



# Enhancing EFL Learners' Competence through Short Stories: A Study in Four Colleges

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## Abstract

In the current dynamics of world communication, the ability to use English functionally is increasing exponentially given the conception of the world as a global village. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, the EFL teaching community has much to desire as far as the learners' English proficiency go. Literature forms a very minuscule component in the curriculum whereas story telling as pedagogy in EFL learning is proven to be effective in various other EFL environments. This paper is an empirical study of the usefulness of this method in KSA with the aim to encourage its adoption by the teaching community.

**Keywords:** EFL; language skills; competence; Dual-code model; multi-sensory approach; contextual clues

## 1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching has come a long way since the beginning of the century when grammar translation dominated as a pedagogy. Today many approaches and even a combination of these is resorted to by EFL teachers in an effort to make the learning experience more meaningful. Even then, most teachers still believe that "an EFL class should focus on mastering linguistic elements only". However, changes in the kind of proficiency that EFL learners need have made it imperative to change the language teaching methods. Literature and language are two sides of the same coin: one can be used to excel in the other. They are also symbiotic in the sense that competence in one can lead to better competence in the other. Historically, especially in the Saudi Arabian EFL context, abstract grammatical rules, vocabulary lists that learners are unable to correlate to daily life experience and sentences for translation are the main classroom components. Speaking the foreign language has scarcely been the target: appreciating English literature is unthinkable as a goal. What we observe in EFL education these days is the use of literature as a technique for teaching the basic language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and Grammar. Why this appeals to the learners is simple: Human predicament is the same across nations and cultures and much like music, one can appreciate literature even with limited language competence. At the same time, it helps improve the language repertoire as the learners' metacognitive faculties become actively involved. Literature adds a new dimension in the curricula to the teaching of EFL. While it is true that dense and lengthy pieces may not engage the EFL learner sufficiently, short stories in English can be useful in developing the EFL learners' language skills. These keep up the learners' interest while simultaneously creating an optimally challenging language situation where they are exposed to an easily comprehensible simple sentence structure and a universally identifiable message.

This paper intends to familiarize EFL instructors with the effectiveness of using short stories in EFL instruction; it also aims at providing teachers with certain teaching strategies for optimal outcomes.

Storytelling has developed as an art across cultures and continents. In the earliest days of civilisation, this was a means of transmitting knowledge when the written word was unknown to man. Among the earliest examples of wisdom being passed down the generations are the Arabian Nights, Aesop's Fables and Panchatantra. Then and now, storytelling has been a living art. Like music and dance, it is brought to life in performance. The storyteller's building materials are words, sounds, and language patterns, the very things that we want our EFL learners to develop. Mallan (1991) says that when accompanied by comprehension questions and retelling strategies, storytelling enhances literal, inferential and critical aspects of learning among children. Further, their reading and listening comprehension and information retrieval functions also improve.

In EFL teaching/learning, short story narrations help young learners progress from oracy to literacy. Sulzby and Teale (1991) and Trostle & Hicks (1998) confirm through their studies that even a simple version of storytelling not demanding much of the teacher's interpretation can make a big difference in children's EFL learning. It is the researcher's experience that short stories prove effective in EFL situations as they can be read or narrated in a single sitting giving the sensation of 'totality' of experience to the reader or listener. Weariness or interruption which can be

detrimental to learning a 'foreign language' are discounted in the reading or listening of a short story. Brevity and coherence make for easy appreciation as even the average learner's attention does not waver due to the presence of these features.

## 2. Previous Studies

Trubus and Karchme (1977) Steinberg (1993), Marschark and Harris (1996) assert that hearing impaired children are more likely to encounter reading difficulties than normal children; the development of their reading proficiency is rendered relatively slow and restrained.

Per Anderson et al (1985), Dyson (1991), Hall (1987), Saville–Troike (1984); and Stenberg (1993) state that oral vocabulary is, in fact, a predictor of reading proficiency. This leads us to know that young learners of Language need sufficient auditory inputs to develop phonological awareness and acquire the needed oral vocabulary; this facilitates their reading becoming smoother for transition from oral communication to print in view.

The advocates of storytelling (Green, 1996; Gillard, 1996; Livo, 1983; Peck, 1989; Williams, 1991) have viewed storytelling as an instructional strategy aimed at playing thereby a major role in preparing students to learn; they can do this prior to their entering school and also after they have begun formal schooling in school.

Cary (1998) has proposed an instructional approach of contextualized storytelling to help ESL learners improve their English acquisition in the U.S. It is not like traditional storytelling where a folk art highlights the verbal performance of storytellers. On the other hand, contextualized storytelling is a multi-sensory approach; it relies upon both verbal and non-verbal communication in the story-telling process. This (story-telling process) uses heavy props, visual aids, concrete referents for vocabulary, proper prosodic delivery, and rich body language. Thus in the story-telling process, contextualized storytelling utilizes learners' non-verbal knowledge by providing abundant contextual clues for them to grasp the language-use without the help of the mother tongue (for transaction). Cary illustrates, in his study, the overall positive effects of this approach on comprehension and retention of oral narratives by the ESL learners. Besides, in this study, a higher degree of student-engagement and a noticeable improvement in their speaking skill were found.

According to Green (2004) who conducted a study for finding out the efficacy of stories, the conclusion is that storytelling can serve multiple functions in the classroom – the chiefs of which are: sparking student interest, aiding the flow of lectures, making material memorable, overcoming student resistance or anxiety, and building rapport between the instructor and the students, or among students themselves.

Chung (2006) says that the act of narrating stories to language learners contributes for a better comprehension of complex ideas, concepts and information. King (2007) discovered from his research that stories are rich sources of wisdom, imagination, creativity and comfort. In the essay, King (2007) described her happy personal experiences through the process of developing and using the collaborative story-making approach with young people and adults in various school settings.

Hui-Ling Hang (2006) conducted a study in Taiwan and came to the conclusion that “Decoding skills such as phonics do not help much in comprehension and thus learners still need to resort to a bilingual dictionary if the contextual clues are not sufficient for them to infer the meanings of the unknown words. The searching and guessing of new words often turn out to be an exhausting task that reduces reading fluency and even the interest” ( p.52)

## 3. Storytelling and Language Learning

The benefit of storytelling in the development of literacy in children has long been recognized (Brand & Donato, 2001; Cooper, Collins, & Saxby, 1992; Glazer & Burke, 1994, Jennings, 1991; Mallan, 1991; Myuers & Hilliard, 2001; Trousdale, 1990). As mentioned before, and as per views of Dyson (1991), Grugeon & Gardner (2000); Hall (1987; and Nelson (1989), sufficient auditory input and oral language competence are basal requirements and crucial pre-requisites for bringing about reading development; the same is true of EFL learners. Storytelling offers a great deal of auditory input through social narrative interaction that incorporates more sophisticated linguistic features than conversation does.

## 4. Developing the Language Grammar

In terms of grammar learning, storytelling may serve as a stepping stone to the learning of syntax as it demonstrates grammatical and syntactic features in meaningful context. As Malla (1991) points out, storytelling demonstrates a varied use of devices of tense and linking's devices in organizing ideas. Taylor (2000); and Wajnryb (2003) opine that with a deliberate design of learning activities, the teacher can draw attention of the EFL-learners to specific linguistic features in the story presentation.

## 5. Research Questions

1. Are the students keen to learn English?
2. What are the methods mostly and currently used to teach and learn EFL?
3. Do the students feel excited about the English class?
4. Will EFL learning and teaching be facilitated using stories?

5. Is any difference in performance seen between those taught using the short story method and conventional methods in terms of word recall, global comprehension, and grammar with the intervention of contextualized storytelling?

## 6. The Present Study

This study was spread over a period of four months to cover one semester completely. The hypothesis was that the language components that formed the syllabus for the semester starting in September 2012 and ending in December 2012 can be learnt better if taught using the short story. There were two tools employed by the researcher. One, a common questionnaire was administered to collect learners' response to the current EFL practices and their outlook to these. Two, the learners' ATRs (Achievement Test Reports) were analysed post intervention to verify the hypothesis. Data was collected from eighty undergraduate students and the assistance of ten English language teachers in four colleges affiliated to Qassim University, Saudi Arabia was sought. Of the twenty students from one college, ten each were the control group and experimental group. The latter were taught the syllabus components for the semester directly or otherwise using the short story. The control group were taught using the prevalent pedagogy. The end semester examination was uniformly administered to all of the eighty subjects. Later their performance was analysed to arrive at relevant generalisations.

## 7. Collection and analysis of data

Data collected through questionnaire is tabulated below:

Responses to Questionnaire

Sr. No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I enjoy learning when the teacher uses storytelling	0	0	15	35
2	I like receiving instruction when the teacher uses storytelling	0	0	16	34
3	Using storytelling makes me nervous.	38	12	0	0
4	I concentrate better in class when storytelling is used to deliver instruction	0	0	38	12
5	I know that using storytelling gives me opportunities to learn many new things	0	0	43	7
6	Using storytelling is very frustrating.	34	16	0	0
7	I enjoy storytelling myself.	0	0	13	37
8	I believe that the more often teachers use storytelling, the more I will enjoy school	0	0	7	41
9	I believe that storytelling is important for me to learn new words.	0	0	15	35
10	I feel comfortable with storytelling.	0	0	17	33

11	I enjoy English learning during storytelling sessions.	0	0	8	42
12	I think that it takes a larger amount of time to learn when my teacher uses storytelling.	30	12	4	4
13	I will be able to get a good score if storytelling were used for other subjects, even for L1.	0	0	23	27
14	I can learn many things when my teacher uses storytelling.	0	0	19	31

The responses from the students support or strongly support story-telling method for EFL. All of them have suggested the use of story-telling for teaching even the L-1 and other subjects as they enjoy stories and feel associated with the content, central idea. They also learn vocabulary and other language tools more comfortably. However, words recall turned out in the range of 10% to 50%.

At the end of the semester, we tested the students for their general language skills. The Achievement Test had four components: One comprehension passage based on a newspaper clipping; one section on general grammar skills; one short answer section based on the literary appreciation of the stories prescribed in their textbook; and one free writing section. Across board, the experimental groups performed in the range of 70-87% in sections 1, 2, and 4. These were all sections that tested their global learning. However, the control group scored poorly on these sections with the performance clustering around 30-40%. This outcome shows that overall language skills improve significantly when taught indirectly using the short stories. However, in section 3, based on the literary items prescribed in their textbooks, the performance of the control group was at par with the experimental group. This went on to prove that word recall was barely affected by the short story methodology.

## 8. Conclusion

The conclusions are:

- (i) no positive effect of storytelling was found on word recall;
- (ii) it is highly encouraging with respect to story comprehension;
- (iii) the contextualized storytelling was found to be an effective intervention in reading comprehension for both proficient and less proficient students; and
- (iv) the less proficient students seemed to profit more from this approach.

## 9. Suggestions and Recommendations

- 1) Ask comprehension questions carefully. Do not immediately rain questions on the learners as the artistic value of the exercise is lost and the entire new approach to teaching suffers.
- 2) Invent exercises in phonetics, semantics, and syntax relating them to the short stories. In fact, this should be an on-going process.
- 3) Undertaking listening activities in communication lab to begin with, later in the class rooms in the regular manner can also be effective: After telling a tale, check listeners' comprehension by: (a) comparing; (b). discriminating; (c). predicting; (d). sequencing; (e). classifying; and (f). transferring information, etc. Unlike other listening activities, stories are often repeated, but never in exactly the same words.
- 4) Do oral activities: some of these are (a) Choral reading; (b) story fill-in; (c ) add-on stories; (d) building a tale from key words; (e) spin a yarn; (f) Chinese whispers etc. These are interesting options to enable the learners use language learnt in reading or listening to the short story. Discussion topics can be taken from the story's themes; students can retell their favourite tales, or invent stories themselves based on their own personal experiences.
- 5) Do written activities: These are: (a) Rewriting; (b) summarizing or paraphrasing a tale.
- 6) Audio-visual activities related to the short story can also be incorporated.
- 7) Continue innovating and involve students in the process; their involvement nurtures positive attitude. Students will be able to collect many interesting stories to make a huge pool for use.

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