



The Effectiveness of Using Short Stories in Learning English Vocabulary among Libyan EFL Learners at the College of Education –Zawia University

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of using short stories as an instructional strategy to enhance English vocabulary acquisition among EFL(English as a Foreign Language) learners in the College of Education in Libya. Vocabulary knowledge is foundational to language proficiency, yet many Libyan students struggle with retaining and using English vocabulary effectively. The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data from pre- and post-vocabulary tests with qualitative insights from student interviews and teacher reflections. Participants included 60 first- year English major students, divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group received vocabulary instruction through selected short stories, while the control group learned vocabulary via traditional methods (word lists and drills). Results showed that the experimental group demonstrated statistically significant improvement in vocabulary retention, usage accuracy, and learner motivation compared to the control group. Qualitative data also revealed that short stories increased students' engagement, contextual understanding of words, and confidence in using new vocabulary. The study concludes that short stories are an effective, learner- centered tool for vocabulary development in Libyan higher education and recommends their integration into the English language curriculum.

الملخص باللغة العربية:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على فاعلية استخدام القصص القصيرة في تنمية مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب كلية التربية في ليبيا. تُعد المفردات اللغوية عنصرًا أساسيًا في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية، إلا أن العديد من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية يواجهون صعوبات في اكتساب المفردات والاحتفاظ بها عند الاعتماد على الطرق التقليدية التي تركز على الحفظ والتلقين. وانطلاقاً من ذلك، سعت هذه الدراسة إلى مقارنة فاعلية تدريس المفردات باستخدام القصص القصيرة مع الطريقة التقليدية في التعليم. اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج شبه التجريبي، حيث تم اختيار عينة مكونة من (60) طالباً من طلاب السنة الأولى بقسم اللغة

الإنجليزية، وتم تقسيمهم إلى مجموعتين: مجموعة تجريبية درست المفردات من خلال القصص القصيرة، ومجموعة ضابطة درست بالطريقة التقليدية. ولجمع البيانات، تم استخدام اختبار قبلي وبعدي لقياس مستوى المفردات لدى الطلاب، بالإضافة إلى استبانة لمعرفة آراء الطلاب حول استخدام القصص القصيرة في تعلم المفردات. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية لصالح المجموعة التجريبية في الاختبار البعدي، مما يدل على أن استخدام القصص القصيرة كان أكثر فاعلية في تحسين تعلم المفردات مقارنة بالطريقة التقليدية. كما أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب كانت لديهم اتجاهات إيجابية نحو تعلم المفردات من خلال القصص القصيرة، حيث ساهمت في زيادة دافعتهم واهتمامهم بتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. وتوصي الدراسة بضرورة توظيف القصص القصيرة في تدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية في كليات التربية لما لها من أثر إيجابي في تحسين مستوى الطلاب اللغوي.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Vocabulary constitutes one of the core components of language learning and plays a central role in facilitating communication, reading comprehension, and language production. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary knowledge is often cited as a major predictor of language proficiency. However, many EFL learners face challenges in acquiring and retaining new vocabulary, particularly when classroom instruction centers on isolated word lists and rote memorization. In Libya, English language education at the college level has traditionally relied on teacher-centered approaches, which may limit students' active engagement and deep understanding of lexical items.

1.2. Rationale

Recent educational trends emphasize contextualized and communicative teaching methods that encourage learners to interact with language meaningfully. Among these methods, the use of short stories has gained attention as a promising instructional tool. Short stories provide rich, authentic contexts in which vocabulary naturally occurs, allowing learners to infer meaning, observe word usage in real contexts, and remember new vocabulary more effectively compared to decontextualized methods. Despite global research supporting storytelling in language teaching, there is limited empirical evidence on its specific effects in the Libyan EFL context, particularly at the college level.

1.3. Research Problem

Libyan EFL students often demonstrate limited vocabulary knowledge, which negatively impacts their ability to understand and use English effectively. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods, which emphasize memorization without meaningful context, may contribute to weak long-term retention and low learner motivation. Therefore, it is essential to explore alternative strategies that support vocabulary acquisition and improve learners' engagement and linguistic competence.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate whether teaching English vocabulary through short stories enhances learners' vocabulary acquisition more effectively than traditional methods in the College of Education in Libya. Specifically, it examines the impact of short story instruction on vocabulary retention, usage accuracy, and student engagement.

1.5. Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

Q1-To what extent does teaching vocabulary through short stories improve students' vocabulary retention?

Q2-How does vocabulary learning through short stories affect students' ability to use words accurately in sentences?

Q3-What are students' perceptions of learning vocabulary through short stories compared to traditional methods?

1.6. Significance of the Study

Findings from this research will contribute to the understanding of effective vocabulary teaching strategies in Libyan higher education. The study also offers practical implications for curriculum designers, English language instructors, and educational policymakers seeking to enhance the quality of English instruction and learner outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Vocabulary Learning in EFL Contexts

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second and foreign language learning. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in developing learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Without adequate vocabulary, learners often struggle to comprehend texts or express ideas effectively, even if they have a good grasp of grammatical rules. In EFL contexts such as Libya, students are typically exposed to English mainly in classroom settings, which makes vocabulary instruction even more essential.

Several researchers emphasize that traditional vocabulary teaching methods—such as memorization of word lists and dictionary definitions—are often insufficient and demotivating for learners (Schmitt, 2008). These methods may lead to short-term retention but fail to promote deep understanding or long-term vocabulary acquisition. As a result, modern language teaching approaches encourage contextualized and meaningful exposure to vocabulary.

2.2Teaching Vocabulary through Context

Context-based vocabulary instruction has been proven to be more effective than isolated word teaching. Read (2004) argues that learning words in context helps learners understand not only meanings but also usage, collocations, and grammatical patterns. When vocabulary is presented

within meaningful texts, learners are more likely to remember and apply new words appropriately.

Studies have shown that contextual learning enhances both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge (Nation & Webb, 2011). Contextualized input allows learners to infer meanings, notice word forms, and see how words function in real communication. Therefore, the use of authentic or semi-authentic texts, such as short stories, has gained increasing attention in EFL research.

2.3 Short Stories as a Teaching Tool in EFL Classrooms

Short stories are considered an effective literary genre for language teaching due to their brevity, simplicity, and engaging content. Unlike novels, short stories can be completed within a limited time, making them suitable for classroom use (Collie & Slater, 1990). They often present realistic situations, cultural elements, and emotional themes that can motivate learners and enhance their interest in reading.

Lazar (1993) states that short stories expose learners to rich and varied vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Through repeated exposure to words across a story, students can reinforce vocabulary learning naturally. In addition, short stories can be adapted to different proficiency levels, making them appropriate for university students.

2.4 Effectiveness of Short Stories in Vocabulary Development

Numerous studies have examined the impact of using short stories on vocabulary learning. Research by Krashen (1989) highlights the role of extensive reading in vocabulary acquisition, suggesting that learners acquire vocabulary incidentally when they are exposed to comprehensible and interesting texts. Short stories provide such input and support incidental learning.

Empirical studies indicate that students taught vocabulary through short stories outperform those taught using traditional methods (Alvarez, 2016; Rahman, 2018). These studies report improvements in vocabulary retention, comprehension, and learners' motivation. Short stories also encourage active learning through discussions, guessing word meanings from context, and follow-up activities such as summarizing and role-playing.

2.5 Short Stories and Learner Motivation

Motivation is a key factor in successful language learning. Dornyei (2001) emphasizes that engaging materials can significantly enhance learners' motivation and participation. Short stories, with their narrative structure and relatable themes, can reduce learners' anxiety and create a positive learning environment.

Studies show that students enjoy learning vocabulary through stories more than through rote memorization (Hismanoglu, 2005). Enjoyment and emotional engagement help learners retain vocabulary more effectively and encourage autonomous reading outside the classroom.

2.7 Summary of the Literature Review

In summary, previous studies demonstrate that vocabulary is a core element of language proficiency and that contextualized instruction enhances vocabulary learning. Short stories provide meaningful, engaging contexts that support vocabulary acquisition and learner motivation. While international research supports the effectiveness of short stories in EFL vocabulary instruction, limited research has been conducted in the Libyan higher education context. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of using short stories in teaching English vocabulary to sixth-semester students at the College of Education, Zawia University.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study will use a quasi-experimental design to examine the effects of teaching short stories on English vocabulary learning. A mixed-methods approach will combine quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive assessment of the instructional impact. The quantitative component will involve pre- and post-tests to measure vocabulary gains, while the qualitative component will explore students' perceptions through questionnaires and focus group discussions.

3.2. Participants

Participants will be selected from first-year EFL students enrolled in the College of Education in Libya. Approximately (60) students will be involved and randomly assigned to two groups:

Experimental Group (30 students): Taught vocabulary through short stories and related activities.

Control Group (30 students): Taught vocabulary using traditional methods (word lists, translation, and drills).

3.3. Instructional Materials

Short Stories: A set of graded short stories appropriate to the students' proficiency level will be chosen. These stories will include vocabulary items aligned with the college curriculum. Texts will be culturally relevant when possible to enhance learner engagement.

Traditional Materials: The control group will learn the same target vocabulary items through conventional classroom materials such as word lists, definitions, translation exercises, and isolated practice drills.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

a. Vocabulary Tests:

Pre-test: Administered before treatment to both groups to establish baseline vocabulary knowledge.

Post-test: Administered after instructional treatment to assess vocabulary gains. Tests will include receptive (recognition) and productive (use in context) items.

b. Questionnaires:

Students in the experimental group will complete a Likert-scale questionnaire to gauge their perceptions of learning vocabulary through short stories (e.g., motivation, engagement, perceived learning effectiveness).

c. Focus Group Discussions:

A subset of students from both groups will participate in focus group interviews to provide qualitative insights into their experiences and challenges regarding the vocabulary learning methods.

3.5 .Procedures

The study will be conducted over 8 weeks:

Week 1: Administer pre-tests and familiarize students with the study protocol.

Weeks 2-7:

Experimental Group: Weekly sessions focused on short story reading, vocabulary identification, contextual exercises, and in-class discussions.

Control Group: Weekly sessions using traditional vocabulary instruction strategies.

Week 8: Administer post-tests, distribute questionnaires, and conduct focus group interviews.

3.6. Data Analysis

a. Quantitative Data:

Pre- and post-test scores will be analyzed using paired sample t-tests to determine within-group improvement and independent sample t-tests to compare differences between the experimental and control groups.

b. Qualitative Data:

Responses from questionnaires and focus group interviews will be analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to learner perceptions of short story instruction effectiveness.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of students 'responses will be maintained. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.

4.Results

4.1 .Vocabulary Test Results

The quantitative data were obtained from the pre-test and post-test administered to both the experimental and control groups. The pre-test results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups before the treatment, indicating that the participants had a relatively similar level of vocabulary knowledge at the beginning of the study.

After the instructional period, the post-test results revealed a noticeable improvement in both groups; however, the experimental group outperformed the control group. The experimental group, which was taught vocabulary through short stories, showed a statistically significant increase in mean scores compared to their pre-test results. In contrast, the control group demonstrated only moderate improvement after learning vocabulary through traditional methods.

Statistical analysis using an independent samples t-test indicated that the difference between the post-test mean scores of the two groups was significant at the 0.05 level, confirming that teaching vocabulary through short stories had a greater effect on students 'vocabulary learning than traditional instruction.

4.2 .Students 'Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire administered to the experimental group showed generally positive attitudes toward learning vocabulary through short stories. Most students agreed that short stories helped them:

Understand word meanings more easily through context

Remember vocabulary for a longer time

Feel more motivated and interested in learning English

Use new vocabulary more confidently in sentences and discussions

The majority of respondents reported that short stories made vocabulary learning more enjoyable and less stressful compared to memorizing word lists.

4.3. Qualitative Findings

Data from focus group discussions supported the quantitative findings. Students reported that encountering vocabulary in meaningful contexts helped them guess meanings without relying heavily on translation. Many students stated that repeated exposure to words within stories improved their understanding and recall. Some participants also mentioned that discussing stories in class encouraged them to actively use new vocabulary.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that teaching English vocabulary through short stories is more effective than traditional methods for EFL learners in the College of Education in Libya. The significant improvement in the experimental group's vocabulary performance supports the view that contextualized instruction enhances vocabulary acquisition.

One possible explanation for this improvement is that short stories provide meaningful and authentic contexts in which vocabulary is naturally embedded. Unlike traditional methods that often present words in isolation, short stories allow learners to see how words function in real language use. This contextual exposure helps learners establish stronger connections between word form, meaning, and use, leading to better retention and application.

The positive attitudes expressed by students toward short story instruction also play an important role. Motivation is a key factor in language learning, and the results suggest that short stories increase learner engagement and interest. When students are emotionally and cognitively involved in reading narratives, they are more likely to pay attention to new vocabulary and actively process it.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the effectiveness of narrative texts in vocabulary learning. Research conducted in other EFL contexts has similarly shown that learners exposed to short stories demonstrate improved vocabulary knowledge and higher motivation compared to those taught through traditional approaches. The present study extends these findings to the Libyan higher education context, where empirical research on story-based instruction remains limited.

Despite these positive results, some challenges were observed. A few students reported difficulty understanding certain stories due to unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures. This suggests that careful text selection and instructional scaffolding are essential to ensure that short stories match learners' proficiency levels.

Overall, the results confirm that incorporating short stories into vocabulary instruction can significantly enhance vocabulary learning outcomes among Libyan EFL students. The study supports the integration of literature-based approaches into English language curricula at colleges of education to promote more effective and engaging vocabulary learning.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the effectiveness of teaching short stories in enhancing English vocabulary learning among students in the College of Education in Libya. The findings of the study clearly indicate that using short stories as a teaching strategy has a positive and significant impact on students' vocabulary acquisition when compared to traditional vocabulary teaching methods.

The results demonstrated that students who learned vocabulary through short stories showed greater improvement in vocabulary retention and usage. This improvement can be attributed to the meaningful context provided by short stories, which allows learners to encounter new words naturally and repeatedly. Learning vocabulary within a story helped students understand word meanings more easily, remember them for a longer period, and apply them more confidently in communication.

In addition to vocabulary improvement, the study revealed that students had positive attitudes toward learning through short stories. Many students reported increased motivation, interest, and enjoyment in English classes. This suggests that short stories not only support cognitive aspects of vocabulary learning but also contribute to a more engaging and student-centered learning environment. Motivation, as shown in this study, plays an important role in helping learners actively participate in the learning process.

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