

Please cite this paper as follows:

Mousavi Mohammadi, S. J., Aliasin, S. H., & Saeedi, Z. (2024). The role of contextualized storytelling in L2 vocabulary retention by young Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in English Language Communication*, 1(1), 44-56. <https://doi.org/10.30470/irelc.2024.714092>



University of Zanjan



Research Paper

The Role of Contextualized Storytelling in L2 Vocabulary Retention by Young Iranian EFL Learners

Seyed Javad Mousavi Mohammadi¹, Seyed Hesamuddin Aliasin², & Zahra Saeedi³

¹ English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; mousavi_sjm60@yahoo.com

² Corresponding author, English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; hesamaliasin@znu.ac.ir

³ English Language Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; z92saeedi@gmail.com

Received: 12/05/2024

Accepted: 01/07/2024

Abstract

Following a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest research design, this study was meant to investigate the effects of contextualized storytelling, as a new teaching technique, including visual aids, as one of the vocabulary learning strategies, on young Iranian EFL learners' target vocabulary retention. Drawing on the optimal input and the output hypotheses, it was hypothesized that the contextualized storytelling technique integrated with visual aids will have positive effect on increasing young EFL learners' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. To test the hypothesis, 60 Iranian lower intermediate students aged between 11 and 12 were selected and randomly assigned into two equal groups of 30 members (experimental and control groups). As data collection instruments, the Oxford Quick Placement Test and Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) were administrated to the participants. The t-test results revealed that the contextualized storytelling technique had a significant effect on the retention and active use of the target vocabulary items. The findings carry implications for ELT teachers and practitioners in an EFL context.

Keywords: Young Learner; Vocabulary; Language Learning Strategy; Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge; Contextualized Storytelling.

1. Introduction

Learning a new language is never an easy task (Cunningham, 2017). However, the acquisition of target vocabulary items can greatly facilitate success in this process (Kirsch, 2012). Vocabulary can provide support for all four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing (Boonkongsan & Intaraprasert, 2014). It is a key factor to understand what learners heard and read inside or outside a pedagogical context during their communications with others (Faraj, 2015). In other words, it is almost impossible for a person to learn a language without words (Minalla, 2024). Min (2013) also acknowledges the role of vocabulary knowledge in language learning and argues that lack of vocabulary knowledge results in a problem across receptive and productive language areas. Thus, a solid foundation in vocabulary knowledge is essential in the development of different levels of language proficiency (Min, 2013). According to Min (2013), it seems that learners with inadequate knowledge of vocabulary are likely to perform poorly in the mentioned language areas and are at risk of being diagnosed as less proficient. Besides all the highlights mentioned by the scholars, one important point to remember is that "effective storage of words will ultimately lead to effective retrieval of words" (Min, 2013, p. 67).

In this regard, the important issue of how to efficiently acquire L2 vocabulary has increasingly captured the attention of both learners and teachers (Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014). Workie and Feleke (2020) state that vocabulary teaching should be part of the syllabus and be instructed well in a planned and regular way, because learners need vocabulary instruction to help them learn new words and develop learning techniques to enable them to extend their vocabulary knowledge over time. In the same vein, Aitkuzhinova-Arslan et al. (2016) claim that "teaching vocabulary is

a comprehensive process in foreign language learning requiring specific techniques of appropriate instruction and accurate strategy” (p. 42). If ESL teachers get adjusted to effective strategies for vocabulary training, they can facilitate learners’ movement to higher levels of language proficiency in all four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Nam, 2010). Hence, teachers play a significant role in enhancing second language vocabulary acquisition by EFL students both quantitatively and qualitatively (Laufer 2003). Unfortunately, teachers tend to use a restricted range of methods to teach vocabulary in many Asian ELT contexts. They also have a tendency to use decontextualized methods to teach words that come from contexts (Shen, 2003). According to Zohrabi et al. (2018), while Iranian educational system in teaching English as a foreign language considers the four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as the most significant processes, teaching vocabulary items is remarkably incidental, and it involves defining unknown words in the texts in which they are used. Therefore, as Zohrabi et al. (2018) claim, this issue makes learners highly dependent on dictionaries and this kind of vocabulary instruction has led to a general inability in vocabulary learning among Iranian EFL learners.

Therefore, teaching vocabulary in an EFL educational context is challenging (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016). Zoubi (2021) argues that this matter is of great importance especially for young EFL learners in learning foreign languages. They suffer from severe shortage in their vocabulary repertoire. Unfortunately, this issue hinders young EFL learners from progressing for developing their language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing. In the same vein, Syafrizal and Haerudin (2018) state that teaching English for young EFL learners is not the same as teaching English for adults in a way that they are often more enthusiastic, active and easily adaptive than adult learners. Therefore, vocabulary instruction to young EFL learners is not easy. Unfortunately, despite the importance of enhancing students’ vocabulary skills, there is a lack of comprehensive information regarding effective techniques for teaching vocabulary at the elementary level. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of empirical research comparing the effectiveness of various programs aimed at fostering vocabulary development in elementary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Biemiller, 2003).

With this in mind, it is important for teachers to give in-depth consideration to the strategies of teaching vocabulary. According to Sutrisna (2021), they should select a strategy which brings lots of benefits for EFL learners’ vocabulary acquisition. “The strategy not only should facilitate the students to achieve the learning objectives, but also provide them with enjoyable and meaningful activities” (Sutrisna, 2021, p.8). Sutrisna (2021) also emphasizes that the strategy must be able to challenge EFL learners in order that they can actively and creatively participate during the process of vocabulary learning. Fauziningrum et al. (2023) acknowledge such claim and argues that to teach English vocabulary effectively, teachers should present vocabularies in a contextual form to facilitate the instructional process. In other words, “vocabulary learning is not limited to memorizing single words; it also involves understanding words in a realistic and meaningful context” Minalla (2024, p. 578). Therefore, according to Brown (1994), contextualization is essential so that it can enhance language learners’ retention and attention, such as through providing stories, recognizable events and people, and engaging regularly in everyday discussions. Given this, while there is a significant body of research on L2 vocabulary instruction and acquisition, there is a lack of studies demonstrating how ESL educators can incorporate the diverse research outcomes of researchers into their instructional resources (Nam, 2010). To close the divide between theory and practice, this study draws on Krashen and Mason’s (2020) optimal input hypothesis and Swain’s (2005) output hypothesis, applying contextualized storytelling technique integrated with visual aids to examine the role of contextualized storytelling in L2 vocabulary retention and use for young Iranian EFL learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Backgrounds

For its theoretical framework, this study draws on Krashen and Mason’s (2020) *optimal input hypothesis* and Swain’s (2005) *output hypothesis*. The former hypothesis proposes that apart from being comprehensible, the input needs to be compelling, rich and abundant. A comprehensible input carries sufficient known content to make it possible to understand what is still new and remains to be comprehended. A compelling input is said to be the one that captures the attention of the L2 learner in a way that they forget for a while that they are in a foreign language learning environment. By the input being rich, it is meant that it needs to be able to contribute to the understanding and natural stream or flow of the message conveyed in the target language. Finally, the input carrying the feature of being abundant is the one that offers multiple chances of acquiring the language, without merely relying on a limited amount of meaning and form. The

second hypothesis, the output hypothesis, proposed and developed by Swain during the years 1985 through 2005, suggests that “the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning” (Swain 2005, p. 471). Thus, learners can more effectively learn the target language by having been given more opportunities to produce the target language forms and structures. Given this conceptual input and output-based framework, the authors of the current study hypothesized that *contextualized storytelling* might be thought of as a construct that bears on both hypotheses and, hence, contribute to EFL learners’ depth of target vocabulary knowledge and retention.

Storytelling is recognized as *one of the oldest forms of human communication* (Yulianawati et al., 2022) that has evolved over time and in three *different forms: pictorial, spoken, and written* (Ibrahim, 2022). There are a variety of definitions used for the term storytelling throughout the literature. Farizawati et al. (2020) conceptualize storytelling as “a literary text that is full of sequence of events and the act of using voice and body language to communicate the text from one person to another in colorful ways to create scenes” (p.21). Huang (2006) makes a distinction between traditional storytelling and contextualized storytelling. The former highlights the verbal performance of storytellers; the latter recognized as a multi-sensory approach utilizes nonverbal knowledge of language learners by giving abundant contextual clues for them to grasp the target language in use without the help of their mother tongue. Pedagogically speaking, Farizawati et al. (2020) describes storytelling as an approach that introduces concepts and ideas through narratives and this enables learners to connect with the material on a personal level and comprehend its relevance and application in a real-life situation.

Storytelling is of great importance in the educational process (Ibrahim, 2022). Utkerovna (2023) states that the incorporation of a story-based approach in language teaching involves using stories to engage learners and facilitate language acquisition. Instead of concentrating only on grammar rules and vocabulary lists, this approach encourages learners to comprehend and use the target language in a more meaningful and contextualized way. According to Benabbes and Taleb (2024), storytelling in educational contexts promotes active engagement among language learners, stimulating their interaction with language and linguistic structures. It can also develop imagination, creativity and inventiveness among learners in the language learning process. Storytelling as a pedagogical tool develops language skills regardless of students’ age, gender, and ethnicity (Yulianawati et al., 2022). According to Utkerovna (2023), storytelling “allows students to connect emotionally with the language and develop their language skills in a natural and holistic way, if the approach is used correctly” (p. 264).

In dealing with vocabulary retention, this study subscribes to the theories governing the depth of vocabulary knowledge. Two approaches have been offered to conceptualizing this vocabulary knowledge depth: developmental and dimensional (Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2010, cited in Hariko & Pietila, 2016). In view of the developmental approach, depth of vocabulary knowledge grows gradually, developing from a total lack of knowledge, passing through recognition stage, having a superficial/vague idea of its meaning, to mastering the word use. Based on the dimensional approach, however, knowing a word means having knowledge of its different components and, hence, different types of knowledge: orthographic, phonological, semantic, collocational, etc. (Read, 2004; Schmitt, 2010, cited in Hariko & Pietila, 2016). This study draws on the developmental approach, focusing on the developing stages of word knowledge and, hence, the use of the VKS to measure the target vocabulary knowledge depth, extending incrementally from reception to production.

2.2. Empirical Studies

In relation to the empirical research, it is important to note that various studies have examined the effectiveness of storytelling in different aspects of language learning across diverse educational environments. Zarei and Ramezankhani (2018) delved into the comparative impacts of mnemonic keyword method, storytelling, and semantic organization on L2 idiom acquisition among Iranian high school EFL students. Their findings indicated that individuals in the storytelling group exhibited superior performance in L2 idiom comprehension, production, and retention compared to those in the semantic organization group. Khodabandeh (2018) explored the influence of storytelling techniques delivered through virtual instruction on the speaking proficiency of low-proficient Iranian EFL learners. Her results demonstrated the positive influence of storytelling and responding to questions on Telegram. Abbasi and Behjat (2018) examined the effects of storytelling via Telegram on the speaking complexity of Iranian EFL learners, concluding that storytelling contributed to enhancing learners’ speaking complexity. Sahibzada et al. (2020) investigated the impact of storytelling on enhancing critical thinking and reading comprehension skills among EFL students at Kandahar University, revealing significant improvements in post-tests on reading comprehension and critical thinking for the storytelling group. Chowdhury and

Biswas (2022) explored the role of storytelling as an educational tool in rural areas of Bangladesh from the perspective of teachers, finding that a majority of primary teachers in remote regions preferred utilizing storytelling as an alternative to traditional textbook content. Furthermore, teachers integrated storytelling to boost learners' language skills and motivation. It is recommended that educators utilize a range of stories to enhance students' creative and linguistic abilities. In a separate study, Utkerovna (2023) investigated the advantages of employing a story-based approach to language instruction. It was found that the use of storytelling in an English classroom is a useful strategy, because it introduces new words in a meaningful and engaging context. Learners also benefit from stories by being exposed to more English input and by developing their vocabulary knowledge.

On the other hand, there have been investigations that have concentrated on the significance of storytelling in the overall enhancement of target vocabulary specifically in the retention of target vocabulary. Kalantari and Hashemian (2016) explored the impacts of utilizing the storytelling method on the acquisition of vocabulary among Iranian EFL learners. The subjects consisted of English learners aged between 10 and 14 years old, all of whom were at a low-intermediate level. The results of the research revealed the effectiveness of storytelling for vocabulary acquisition. Bezilova (2019) found that storytelling had positive impacts on the longer retention of vocabulary in an EFL context in Slovakia. In a study conducted with young EFL learners, Zoubi (2021) concluded that storytelling was an effective technique for enhancing vocabulary learning and that this feasible technique should be incorporated in EFL classrooms as an essential tool for improving vocabulary knowledge among young learners. Ahmed et al. (2021) investigated the effect of storytelling on listening skills and vocabulary of preschool children in Pakistan. They found that the learners exposed to storytelling were listening attentively and had a better, meaningful and deeper understanding of vocabulary. Likewise, Bhatti et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of short stories in improving English vocabulary at the elementary level in Pakistani EFL classes with both male and female students. They found that the participants in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group statistically.

Several research studies have explored the effectiveness of various storytelling techniques on vocabulary acquisition. For instance, Morsali (2016) conducted a study to compare the impact of summarizing and strip story arrangement on vocabulary retention among 105 female elementary Iranian EFL learners. The results revealed that the summarizing group performed significantly better than the strip story arrangement group in posttest vocabulary, with both groups outperforming the control group. In a more recent study, Nematollahi et al. (2017) and Amin Afshar and Mojavezi (2017) investigated the effects of aural and visual storytelling on English vocabulary learning and retention with 50 intermediate female EFL learners in Iran. Their findings demonstrated that visual storytelling had a significant influence on vocabulary acquisition compared to aural storytelling. Additionally, Rahnama (2019) examined the impact of picture-based storytelling on vocabulary learning among intermediate EFL learners, showing that the experimental group, which utilized picture-based storytelling, performed better on immediate and delayed post-tests compared to the control group that received vocabulary instruction through stories without pictures. Gao et al. (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of the impacts of three different storytelling strategies on the enhancement of vocabulary acquisition and response tendencies among third-grade learners of English as a second language (ESL): storytelling in isolation (S), storytelling coupled with a focus on vocabulary words (S+W), and storytelling integrated with various activities (S+A). The outcomes of the study revealed that the approach of solely using storytelling yielded the most favorable outcomes. Tachom (2021) explored the progress in vocabulary proficiency of ESL learners by employing a task-oriented technique with a cohort of 32 Thai students enrolled in an English for Communication program at a university situated in the northern region of Thailand. The discoveries of this investigation suggested that students acquired English vocabulary in a stimulating and purposeful manner through storytelling, thereby indicating a probable high level of retention of vocabulary among the students.

Based on the aforementioned studies, it is evident that there is a gap in the existing literature regarding the retention of target vocabulary by learners. Additionally, there is a lack of consideration for the differentiation between receptive and productive vocabulary retention. Furthermore, there has been insufficient attention given to the contextualization of storytelling for younger learners in both general EFL contexts and specifically within the Iranian EFL context. Consequently, this study aims to address these gaps and contribute to the existing literature by examining the influence of contextualized storytelling techniques on the vocabulary retention of young Iranian EFL learners. In order to achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do contextualized storytelling techniques including visual aids improve young Iranian EFL learners' retention of receptive vocabulary in the target language?

2. Do contextualized storytelling techniques including visual aids improve young Iranian EFL learners' retention of productive vocabulary in the target language?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The study followed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design due to the fact that the sample was not randomly selected. Contextualized storytelling and target vocabulary retention functioned as the independent and dependent variables of the study, respectively. Gender and language proficiency were treated as the control variables in this research context.

3.2. Participants

The study involved 60 male EFL learners aged 11-12, studying English at a private language institute in Zanjan, Iran at a lower intermediate level. The participants were chosen based on their language proficiency level using the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004) from a pool of 98 students. They were selected through convenience sampling and then randomly divided into two groups: one control and one experimental.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004)

For the researchers to make sure that the participants were all homogenous in terms of English language proficiency level, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2004) was administered beforehand. This test consisted of 60 items requiring the participants to answer in 45 minutes. The scores obtained on the placement test were between 24 and 30, the range for the lower intermediate level.

3.3.2. Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS)

To assess the participants' depth of vocabulary knowledge and use, the researchers used the same adapted version of the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) by Derin (2002). Developed by Paribakht and Wesche (1996), this instrument is originally a five-point scale combining self-report and performance items to elicit both receptive and productive knowledge of intended vocabulary items in written form. Thus, the total lack of familiarity is measured by giving point 1 to the vocabulary item, with point 5 indicating a full familiarity and command of the vocabulary item by the learner. The detailed scoring of the original form by Wesche and Paribakht (1996) are reported in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *VKS Scoring Categories: Meanings of Scores*

Self-report Categories	Possible Scores	Meaning of Scores
I. I don't remember having seen this word before	1	The word is not familiar at all
II. I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means	2	The word is familiar, but its meaning is not known
III. I have seen this word before, and I <i>think</i> it means _____. (synonym or translation)	3	A correct synonym or translation is given.
IV. I <i>know</i> this word. It means _____. (synonym or translation)	4	The word is used with semantic appropriateness in a sentence.
V. I can use this word in a sentence: . (If you do this section, please also do Section IV.)	5	The word is used with semantic appropriateness and grammatical accuracy in a sentence.

As mentioned above, this study used a version adapted by Derin (2002) for more feasibility. To avoid misunderstanding of test instructions of the VKS by the learners, the instructions were translated into Persian. Then, for comprehensibility reasons, the original five-point scale was reduced to a three-point scale as done by Derin (2002). It is worth noticing that the validity and reliability of the original VKS test have been approved by Paribakht and Wesche (1996). They reported a test-retest reliability index of .89 for the total content words and that of .82 for the entire discourse connectors in their study, which they believed that such results "indicate that the instrument can elicit acceptably reliable responses" (p. 32). As for the validity of the scale, Wesche and Paribakht (1996) found a significant correlation ($r = .55$) between the VKS and a criterion parallel test, the *Eurocentres 10K Vocabulary Size Test (EVST)*. Being a well-established




instrument and having a self-report nature, the VKS and its diverse modified versions are widely used in relevant vocabulary research across the globe.

Table 2. *Adapted VKS (Persian Version)*

Self-Report and Items
<p>A. من به یاد نمی آورم که این کلمه را قبلاً دیده باشم.</p> <p>B. من این کلمه را قبلاً دیده ام ولی معنی آن را نمی دانم.</p> <p>C. من این کلمه را قبلاً دیده ام و معنی آن را می دانم.</p> <p>لطفا مترادف انگلیسی یا ترجمه فارسی کلمه را بنویسید.</p> <p>(لطفا با این کلمه یک جمله انگلیسی بنویسید.)</p>

As seen in the table above, categories A and B represent participants' receptive retention, and category C reveals their productive knowledge of the meaning of the target word. Since the participants were young, and since visual aids along with other pictorial techniques were used to teach them, the researchers asked for neither the translation of the intended vocabulary items in Persian nor their synonym in English. Instead, for the researchers to increase the objectivity of the scoring procedure, pictorial multiple-choice items were replaced (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Adapted VKS for Young EFL Learners (Persian Version)*

"Bus"	
	<p>A. من به یاد نمی آورم که این کلمه را قبلاً دیده باشم.</p> <p>B. من این کلمه را قبلاً دیده ام ولی معنی آن را نمی دانم.</p> <p>C. من این کلمه را قبلاً دیده ام و معنی آن را می دانم.</p> <p>لطفا تصویر مربوط به این کلمه را انتخاب کنید.</p>
 <p>a)</p>	 <p>b)</p>
	 <p>c)</p>
	<p>(لطفا با این کلمه یک جمله انگلیسی بنویسید.)</p>

As for the scoring method, Derin (2002) conducted an analysis of the VKS scoring method, dividing it into two parts. The first part consists of three items that gather data on students' perceptions of the intended vocabulary items. This allows for the observation of the constant variation in the level of vocabulary knowledge. Each item's perception score can range from 1 to 3, meaning that question a, b, and c can result in scores of 1, 2, and 3 for each vocabulary item, respectively.

The participants' productive vocabulary knowledge was assessed based on their responses to the third question. They were required to select the correct picture that represented the meaning of the target vocabulary and write a grammatically correct English sentence using the given vocabulary item. If they provided correct answers for both tasks, they received a score of 3. The total actual score was then calculated by counting the number of correct answers. However, it is important to note that participants could only answer the second part and receive an actual score if they had chosen the third category of the perception part (question C).

3.4. Procedure

To begin with, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was utilized to evaluate the participants at the lower intermediate level of English proficiency. Subsequently, the participants were randomly divided into two groups - the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group was exposed to Contextualized Storytelling to enhance their vocabulary acquisition, while the control group followed a traditional vocabulary learning approach which included routine activities and exercises on the target words during the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages of the classroom activities, with no exposure to the storytelling techniques. Following this, both groups underwent a VKS pre-

test consisting of 30 target vocabulary items to gauge their initial vocabulary knowledge and ensure the groups' homogeneity in this aspect. Six weeks after the instruction, the time interval allowed to check the participants' retention and active use of the target vocabulary items, the participants in both groups took a post-test of the same VKS. The independent-samples t-test results confirmed this homogeneity. Lastly, both study groups' performance on the VKS pre/posttest was studied to determine if there existed any statistically significance difference between the treatment and control groups in receptive and productive vocabulary retention. To this end, two independent sample t-tests were run to test the null hypotheses and answer the research questions of the study.

3.4.1. The Contextualized Storytelling Procedure

In accordance with the institute syllabus, the participants attended English classes six hours a week in three separate sessions on Saturdays, Mondays, and Tuesdays. For the purpose of the study, storytelling activities including visual aids and other vocabulary teaching techniques were incorporated in their teaching syllabus for two hours per week. The entire study lasted seven weeks, with the first week dedicated to sampling, pre-testing, detailed introduction of the program such as storytelling and its procedure, benefits, and purposes to the participants.

Based on the participants' language proficiency level and the principles mentioned in Table 4, six stories were selected. According to the appropriate degree of simplicity, ten target vocabulary items were selected from different paragraphs in each story: its beginning, plot, and the end. These items were recycled and recalled in different stories during storytelling activities in a six-week course.

Table 4. *Criteria for the Selection of the Stories*

Criteria	Title of Story...	
	Fulfills	Exploits
Appropriate language level (vocabulary, structures, notions/functions)		
Content (interesting, fun, motivating, memorable, encouraging participation)		
Visuals (attractive, potential to work with, size)		
Pronunciation (intonation, rhythm, repetition)		
Motivation (develop imagination, arouse curiosity, draw on personal experience)		
Language learning potential (skills development, language practice, recycling, prediction, other strategies)		
Potential in terms of learning other subjects, target/other culture, metacognition		

The study stories were selected from the Agenda Web website (http://www.agendaweb.org/listening/easy_reading_listening.html). The site is an original one especially designed for native students who are learning English. All these authentic stories are categorized into different levels of language proficiency with a consistent writing style. For the purpose of this study, the selected child stories, simply about animals, were full of natural repetition of many elements, illustrations, events to act out, and funny and surprising endings.

Based on Brewster et al.'s (2004) storytelling guidelines, the storytelling activities were divided into three parts: *pre-storytelling activities*, *during* and *post-storytelling activities*.

3.4.2. Pre-storytelling Activities

Each session started with a number of useful warm-up activities. One of the researchers as the classroom teacher introduced the story in a fun and interesting way. He used visual aids and related pictures to help students connect with the story and guess its title and characters. The teacher provided opportunities for the learners to review previously taught vocabularies and structures. He asked the participants some questions to give them a chance to think about what might happen in the story. In addition, the teacher wrote a list of intended vocabularies on the board to be emphasized during storytelling.

3.4.3. During and Post-storytelling Activities

During the storytelling, on the basis of the context of each story, the teacher alternatively carried out the following routine activities in each session to check comprehension of the story read, to encourage the learners to practice new language, and to make word retention easy to them. To this end, the teacher read the story orally to the participants,

using mimes, gestures, facial expressions, visual aids, eye contacts, and the Total Physical Response Method developed by Asher in 1960. The teacher also portrayed different characters in each story by varying his voice tone and volume as a function of meaning to facilitate comprehension and make the story more enjoyable and interesting for them. Moreover, he repeatedly made inquiries concerning their understanding during the storytelling by asking questions, paraphrasing, making close eye contacts, and using verbal and nonverbal cues. Also, the teacher asked the students to predict the next happenings.

The teacher retold the story with pauses and gaps for them to fill in (Group Retelling). He took pictures of the story scene and asked students to retell the story. They carried out this class activity by acting out the plot. Then, the students were presented with a series of comprehension questions regarding the story, including wh-questions and true/false questions. Additionally, they were tasked with completing exercises such as filling in the blanks, arranging the story in the correct order, and describing the picture associated with the story. These activities served as a means for the teacher to highlight and reinforce the target vocabulary items. Additionally, the learners watched some subtitled animations or cartoons to improve their understanding, pronunciation, and spelling. Vocabulary games were other interactive classroom activities in which learners were given some flashcards to hand up the one pertinent to the target vocabulary one after another while hearing its related name or action through story lines.

Then, the teacher divided the class into some groups to do some group work such as telling the given pictures of the story, creating wall display for a story, writing and telling their own stories with the given words, role playing by acting out some scenes pertinent to the story, etc. Finally, to practice the VKS test instruction and to recycle the previously taught vocabularies, a short VKS test was administered at the beginning of each following session. The administration of this test could provide a beneficial guideline to choose more problematic words to be practiced and emphasized during the presentation of other stories and activities, which also lead to the selection of the 30 target vocabulary items to be included in the VKS pretests and posttests.

4. Results

4.1. Investigating the first research question

To assess the perception of the participants on the level of meaning for the intended vocabulary items, the VKS perception scores were separately calculated for each of the following three scales: a) I don't remember having seen this word before, b) I have seen this word before, but I don't know its meaning, c) I have seen this word before, and I know its meaning. In order to find out whether the difference between the perception mean scores of experimental and control groups obtained from the post-test is meaningful and whether the difference is due to the treatment effect or not, the independent sample t-test was run. As shown in Table 5, the results revealed a significant difference between the two study groups in the perception of vocabulary items [$t(58) = 1.336, p = .000$]. Thus, the first research question received a positive answer and the relevant null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that using contextualized storytelling technique including different visual aids was effective in enhancing the perception of the intended vocabulary items. In other words, this technique could made significant contributions to either becoming familiar with or learning significant amount of target vocabulary items. This means that contextualized storytelling helped the learners to develop their retention of receptive target vocabulary knowledge. Table 4 below reports the results of this analysis.

Table 5. *Independent Samples Test (VKS-posttest Perceptions)*

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
10.336	58	.000	20.93	2.025	16.879	24.987

4.2. Investigating the second research question

Along with the perceptions, the number of correct choices to the pictured questions and the number of correct sentences written with the given vocabulary items were calculated. These choices which provided the participants' actual mean scores were elicited from the second part of option C in the VKS. It is worth mentioning that only in cases where the mentioned option was selected by the learners in both groups, could they answer its second part and get the actual scores i.e. production scores.

Similarly, to analyze the differences between two sets of actual scores obtained from the two study groups, the independent sample t-test was applied. In this regard, the results revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores [$t(58) = 13.1.3, p = .000$], which means that using contextualized storytelling technique including different visual aids was effective in retrieving vocabulary items and using them productively when needed by the learners. Thus, the second research question was also answered in the affirmative and the respective null hypothesis was rejected. This means that contextualized storytelling helped the learners to develop their retention of productive target vocabulary knowledge. The results of the analysis are given I Table 6 below.

Table 6. *Independent Samples Test (VKS-posttest Actual Scores)*

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
13.103	58	.000	26.33	2.010	22.310	30.356

Note. $N = 30. p < .05.$

5. Discussion

As stated previously, this study sought to investigate the effects of contextualized storytelling in both receptive and productive vocabulary retention among EFL learners at the lower intermediate level. According to empirical evidence derived from this study, it was found that the effects of contextualized storytelling on vocabulary growth were positive and statistically significant. In other words, the experimental group who learned novel words through contextualized storytelling significantly outperformed the control group who derived no benefit from the merits of this instructional technique in learning intended vocabulary items. According to these findings, it can be mentioned that contextualized storytelling-based instruction can equip EFL learners with effective strategies needed to expand their vocabulary knowledge in EFL context in which learners have lack of exposure to authentic language use in real life. These findings confirm the claim that “storytelling can lead to language development in young children” (kirsch, 2012, p. 35).

With this in mind, these findings further support those of the previous studies (Ahmed et al., 2021; Amin Afshar & Mojavezi, 2017; Bezilova, 2019; Bhatti et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2023; Nematollahi et al., 2017; Rahnama, 2019; Tachom, 2021) in that all of them agree on the important role of storytelling in vocabulary learning and retention. A probable reason for the superiority of contextualized storytelling could be that it provided a relaxed and enjoyable environment for the participants in the experimental group. They could actively participate in the process of English language learning. This is because “storytelling develops positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning and creates willingness to continue learning” (Juraid & Ibrahim, 2016, p. 87). Therefore, storytelling as a useful training method can enable language learners to fix information in mind (Juraid & Ibrahim, 2016).

In the same vein, the study findings can be parallel with the ones from previous studies that revealed the significant effects of the storytelling-based instruction on other areas of language learning: listening (Ahmed et al, 2021; Hemmati et al, 2015), both listening and speaking (Tran, 2021), and reading (Sahibzada et al., 2020; Vu et al., 2021; Yanto, 2018). All these studies validated the effectiveness of storytelling as an educational tool which can improve the quality of English language teaching and learning among learners and increase their success and motivation toward learning the target language.

In summary, the overall finding of this study indicates that contextualized storytelling, regarding the way it is treated in the study, contributes to the deep and durable learning of the target vocabulary. This finding can be expounded in light of Krashen and Mason's (2020) *optimal input hypothesis* elaborated above. The compelling, rich, and abundant input brought about through the diversified contextualized storytelling may be said to have caused deep-rooted intake, and hence, retention of the target words. Also, Swain's *output hypothesis* might be said to have put more flesh to this finding as during the contextualized storytelling activities the learners get involved in ample and dives language productions (output-based tasks), which in turn brings about profound and more lasting learning effect and vocabulary retention.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study depict that contextualized storytelling activities including visual aids improve learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge and help them to use the intended vocabularies productively. It could be clearly realized

that in spite of the fact that the learners were at a lower level of language proficiency (lower-intermediate), they could learn most of the vocabularies taught using illustrated stories with no need to translate any word to Farsi to simplify stories' comprehension. This is because images with other contextualization techniques support understanding the meaning of the story events.

The findings in this study imply that EFL teachers play a more active role in learners' vocabulary teaching and learning. They should creatively integrate the use of the contextualized storytelling activities in the EFL curriculum to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Storytelling should not be viewed as a chore but an activity which encourages the learners to use their imagination and which allows them to engage in experimentation with the target language. Also, teachers could develop the language skills of learners by providing appropriate learning opportunities that stimulate them to play with words, with the story, and with the text during a storytelling experience.

Like any other research endeavor, this study is not free from its limitations. This study focused on the lower intermediate level learners. Other studies can replicate the study, focusing on other proficiency levels. Also, the study dealt with the young EFL learners, which means that other age ranges can be an issue to be taken up by further studies. Concerning the language components, the present study focused on vocabulary development. Similar studies can focus on other language skills and components in the same research context. Finally, this study utilized a quantitative research design. Other researchers may investigate the same research problem, employing mixed-methods designs in their studies. The further studies suggested above can help enrich the related literature and provide a more comprehensive picture of the status of this research area in the EFL/ESL teaching/ learning contexts.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

References

- Abbasi, M., & Behjat, F. (2018). The effect of storytelling via Telegram on Iranian EFL learners' speaking complexity. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 5(2), 28-40.
- Ahmed, M., Inam A., & Saif, J. (2021). The effect of storytelling on listening skills and vocabulary of preschool children. *Journal of Early Childhood Care and Education*, 5(2), 13-30.
- Aitkuzhinova-Arslan, A., Gun, S., & Ustunel, E. (2016). Teaching vocabulary to Turkish young learners in semantically related and semantically unrelated sets by using digital storytelling. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 12(1), 42-54.
- Amin Afshar, M., & Mojavezi, A. (2017). The effect of aural and visual storytelling on vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 10(4), 92-99.
- Benabbes, S., & Taleb, H. A. A. (2024). The effect of storytelling on the development of language and social skills in French as a foreign language classroom. *Heliyon*, 10, 1-10.
- Bezilova, V. (2019). The effect of storytelling on longer vocabulary retention. *Contemporary Research in Education and English Language Teaching*, 1(4), 57-62.
- Biemiller, A. (2003). Vocabulary: Needed if more children are to read well. *Reading Psychology*, 24, 323-335.
- Bhatti, M. S., Iqbal, A., Rafique, Z., Noreen, S., & Tabassum, F. (2022). Short stories as an innovative EFL teaching technique to improve Pakistani elementary students' English vocabulary. *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, 12(2), 405-420.
- Boonkongsan, N., & Intaraprasert, C. (2014). English vocabulary learning strategies employed by Thai tertiary-level students with different genders and levels of vocabulary proficiency. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 4(3), 1-9.
- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2002). *The primary English teacher's guide*. Penguin.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Prentice Hall Regents.

- Chowdhury, D. & Biswas, T. (2022). Storytelling as an Effective Educational Tool in Primary Education in Rural Areas of Bangladesh: Teachers' Perspective. *Teacher's World: Journal of Education and Research*, 48 (2), 130-141
- Cunningham, D. S. (2017). *Vocation across the academy: A new vocabulary for higher education*. Oxford University Press.
- Derin, A. (2002). *Incidental and intentional vocabulary learning of 3rd grade EFL learners: A case study in Turkey*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Bogazici University.
- Faraj, A. K. A. (2015). Effective strategies for turning receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary in EFL context. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 16(27), 10-19.
- Farizawati, Ramlan, & Lubis, T. (2020). Teaching vocabulary through story telling for young learners. *Journal of Community Empowerment*, 1(1), 18-27.
- Fauziningrum, E., Sari, M. N., Rahmani, S. F., Riztya, R., Syafruni, & Purba, P. M. (2023). Strategies used by English teachers in teaching vocabulary. *Journal on Education*, 6(1). 674-679.
- Gao, Y.-L., Wang, F.-Y., & Lee, S.-Y. (2023). The effects of three different storytelling approaches on the vocabulary acquisition and response patterns of young EFL students. *Language Teaching Research*, 27(5), 1078-1098.
- Harkio, N., & P. Pietila. (2016). The role of vocabulary breadth and depth in reading comprehension: A quantitative study of Finnish EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 7(6), 1079-1088.
- Juraid, R. A., & Ibrahim, M. M. A. (2016). The effect of storytelling on developing communication skills of EFL female students and their attitudes towards IT. *Educational Research International*, 5(4), 71-131.
- Huang, H. -L. (2006). The effects of storytelling on EFL young learners reading comprehension and word recall. *English Teaching and Learning*, 30(3), 51-74.
- Ibrahim, A. I. (2022). The effect of storytelling as a teaching method on speaking skills in EFL programs: An action research. *European Journal of Education English Teaching*, 7(3), 20-35.
- İnal, H., & Cakir, A. (2014). Story-based vocabulary teaching. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 675-679.
- Garcia, F. V. (2017). Storytelling and grammar learning: A study among young-elementary EFL learners in Colombia. *International Journal of English and Education*, 6(2), 63-81.
- Kalantari, F. & Hashemian, M. (2016). A story-telling approach to teaching English to young EFL Iranian learners. *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 9(1), 221-234.
- Khodabandeh, F. (2018). The impact of storytelling techniques through virtual instruction on English students' speaking ability. *Teaching English with Technology*, 18(1), 24-36.
- Kirsch, C. (2012). Using storytelling to teach vocabulary in language lessons: Does it work? *The Language Learning Journal*, 44(1), 33-51.
- Kowsary, M., & Rouhani, Y. (2013). The relationship between teacher's storytelling aloud and reading comprehension among Iranian elementary EFL learners. *Indian Journal of Fundamental and Applied Life Sciences*, 3(3), 225-234.
- Krashen, S., & Mason, B. (2020). *The optimal input hypothesis: Not all comprehensible input is of equal value*. CATESOL Newsletter, 5.
- Laufer, B. (2003). Vocabulary acquisition in a second language: Do learners really acquire most vocabulary by reading? *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59, 565-585.
- Lotfi, G. (2007). Learning vocabulary in EFL contexts through vocabulary learning strategies. *Novitas-Royal*, 1(2), 84-91.
- McNett, G. (2016). Using stories to facilitate learning. *College Teaching*, 64(4), 184-193.
- Minalla, A. A. (2024). *Enhancing young EFL Learners' vocabulary learning through contextualizing animated videos*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14 (2), 578-586

- Min, Y.-K. (2013). Vocabulary Acquisition: Practical Strategies for ESL Students. *Journal of International Students*, 3(1), 64-69.
- Morsali, S. (2016). The effect of storytelling on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary retention. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 4(4), 416-438.
- Nam, J. (2010). Linking research and practice: Effective strategies for teaching vocabulary in the ESL classroom. *TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL DU Canada*, 28(1), 127-135.
- Nematollahi, B., Behjat, F., & Kargar, A. A. (2017). The effect of aural and visual storytelling on vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 10(4), 92-99.
- Paribakht, T. S., & Wesche, M. (1996). Enhancing vocabulary acquisition through reading: A hierarchy of text-related exercise types. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 52(2), 155-178.
- Rahnama, Z. (2019). The effects of picture-based storytelling on vocabulary learning of intermediate EFL learners. *International Journal of Language, Literature, Culture and History Studies*, 1(4), 242-252.
- Read, J. (2000). *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press.
- Read, J. (2004). Plumbing the depths: How should the construct of vocabulary knowledge be defined? In P. Bogaards & B. Laufer (eds.), *Vocabulary in a second language: Selection, acquisition, and testing* (pp. 209-227). John Benjamins.
- Sahibzada, J., Ahmadzai, Y. M. B., Niaz, A., & Laftah, S. H. (2020). Effects of Storytelling on Improving EFL Students' Critical Thinking and Reading Comprehension. *American International Journal of Social Science Research*, 5(1), 33-47.
- Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Senoo, Y., & Yonemoto, K. (2014). Vocabulary learning through Extensive reading: A case study. *The Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 1-12.
- Shahibzada, J., Ahmadzai, Y. M. B., Sahibzaha, A., Niaz, A., & Laftah, S. H. (2021). Effects of story reading on improving EFL students' reading comprehension and critical thinking and vocabulary of preschool children. *American International Journal of Education and Linguistics Research*, 4(1), 1-17.
- Shen, W. W. (2003). Current trends of vocabulary teaching and learning strategies for EFL settings. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7, 187-224.
- Siyanova-Chanturia, A., & Webb, S. (2016). Teaching Vocabulary in the EFL Context. In W. A. Renandya and H. P. Widodo (Eds.), *English language teaching today: Linking theory and practice* (pp. 227-239). Springer International.
- Sutrisna, G. (2021). Vocabulary acquisition in EFL: A literature review of innovative vocabulary teaching strategies. *Journal of English Language Education*, 4(1), 8-17.
- Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 471-483). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Syafrizal, S., & Haerudin, H. (2018). The implementation of vocabulary building strategy in teaching English vocabulary to young learners. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 5(1), 40-48.
- Tachom, K. (2021). Enhancing Thai EFL students' EFL vocabulary knowledge through the use of task-based language teaching and storytelling technique adopting Thai folktales. *Asian Journal of Education and Training*, 7(4), 235-243.
- Tran, D. T. (2021). Storytelling to enhance speaking and listening skills for English young learners: A case study of language centers in Binh Duong province. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, 5(2), 29-36.
- Utkegovna, B. S. (2023). A story-based approach in teaching foreign language. *Modern Science and Research*, 2(10), 262-266.

- Vu, N. N., Lan, P. T. N., & lien, N. T. H. (2021). Using story retelling to improve young learners' L2 reading comprehension. *Language Related Research*, 12(3), 25-49.
- Workie, M. B., & Feleke, K. E. (2020). Strategies of vocabulary instruction in English language teaching: A literature review. *International Journal of English Literature and Culture*, 8(5), 134-142.
- Yanto (2018). The effect of storytelling on technique towards students' speaking ability at class XI of state Islamic senior high school (man) Salido. *Journal of English Education and Linguistics*, 2(1), 60-71.
- Yulianawati, I., Nurhadi, K., & Mayasari, A. D. (2022). Elementary students reading engagement: The impact of storytelling in EFL reading comprehension. *Educational Journal of History and Humanities*, 5(1), 159-167.
- Zarei, A. A., & Ramezankhani, Z. (2018). The comparative effects of mnemonic keyword method, storytelling, and semantic organization on L2 idiom learning. *Teaching English Language*, 12(1), 31-60.
- Zohrabi, M., Tadayyon, P., & Dobakhti, L. (2018). The effects of rote and contextualized memorization on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary development. *Iranian Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(2), 16-31.
- Zoubi, k. F. A. (2021). The Effect of Storytelling in Developing Vocabulary Acquisition. *Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal*, 38(7), 1-14.



© 2024 by the authors. Licensee University of Zanjan, Iran. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0 license). (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).