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The Effect of Using Short Stories on Vocabulary Learning of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—This study aimed at investigating the effect of using short stories on enhancing vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The purpose of the study was to come up with new methods of enhancing learners' vocabulary which enable both teachers and students to better cope with language learning and teaching. The design of the study is of quasi-experimental pretest-posttest. The participants were in two classes each of which had 25 students. One of the classes was considered as the control group and the other one was considered as the experimental group. The analysis of data using independent samples t-test showed that there was no significant difference between two groups at the outset of the study. After the treatment period, a posttest was given to both groups to see if there was a significant difference between the two groups. The magnitude of sig (2-tailed) on posttest was 0.01 that is lower than 0.05. Therefore, the difference is significant and the experimental group outperformed the control group. This can be attributed to the effect of using short stories on improving vocabulary performance of learners. The results have some implications for language teachers and materials developers.

Index Terms—vocabulary learning, short story, vocabulary retention, EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, vocabulary plays an important role in language teaching and learning without which learners will not be able to develop other skills successfully, since knowledge of vocabulary is the raw material for all thoughts and feelings to be expressed and conveyed through the medium of language. Harmer (1991) argues that “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh” (p. 153). He overemphasizes the importance of acquiring vocabulary and states that very little can be expressed without grammar, while without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Hence, assisting learners to acquire a wide range of vocabulary knowledge seems to be indispensable for any language teaching program. Therefore, designing a structured and effective approach to enrich learners' knowledge of vocabulary has to be considered as the first priority. Most of EFL learners suffer from lack of sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and get frustrated by not knowing the meaning of key vocabulary items in a passage, consequently, they find the task of reading comprehension and other skills as tiresome, laborious and tedious job and soon give up the task. In order to help our learners not to get frustrated easily and assist them enjoy the language learning tasks we should find ways to enrich their knowledge of vocabulary, one of which is using authentic materials such as short stories that make it possible for the learners to widen their vocabulary and develop their competence and become more autonomous learners. To alleviate the problem, it seems to be of utmost importance for language educators and materials designers to provide learners with most interesting redundant materials that challenge learners and at the same time familiarize them with wider scope of vocabulary. To do so, researchers should take the first steps to pioneer new methods and techniques to make our learners as much competent to communicate in the foreign language as other EFL learners are. Having felt this necessity, the researchers have been motivated to probe into the issue and find out if implementing short stories can help learners enhance their vocabulary learning. The results of the current study can assist teachers to move in the direction of recognizing the importance of learning vocabulary and providing them with as much knowledge of vocabulary as they need to feel confident enough to take on the task of language learning more easily. Since in modern methods and approaches a greater weight has been given to vocabulary instruction than before, this research will be of great help for teachers and learners and our language teaching materials designers to incorporate more authentic sources into language teaching curriculum.

II. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to see whether using short stories can enhance EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, to help educational curriculum designers and policy makers to take the issue of using short stories into consideration more seriously and incorporate them into education programs.

In other words, the research sets out to answer the following question:

Does using short stories have any significant effect on improving vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

A. The Role of Short Stories in Vocabulary Development

Although there are many methods and strategies of teaching and enhancing vocabulary of EFL learners, the importance of extensive reading in the development of EFL learners' vocabulary is of great importance (Nagy & Anderson, 1984). And in this regard, implementing short stories can be the most efficient method to bring this goal to reality. This method has many merits for EFL teachers and learners. Panthan and Al-dersi (2013) and Pigada and Schmitt (2006) suggest a list of such benefits for making reading comprehension skill easy, interesting and enjoyable. Short stories also play crucial role in enhancing EFL learners' vocabularies. It is believed that the more students read, the wider their scope of their vocabulary knowledge becomes (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). In order to decrease the gap in vocabulary and comprehension, it seems to be imperative for the learners to discover and deepen comprehension of words during independent reading. Through short stories to enhance vocabulary of EFL learners, teachers have the advantage of teaching vocabulary in contextualized materials. This simply makes the learners to look for clues in the sentences that may tell them something about the meaning of the word in question. Researchers have pointed out the impact of visual and verbal clues on comprehending words in context. In this respect, Walters (2006) stated that enhanced reading comprehension became possible when students enrolled in an English language program where they were shown strategies of how to derive meanings of new vocabularies from contextual clues.

Researchers have also discovered that longer retention of vocabulary happens when they encountered them in numerous assignments. To make sure learners really learn the words, the learners must be able to use them in several different contexts, that is, they must use it in different occasions such as reading, speaking, writing, and listening (Rupley & Nicholas, 2005). The use of short stories provides the learners with the opportunities for integrating vocabulary instruction with other language skills. Many studies have also proven that contextualized vocabulary learning using short stories can lead to an increase in word usage compared with word-list instruction (Dixon-Krauss, 2002). Another advantage of using short stories is the cultural load in storytelling. Cultural load refers to the way language and culture are intertwined and the amount of cultural knowledge needed to understanding meaning to participate in an activity (Meyer, 2000). EFL learners have to learn words in context to comprehend the meaning. This can be possible with the use of selected short stories by the EFL teachers.

B. Ways, Methods and Strategies for Enhancing Vocabulary of EFL Learners

Many ELT teachers believe that learning vocabulary is equivalent to learning a list of words with meanings in their native language without any real context practice. Therefore, in most of EFL learning contexts, learners are often obliged to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary during their language acquisition experience. Each time the learners encounter a new word they have to look up the meaning of the word in a bilingual dictionary. Most of the time, the students write down a list of new words without knowing about their use in real contexts. This way of vocabulary learning is completely unsatisfactory because most EFL learners fail to understand and communicate the message in an appropriate way (Hunt & Beglar, 2005).

Many researchers have prevented the learners from memorizing new vocabulary items. According to Decarrico (2001), words should not be learned through memorization or separately without comprehending. This is because the words learned in this manner lead to overlooking of lexical features. It means that the learners only learn how to use the words in one specific form, but they do not get to know how the words are used in various contexts with some different shades of meanings in real life situations. As Nation (2000) and Smith (1985) express, learning new words is a matter of cumulative process through which word meanings are enriched and extended as the learners encounter them several times.

There are some other techniques and approaches for enhancing vocabularies of EFL learners by EFL teachers. One of these techniques is incidental vocabulary acquisition in which the items are learned through immersion in language tasks. Vocabularies can also be acquired through direct instruction in which the learners acquire words through a structured approach (Lituanas, Jacobs, & Renandya, 2001). Using dictionaries is another strategy to promote vocabularies. Teachers can also give their learners a vocabulary notebook in which they can be asked to keep a record of unfamiliar or newly discovered words until they need to use them in real contexts. Playing word games can also help learners to develop their vocabulary. Graves (2006) suggests a framework for successful vocabulary programs that facilitates effective teaching and learners' promotion of word knowledge. This program consists of four parts to develop robust vocabularies: first, providing rich and varied language experiences. Second, teaching individual vocabulary. Third, teaching word-learning strategies, fourth, fostering word consciousness.

More importantly, teachers can enhance and promote and extend learners' independent reading experiences and assist them to enrich and promote their vocabulary (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996). EFL teachers can persuade their fellow peers to talk about books, to ask questions and give suggestions. This strategy can effectively promote the learners' vocabulary by creating a language rich environment which boosts vocabulary acquisition. This can be attainable through providing learners with high quality texts that can sustain EFL learners' interest and motivation. In this concern, literary texts such as short stories can play a very significant role in enhancing and enriching the EFL learners' vocabulary. The idea of using short stories for promoting vocabulary of EFL learners has been suggested by

many ELT professionals (Wright, Betteridge & Bucky, 1989). They claim that using short stories is an effective way to learn vocabulary in EFL context. They argue that with the use of short stories teachers can create different contexts where students should use the language to communicate, exchange information and express their ideas. Similarly, Huang (1996) expresses that learning through short stories could encourage the operation of certain psychological and intellectual factors which can promote communication, enhance self-esteem, motivation and spontaneity boosting learning vocabulary. As a result, it seems to be important to explore and investigate if EFL learners can learn vocabulary efficiently through stories.

C. Studies on the Effect of Short Stories on Language Learning

Satitporn (1995) carried out a study on the effect of short stories on enhancing learners' ability to acquire vocabulary and influence the motivation of Thai EFL learners. In his experimental study he divided the subjects of the study into two groups, the experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught using short stories while the control group was taught through traditional text books. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post test.

Tutwisoot (2003) conducted a study to see if short stories could enhance reading comprehension of EFL learners Thai learners. The results of the study showed after taking short story reading course, the mean score of the experimental group was considerably higher than that of the control group on reading comprehension test.

Bell (2001) carried out a study on the effect of using short stories on both reading speed and reading comprehension. Twenty-six elementary students participated in the study. They were divided into control and experimental groups. It was found that learners in the experimental group who used short stories made greater gains in reading speed than the control group.

Hopkins and Davis (1982) conducted a study on the effect of short stories on the Hispanic EFL learner's general English improvement. The results showed that short stories had a significant effect on improving the subjects' general English proficiency.

In the Iranian EFL context, Kharaghani (2013) carried out a study on the effect of using short stories on enhancing reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. The results of her study showed that the experimental group who were taught short stories considerably performed better than the control group.

In another study Ajideh (2013) investigated the effect of summarizing short stories on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. The results showed that the experimental group was considerably better than control group in terms of vocabulary learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 50 intermediate EFL learners who were studying at a language institutes named Iran National Language Institute in 2014.

These students were in two classes each of which had 25 students. One of them was considered as the control group and the other one was considered as the experimental group. They were tested for their vocabulary ability in order to make sure the homogeneity of the participants.

B. Instrumentation

a. An English vocabulary test

A test of vocabulary was used as the pre-test and post-test to gather data about the students' vocabulary ability. This test consisted of 25 multiple choice questions.

To evaluate the learners' vocabulary learning, a test of vocabulary was made based on Test Your Vocabulary by Watcyn Jones (2000). The vocabulary test consisted of 25 item with multiple choice options. The items which were in the content of the stories were included and very difficult words and very easy ones were excluded from the items in order to suit the learners' level of proficiency, that is, intermediate learners. It should be mentioned that the test underwent expert judgment for its validity.

b. Reading Materials

During the ten-session experiment, both the experimental and the control groups received the usual number of class with the reading materials. However, the experimental group was asked to read the following short stories: 'a body in the barrel', 'grab your umbrella', 'laundry day', 'a noisy neighbor', and 'fire alarm'. Each story was covered in two sessions. They contained about 200 words which were at intermediate level.

C. Design

This quantitative study concerns the impact of short stories on students' vocabulary development. The design of the study was quasi-experimental pretest-post test design.

D. Procedure

First of all, the participants were given a pretest of vocabulary to ascertain their homogeneity in terms of their knowledge of vocabulary. Then, the participants in the experimental group were taught the materials using short stories in a way that after presenting the reading material they were asked to underline the unfamiliar vocabulary items and then try to guess the meanings based on the context of the story. Then learners were given time to exchange views about the items they learned. At the end of each session during which a short story was presented, learners were given a quiz to evaluate their level of comprehension. Finally, at the end of the treatment period the participants were given a posttest of vocabulary to examine their vocabulary development.

The participants in the control group were taught vocabulary using traditional texts. They were presented the vocabulary items using word lists including synonyms and antonyms and dictionary definitions. The participants were taught the reading materials using the traditional approach. At the end of the term they were given a posttest of vocabulary to see how they perform on vocabulary test.

E. Conducting the Treatment

After the pilot study, the participants in the experimental group received the treatment. They were taught the selected short stories using the incidental vocabulary approach in a way that they were asked to try to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words using the contextual story clues as well as sharing ideas with other peers.

In the control group, the participants were taught the reading materials using traditional dictionary definition through giving examples, synonyms and antonyms.

F. Administering the Pretest and Posttest

Pretest was administered to know students' prior knowledge. It was given to both groups (experimental and control group). After taking the pretest the students in the experimental group received the treatment while the control group received whole class teaching method (traditional method). In the end, the posttest was given to the groups to investigate if using short stories could improve students' vocabulary performance.

IV. RESULTS

A. The Results of Pretest

In order to make sure the two groups were homogeneous at the beginning of the study, the performance of the participants in both groups was compared through giving a pretest of vocabulary. Mean scores of the control and experimental groups were presented in Table 1. The Table shows that there was no significant difference between their mean scores.

TABLE 1
THE RESULTS OF THE MEAN COMPARISON OF THE VOCABULARY PRETEST

Mean	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Experimental group	25	21.0400	1.20692	.24138
Control group	25	20.6400	1.15036	.23007

The mean comparison of both groups using independent samples t-test showed that there is no significant difference between two groups. The mean score of the control group was 20.64 but the mean score of the experimental group was 21.04. To be more accurate and objective concerning the homogeneity of the two groups, an independent samples t-test was run between the scores of both groups on vocabulary pretest.

Figure 1 below displays the graphic representation of the mean scores of the groups in the pre-test.

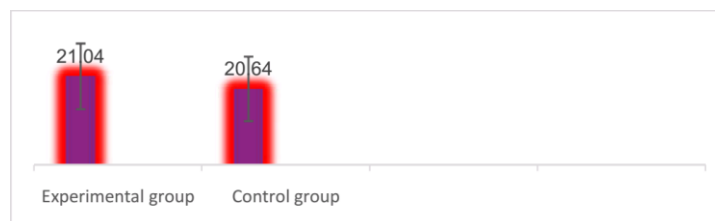


Figure 1 mean scores of two groups on pretest

The graph above clearly depicts that there was no significant difference between mean scores of both groups. In order to be more exact, an independent samples t-test was run to see if the difference was significant or not. Table 2 illustrates the point.

TABLE 2
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST ON PRETEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.013	.908	-.455	48	.651	-.20000	.43970	-1.08407	.68407
Equal variances not assumed			-.455	47.492	.651	-.20000	.43970	-1.08431	.68431

The magnitude of sig (2tailed) was 0.23 which is higher than 0.05. This proved that both groups were homogeneous in terms of their knowledge of vocabulary. Next step was to analyze the results of posttest.

B. The Analysis of Research Question

The following null hypothesis was formed to be tested

Ho: Using short stories has no effect on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary learning. In order to investigate the hypothesis the following steps were taken. First, a posttest of vocabulary was given to both groups. The participants' performance in both groups was compared in table 3 below:

TABLE 3
MEAN SCORES OF BOTH GROUPS ON POSTTEST

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control group	25	23.92	0.9092	1.18184
experimental group	25	22.08	1.2884	1.25768

Based on the statistics displayed in table 3, it can be argued that the mean score of experimental group was higher than mean score of the control group. The mean scores of the control and experimental groups were 22.08 and 23.92 respectively.

Figure 2 below shows the graphic representation of the mean scores.

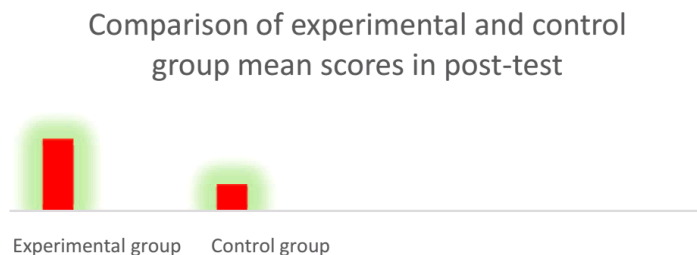


Figure 2 mean scores of two groups on posttest

In order to be more exact, an independent samples t-test was run between the posttest scores of control and experimental groups. Table 4 illustrates the results of independent samples t-test.

TABLE 4.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST ON POSTTEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	4.055	0.050	2.663	48	0.010	1.840	.3153	.2058	1.4741
Equal variances not assumed			2.663	43.15	0.010	1.840	.31538	.2040	1.4759

According to Table 4, the magnitude of sig (2-tailed) is 0.01 that is lower than 0.05 therefore, the difference is significant and the experimental group outperformed the control group. This can be attributed to the positive effect of using short stories on developing vocabulary learning of learners. Consequently the null hypothesis for the research question was rejected.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups because of the treatment given to them. The findings of the study rejected the null hypothesis. It was concluded that there was significant evidence with regard to the impact of short stories on learning vocabulary.

The findings of this study are in line with the results of other studies carried out previously by other researchers who tried to investigate the effect of using short stories on different language skills such as Adeyemi (2008) who studied the impact of oral presentation of short stories on general language proficiency of learners. The results were in agreement with Sarigoz (2008), and Hişmanoğlu's (2005) findings who investigated the effect of short story reproduction on reading and writing skill of EFL learners. The findings are also in agreement with the findings of Adams (1995), Ghaith (2003), Stevens (2003) all of which confirm the positive effect of short stories on the performance of EFL learners in different language skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

The comparison of both groups' vocabulary improvement in the pretest and posttest has helped us find out the answer to the research question of the study. The pretest was designed for testing the subjects' English vocabulary knowledge to get some pre-examination of the two groups before the experiment. As mentioned previously, the control and experimental groups performed almost the same. However, the comparison of the posttest showed that there was a significant difference between the performance of control group and experimental groups. On the whole, the current study has brought out enough evidence to come to the conclusion that the use of short stories has positive effect on the learners' English vocabulary learning. In other words, learners who took part in the program were able to make more progress in their vocabulary acquisition than those who did not use short stories.

Concerning the previous studies in the literature, the current research confirms more value of short stories for learning vocabulary. In their investigation into L2 vocabulary acquisition, Woodinsky and Nation (1988) and Krashen (1989) claim that incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading short stories does occur. Also, there are those who believe that vocabulary acquisition through reading short stories is sufficient for L2 learners. For example, Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) argued that teachers must promote short story reading because it can lead to greater vocabulary growth than any explicit instruction alone ever could. Generally speaking, most practitioners of second language instruction seem to be resigned to the default argument that incidental L2 vocabulary learning through reading is sufficient. Based on Schmidt's (1990) and Ellis' (1994) theories that incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition should cover the right combination of implicit learning processes and explicit learning processes, the use of short stories was pedagogically successful in this study. In fact, during the experimental period, the learners in the experimental group were assisted with reading learning strategies, note-taking strategies. Explicit instruction was also offered to those who really met difficulties in comprehending the contents of language.

Under the light of Krashen's (1982) comprehensive input theory and Nation's (1991) theories of L2 vocabulary acquisition, the use of short stories was designed to be in the contents of comprehensible reading materials which were aimed to encourage learners to read a lot to acquire vocabulary and develop reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. According to Nation (2001), the variety in meaning focused input helps vocabulary growth. Krashen (1989) also stated that reading short stories in an L2 is one of the main ways that language learners acquire new vocabulary knowledge. However, to achieve this, learners must be exposed to a large amount of comprehensible texts since many appearances of a word in the rich contexts helps students retain and reinforce its form and meanings. In this study, the results showed that the proper application of the short stories could bring about effectiveness to teaching and learning English vocabulary.

VII. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To make full use of the benefits of short story reading, students should be guided to choose appropriate reading materials, and to spend proper time on reading and to exploit effective reading strategies. According to Nation (1990) "for second language learners, direct teaching and learning of vocabulary is a feasible proposition" (p. 356). In order to get students to a vocabulary knowledge level where they can read texts with ease and acquire words by themselves, some form of explicit instruction should be offered. Concerning the role of reading texts, Hirsh and Nation (1992) also emphasize that most series of simplified short stories would play a vital part in developing L2 learners' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, there is a need for more short stories which 'bridge' the gap between the monotonous reading and learning of vocabulary. Moreover, an effective short story reading program should engage the learners to get their sustained attention, should encourage large quantities of reading to get adequate vocabulary repetition, and should provide texts at the right coverage levels to allow unknown vocabulary to be adequately dealt with.

Since this study was just conducted on a small sample size with the experimental period of four months, it was impossible for the researchers to establish all the effects of short story reading on English language acquisition. Thus, it would have been better if further researches with the short story reading had been done on a larger sample size for a longer time. Also, more studies should be carried out to consider more impacts of short story reading on other aspects of vocabulary such as spelling, word-meanings, part of speech and grammatical characteristics. Further researches should be conducted on the students at other educational establishments so that the teacher would be able to employ the

program as an alternative way for teaching and learning English language effectively. Finally, in order to bring the present study to higher reliability and validity, it should be carried out under true experimental conditions in the future.

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