communication models with a combination between informative content and powerful narration.

Previous studies on TED Talks have primarily focused on linguistics or motivation purposes, with limited attention to personal development content and instructional discourse structures. To fill this gap, this study adopted Labov's (1972) oral communication model which has been widely applied to academic lectures (Swales, 1990), political speeches (Lewis, 1987), and digital public discourse (Rychkova, 2022). The model provided a systematic analytical framework through six practical elements: abstract (AB), orientation (OR), complications (CO), evaluation (EV), resolution (RE), and coda (CA).

The investigation on TED Talks mostly concentrated on linguistics or motivation purposes, rather than personal development or instruction sequences. Therefore, Labov's (1972) oral communication model, generally found in academic lectures (Swales, 1990), political speeches (Lewis, 1987), and digital public discourse (Rychkova, 2022), was adopted for this research to generate a concrete analytical framework through six practical elements: abstract (AB), orientation (OR), complications (CO), evaluation (EV), resolution (RE), and coda (CA). Accordingly, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How are Labov's six narrative elements realized in four TED Talks on personal development?

2. How do these narrative elements perform persuasive functions in each talk?

3. What are the implications of these narrative patterns for university-level EFL speaking and presentation instruction?

Research objectives

This study aims to: 1) identify Labov's six narrative elements in four TED Talks on personal development; 2) analyze the persuasive functions of these elements; and 3) propose implications for university-level EFL speaking and presentation instruction.

Literature Review

1. Narrative Analysis and Labov's Model

Storytelling analysis has been a major guideline in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics fields (Bruner, 1990). Regarding Labov's (1972) model which originated in Labov and Waletzky (1967), a complete story must consist of functional units arranged to

a maximum of six units. In the 6 units, evaluation is the most structurally complex part divided into external and embedded evaluation. External evaluation focuses on the significance of storytelling, whereas embedded evaluation emphasizes storytelling presentation that transfers significance by itself (Labov, 1972).

2. TED Talks as Authentic Materials for EFL Instruction

Using authentic materials in language teaching is an essential communicative method (Zvarych et al., 2024; Gilmore, 2007). TED Talks are highly suitable for EFL instruction (Fitria, 2022) because of their characteristics of academic descriptive discourse with personal narrative techniques. These media effectively enhance listening skill (Al-Jarf, 2021), glossaries (Webb & Nation, 2017), critical thinking (Al-Siyabi & Al-Aliyani, 2024), and presentation skills (Salem, 2019; Nursafira, 2020; Tran & Nguyen, 2024; Patty, 2024; Alghmadi, 2024; Salih & Omar, 2024). An investigation on digital narrative discourse, recently, has examined the strategies utilized in online storytelling, including TED Talk transcripts, for viewpoint alignment and perspective taking which differ from those in face-to-face narrative contexts (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Recent work has also proposed a communicative model of how narratives in TED Talks work, emphasizing characteristics of the writing type, the speaker's position, and audience engagement (Nadeem, 2021).

3. EFL Speaking and Presentation Skills at the University Level

English speaking proficiency in EFL contexts requires linguistic accuracy, discourse coherence, pragmatic appropriateness, and interactions (Fulcher, 2014; Nation & Newton, 2009). According to the CEFR speaking descriptors (B2–C1), university-level learners are expected to deliver presentation coherence, evidence-based disagreements, and effective participation (Hyland, 2006). However, EFL learners often experience communicative anxiety due to limited academic language proficiency and insufficient discourse-level feedback (Woodrow, 2006).

The knowledge from these approaches is valuable, but not sufficient. This study, then, proposed an integration of three approaches as a new pedagogical dimension to develop audience-oriented English presentations by emphasizing on persuasive tools. As a results, the Labov's (1972) systematic element-level model is used to analyze TED Talks, persuasive digital public discourse, in EFL instructional context. This combined method can address the gap and provide a theoretical rationale for research framework.

Research Framework

Labov's model was selected because its systematic and replicable coding scheme has proven effective across various discourse genres, including academic lectures

(Swales, 1990), political speeches (Lewis, 1987), and digital public communication (Rychkova, 2022). Labov's model consisted of six sequential narrative elements: Abstract (AB) introduced the topic, Orientation (OR) provided contextual information (e.g., character, time, place, and storyline), Complication (CO) presented the central conflict, Evaluation (EV) expressed narrators' opinion on the implications of the story, Resolution (RE) addressed the solution of the problem, and Coda (CA) returned the audience to the present. Each element functions as a discourse unit (DU) – a clause or sequence of clauses with coherent meaning that served a specific purpose in the story, and as a persuasive chain to elaborate stories.

Abstract (AB) captured audience attention, Orientation (OR) established context and speaker credibility, Complication (CO) created emotional and intellectual engagement, Evaluation (EV) highlighted the speaker's perspective, Resolution (RE) presented outcomes, and Coda (CA) reinforced key insights. Applying this structured sequence in EFL speaking and presentation instruction may help learners understand the communicative and persuasive functions of each element, enabling them to develop coherent and audience-oriented presentations beyond the sentence level (see Figure 1).

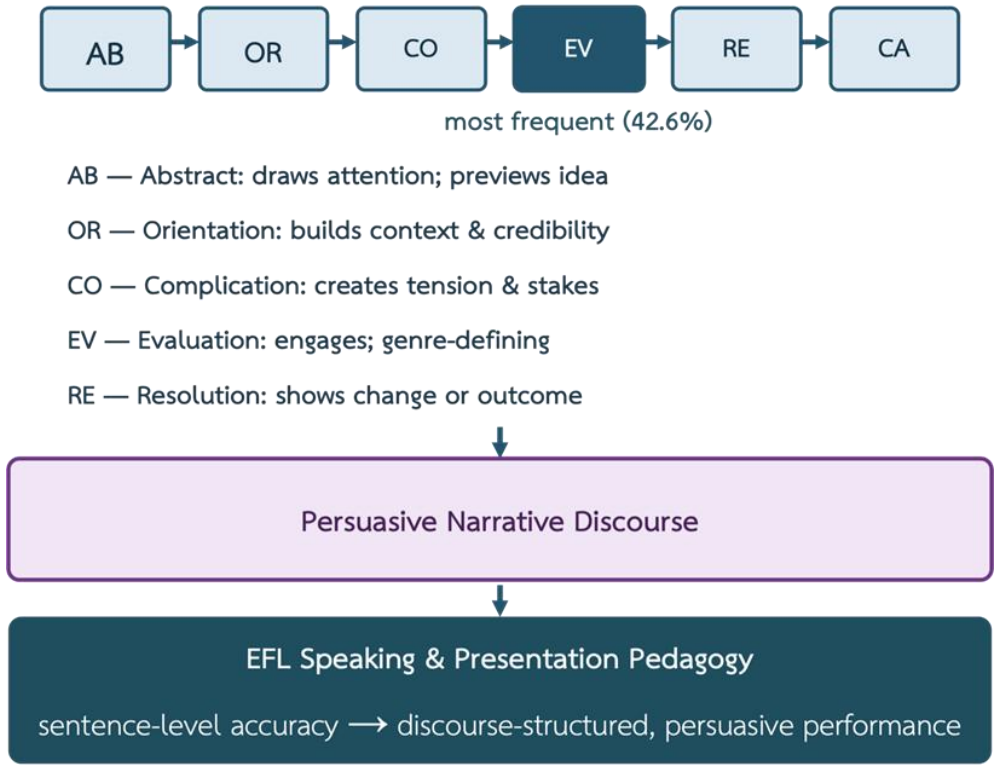


Figure 1 A Labovian Persuasive-Chain Model for Analysing TED Talk Narratives
Labov's Six Narrative Elements as a Persuasive Chain
(Created by the authors, 2026)

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using descriptive and interpretive analysis within a deductive coding framework (Krippendorff, 2004). The data consisted of publicly available TED Talk transcripts. Four TED Talks were purposively selected based on five criteria: (1) focus on personal development, mental flexibility, or transformative experiences; (2) sufficient content for analysis; (3) availability of official English transcripts on TED.com; (4) publication between 2018 and 2021; and (5) diversity in speakers' gender, cultural background, and profession.

Table 1 Overview of TED Talks Selected as the Research Corpus

Talk Title	Speaker	Year	Theme
What you discover when you really listen	Hrishikesh Hirway	2021	Listening & Connection
3 questions to build resilience—and change the world	Sister True Dedication	2021	Mindfulness & Resilience
We don't 'move on' from grief, we move forward with it	Nora McInerny	2018	Grief & Personal Development
How to stop languishing and start finding flow	Adam Grant	2021	Well-being & Motivation

Each official transcript was segmented into discourse units (DUs) and coded as one of Labov's six narrative elements (AB, OR, CO, EV, RE, or CA) or as Non-Narrative (NN) for content extending beyond the narrative plot. The primary researcher coded all 122 DUs following an initial calibration phase. To establish inter-rater reliability, a second researcher independently coded 30% of the corpus (n = 37 DUs), proportionally sampled from each talk, and agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960). Any coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Results

1. Inter-rater Reliability

Independent coding by Coder 2 yielded **K** = .91, indicating excellent inter-rater agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977) and exceeding the **K** ≥ .80 threshold widely cited in applied linguistics research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Two discrepancies were identified (Grant DU06: OR vs. EV; Grant DU15: OR vs. CO) and resolved through consensus. Both involved borderline cases where orientation and evaluative functions co-occurred, reflecting the structural complexity of Labovian evaluation in everyday discourse.

2. Overall Distribution of Narrative Elements

Evaluation was the most frequently occurring element (EV, n = 52, 42.6%), followed by orientation (OR, n = 22, 18.0%), complication (CO, n = 16, 13.1%), resolution (RE, n = 14, 11.5%), coda (CA, n = 13, 10.7%), abstract (AB, n = 5, 4.1%), and informative units (NN, n = 4, 3.3%), respectively. Table 2 presents the distribution of narrative elements across the four TED Talks.

Table 2 Frequency and Percentage of Labov's Narrative Elements Across Four TED Talks

(N = 122 DUs)

Narrative Element	Hirway	Sr. True	McInerny	Grant	Total	%
Abstract (AB)	1	2	1	1	5	4.1%
Orientation (OR)	9	3	5	5	22	18.0%
Complication (CO)	4	3	6	3	16	13.1%
Evaluation (EV)	11	11	16	14	52	42.6%
Resolution (RE)	3	3	3	5	14	11.5%
Coda (CA)	3	3	3	4	13	10.7%
Informative (NN)	0	0	0	4	4	3.3%
Total DUs	**31**	**25**	**34**	**36**	**126**	**100%**

3. Analysis by Narrative Element

3.1 Abstract (AB): n = 5, 4.1%

Abstract appeared in all four talks as an audience engagement device previewing a key concept. Sister True Dedication's two abstract DUs open with "*Why is it so hard to change the direction of our civilization?*" (Sister True Dedication, 2021, 0:10) before providing the thesis "*What's missing is insight*." (Sister True Dedication, 2021, 0:33) Grant's abstract, (Grant, 2021, 1:54) "*Strangely enough, what rescued me from that feeling was playing Mario Kart*", appeared mid-talk after the complication, supporting Labov's (1972) view that the abstract may occur throughout a narrative rather than only at its beginning.

3.2 Orientation (OR): n = 22, 18.0%

Hirway's talk contained the highest proportion of Orientation (n = 9, 29.0%), with nine discourse units establishing his credibility through personal experiences, including his relationship with music, immigrant family background, and the creation of the *Song Exploder* podcast, reflecting Cortazzi's (1993) concept of experience-based

credibility. In contrast, Sister True Dedication had the fewest Orientation units (n = 3), as her credibility derived primarily from institutional authority rather than personal narrative.

3.3 Complication (CO): n = 16, 13.1%

In McInerny's talk, the most outstanding element was complication (n = 6). The loss that she faced within six weeks caused huge emotional impacts. Her precise memory of the dates ("*October 3*...", "*October 8*...", "*November 25*...") (McInerny, 2018, 0:13) increased these impacts through accumulation. In Grant's talk, complications positioned viewers as sharers of grief prior to suggestions of conceptual relief. His complications included online feed scrolling and nonstop TV watching despite his behavioral science expertise.

3.4 Evaluation (EV): n = 52, 42.6%

Evaluation was the most prominent narrative element in all four talks, supporting Labov's (1972) view that evaluation is pervasive and structurally complex. McInerny used the highest number of evaluation units (n = 16), employing dark humor and universal comparisons, as in: *"Grief is kind of one of those things, like falling in love or having a baby or watching The Wire on HBO, where you don't get it until you get it"* (McInerny, 2018, 13:07). This exemplified external evaluation which the speaker steps outside the narrative to emphasize its significance. Grant (2021) integrated personal experiences with empirical evidence, demonstrating how experiential and academic credibility can reinforce persuasion. In addition, Sister True's frequent evaluations (n = 11) drew on Zen Buddhist principles, showing that authoritative evaluation in TED Talks can derive from diverse epistemological sources.

3.5 Resolution (RE): n = 14, 11.5%

Resolution in all four talks revealed internal transformation rather than the resolution of external conflict, consistent with the personal development genre. Hirway concluded with a transformative encounter with Yo-Yo Ma: *"He listened to everything I said, and then he played those notes"* (Hirway, 2021, 9:08) which was a moment that encapsulated his central message. Similarly, McInerny stated, (McInerny, 2018, 6:38) *"I've not moved on from Aaron, I've moved forward with him,"* highlighting personal growth through grief. Grant's resolution reflected renewed well-being by reconnecting with his family through playing *Mario Kart*.

3.6 Coda (CA): n = 13, 10.7%

Coda was used in all four talks as a brief closing device that reinforced the central message. McInerny's coda culminated in the talk's title: *"They're going to move forward. But that doesn't mean that they've moved on,"* (McInerny, 2018, 14.35) showing close alignment between linguistic form and semantic precision. Similarly,

Grant's four coda discourse units reframed the central issue into a memorable takeaway: (Grant, 2021, 15:28) *"When someone asks, 'How are you?' it's OK to say, 'Honestly, I'm languishing,'"* transforming a personal narrative into a broadly applicable life principle.

4. Cross-Talk Comparison

Four cross-talk patterns emerged. First, Evaluation was consistently the most prominent element, ranging from 35.5% in Hirway's talk to 47.1% in McInerny's, confirming its central role in TED Talks. Second, Hirway's talk contained the highest proportion of Orientation (29.0%), compared with 12.0–14.7% in the others, emphasizing the value of an extended biographical framework. Third, Non-Narrative (NN) units appeared only in Grant's talk (n = 4), reflecting the integration of empirical evidence with personal storytelling. Finally, the higher coda-to-resolution ratios in McInerny's and Grant's talks suggested that personal development narratives favored meaningful, reflective endings over simple problem resolution.

Discussion

1. Evaluation as the Genre-Defining Element

In RQ1 and RQ2, the outstanding evaluation (42.6%) in TED Talks discourse serves as deep structural element and persuasive drive, supporting Rychkova's (2022) analysis of heroic storytelling with the focus on evaluation frequency. Likewise, Swales' (1990) persuasive drive implies that TED Talks forms a hybrid pattern, which affection and epistemology are mediated through continuous evaluative work.

2. Orientation, Credibility, and the Academic Hybrid Mode

Regarding RQ2, variations in narrative elements reflected different credibility strategies. Hirway's extended Orientation shaped expertise through personal experience, whereas Sister True's brief orientation relied on institutional authority. These findings suggest that the length and structure of orientation are strategic rhetorical choices. In contrast, Grant's integration of Non-Narrative (NN) units with personal storytelling represented a hybrid pattern in which empirical evidence and lived experience reinforced one another. In academic contexts, this approach illustrates how evidence-based arguments can be integrated into personal narratives without compromising intellectual credibility

3. Labov, TED Talks, and EFL Pedagogy: A New Instructional Dimension

Addressing RQ3, the findings reveal that Labov's model, particularly its emphasis on evaluative density, provides valid and practical criteria for oral presentation feedback. A six-week instructional framework can systematically develop learners' understanding of each narrative element while strengthening persuasive communication skills. From a

cross-cultural perspective, narrative structure, evaluation, and credibility-building strategies vary across cultures and first-language communities (De Fina, 2021; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). Therefore, Thai EFL learners, whose narrative traditions often emphasize indirect evaluation, hierarchical credibility, and collectivist values, may interpret the more individualistic and evaluation-rich discourse of Western TED Talks differently. Explicit consciousness-raising activities (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985) can help learners recognize these differences and apply discourse-level strategies more effectively in cross-cultural communication.

New Knowledge from the Research

Discourse evaluation emerged as a genre-defining feature of TED Talks rather than a coincidental stylistic pattern. Credibility was shaped by the distribution of narrative elements, while narrative construction reflected speakers' social practices (De Fina, 2021) and personal backgrounds. The findings also support the use of Labov's model as an effective framework for developing and assessing EFL speaking and presentation skills (Salem, 2019; Nursafira, 2020; Tran & Nguyen, 2024; Karimah et al., 2022; John & Yunus, 2021). In particular, the high proportion of Evaluation (42.6%) informed the development of an element-based assessment rubric that extends beyond linguistic accuracy to include persuasion, credibility, contextualization, and meaningful closure, providing a systematic framework for discourse-level feedback in EFL presentation contexts (see Figure 2).

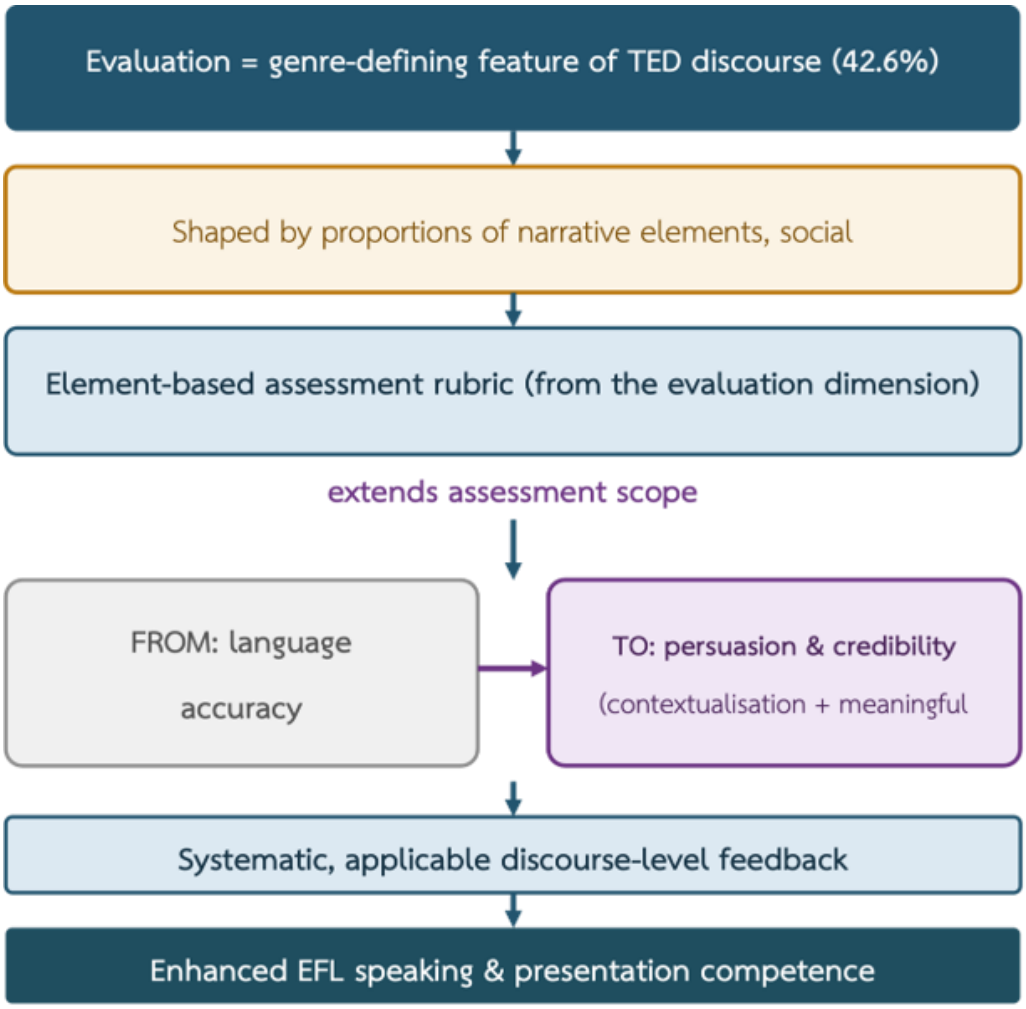


Figure 2 A Model of New Knowledge — From Evaluative Density to Discourse-Level Feedback (Created by the authors, 2026)

Conclusions

Analysis of the four TED Talks identified Evaluation as the dominant narrative element, accounting for 42.6% of all discourse units (DUs), highlighting its central role in connecting personal experiences with broader audience understanding. The remaining elements including Orientation, Complication, Resolution, and Coda served distinct persuasive functions depending on speakers' identities, themes, and narrative styles. These findings suggest that TED Talks provide an effective model for developing EFL presentation skills through personal storytelling, particularly in expressing viewpoints and engaging audiences during discussions. The proposed six-week instructional framework offers practical guidelines for teaching presentation skills. Besides, the evaluation framework provides concrete criteria for feedback that addresses persuasive effectiveness beyond linguistic forms.

Table 3 The Six-Week Respective Instruction of Presentation, Using TED Talks

Week	Focus	Key Activity	Model Talk
1	Narrative structure overview	Identify AB, OR, CO, EV, RE, and CA in excerpts	McInerny (2018)
2	Abstract & Orientation	Analyze how speakers open talks and build credibility	Hirway (2021)
3	Complications & Resolution	Map personal stories to CO–RE arc; draft own arc	McInerny (2018)
4	Evaluation strategies	Identify evaluative devices; practice significance markers	Grant (2021)
5	Coda design	Craft memorable codas; peer feedback on closings	Sister True Dedication (2021)
6	Integrated presentation	Deliver 5-min personal development talk using full structure	All four talks

This study has three limitations. First, the findings may not be generalizable to all TED Talks or personal development discourse because only four talks were analyzed. Second, the analysis focused on linguistic and narrative structures, excluding paralinguistic features such as intonation, speech rhythm, vocal delivery, and visual aids. Third, TED Talks are delivered by native English speakers in Western contexts, so the findings may have limited applicability in non-native settings, including Thailand.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could examine narrative elements across different TED Talk themes and cultural contexts to better understand variations in evaluative patterns. In addition, experimental studies using pre- and post-test designs are recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of narrative-structure instruction in improving EFL learners' presentation skills and to provide empirical support for the proposed framework.

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