The Impact of Using Narrative Content on Improving Iraqi EFL Learners' Four Language Skills

Ali AbdulhusseinSagban[a], SaadiyaWudaaAlquraishy[b], Bahaaaldeenkazom Abbas[c], [a]Al-Furat Al-Awst Technical University, Iraq, [b]University of Al-Qadisiyah, Iraq, [c]The General Directorate of Education in Najaf, Iraq, Email: [a]dw.ali3@atu.edu.iq, [b]saadiya.wydaa@qu.edu.iq, [c]bahaa.kadom@gmail.com

The present study aims at investigating the effect of teaching narrative content on improving Iraqi EFL intermediate pupils' four language skills. To achieve the purposes of this study, sixty third year intermediate pupils were taken to represent the present study sample. Thirty pupils received instruction on narrative content and were enrolled in an experimental group. The other thirty pupils represented the control group, which was tutored in the conventional way. After instruction, the findings indicated that the experimental group subjects' performance in four skills outperformed that of the control group subjects on post-test. Building on the results obtained, it is concluded that the narrative content employed with the third year intermediate pupils of the experimental group is considered more effective, useful, and favourable to teach the four English language skills than the conventional one.

Key words: *Narrative content, four language skills, EFL intermediate learners.*

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Stories serve as an entertainment function that creates a pleasurable feeling in the comprehender (Brewer and Litchenstein. 1982: 478). In addition, the purpose of using the story is to introduce learners to different ways that help them think about values, and to instruct them in the lessons of life by giving them insights into the motives for different patterns of behaviour. Thus, by reading stories which convey such topics as failure, success, friendship, sacrifice, grief, loss, etc., learners will find out that some strategies are condoned whereas others are punished by their society. Consequently, they learn that the particular strategy they may wish

to follow when carrying out a set of actions that satisfy their own goal might not be ignored by the society and consequently lead them to a tragic end (Stein. 1982: 490).

In addition, learners who are given opportunities to use language through the medium of stories will refine and develop their language skills (Jennings. 1991: 12).

However, those points above depend mainly on how well stories are introduced by teachers of English. Throughout my observation as a teacher of English, I see that the present use of stories in language classes does not mirror its potential. This is because teachers regard stories as time consuming and complicated in their language and content. To back and document this problem, the researcher has conducted personal interviews with some teachers of English.

The results show that most of the teachers of English do not pay enough attention to the stories found in the student books. They justify that with the plentiful and difficult vocabulary items they have to present in the limited class time.

The above points of view indicate that there is a real problem. To remedy this problem, the researcher gives a satisfactory amount of time to teach stories found in the student books to the study sample.

Aim

The study aims to use stories to teach the four main language skills for the third year intermediate pupils, hoping to improve their overall English language.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis which is posed by the researchers is the following:

No statistically significant difference is to be found between the mean scores of the experimental group which is tutored in English using stories, and the mean scores of the control group which is tutored conventionally.

Limits

This study is limited to:
1. Stories that are found in the third year intermediate student's book.
2. The third-year pupils of the intermediate schools for boys in the city centre of Al-Najaf Governorate for the academic year (2019-2020).
3. The prescribed syllabus "English for Iraq - 3rd Intermediate Student's Book" by Terry

O'Neill and Peter Snow.

Value

The study value lies in the following aspects:
1. EFL teachers and supervisors to use stories to improve the four language skills.
2. Textbook writers in determining the objectives of the curricula that conform with the learners' needs.
3. Researchers who work in the field of language teaching and learning.

Procedures

In order to for the aim to be fulfilled and the hypothesis of the study to be verified, the following procedures have been adopted:

1. Surveying the terms Story and English Language Skills in the literature available, concentrating on its definitions;
2. Choosing a suitable experimental design;
3. Choosing a sample from the population under study, equalising its subjects in some variables, and controlling some extraneous factors;
4. Dividing the sample into experimental and control groups;
5. Making a lesson plan to explain how to implement stories in tutoring the experimental group;
6. Designing a pre-test and post-test and taking into account its validity and reliability;
7. Setting a scoring scheme in order to score the tests accurately;
8. Administering a pilot study;
9. Administering the pre-test to the subjects of both groups;
10. Using stories in teaching the experimental group pupils and using the conventional method in teaching the control group pupils;
11. Applying the post-test to both groups and collecting the required data;
12. Analysing the data statistically to get results;
13. Drawing conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies.

Definitions of Basic Terms

Impact

According to Hornby (2007: 648) the word impact implies the massive effect that something has on somebody or something else.

Whereas Richards (2010: 248) defines impact as the effect of an exam on testees, other stakeholders (e.g. instructor, parents, head teachers, or test constructers), pedagogical systems, or community.

The Operational Definitions

Impact means the effect that narrative content has on improving students' English language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Narrative Content

According to Baldick (2001: 165) narrative content "is a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee. A narrative consists of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration, in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot)".

Richards (2010: 384) regards narrative content as the written or oral account of a real or fictional story. It is the genre structure underlying stories.

The Operational Definition

Narrative content refers to a set of simple stories which are located in students' books and give students moral lessons.

Language Skills

Language skills in the field of language teaching means the manner or the way in which language is used. Generally, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are named as the four language skills (Richards. 2010: 293).

The Operational Definition

Language skills pertains to the main skills of English language. Namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Theoretical Background

Reasons for Using Stories in EFL/ESL Classes

There are, at least, three merits of using stories in EFL classes. Firstly, since stories are short, they make teachers' coverage and students' reading task easier. Secondly, they help to develop cognitive analytical abilities; a student may infer life and develop his/her experience by means of reading books. Thirdly, since they are global, readers everywhere can experience and narrate them (Sage. 1987: 43). Moreover, the excitement and drama of stories can be experienced and of course numerous struggles, problems, and disputes can be seen through them (White. 1993: 1).

It is worth mentioning that students may face obstacles to remember unrelated sentences; while they incline to remember stories (Karant. 1994:3). In the same view, Bromley (1998: 93) states that using stories is recognised as an important means to develop learners' literacy. Good stories have a distinctive language that really develops the knowledge and delights the senses of learners.

In addition, through stories learners can identify how people live around the world. This might help them to develop a good understanding of themselves and may improve their experience of life. This is the reason why stories are delivered from one generation to the next (Wheeler, 2001:36).

Concerning motivation, stories have the strength to stimulate students, who are unstimulated and unenthusiastic, to learn, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to engage in an uncommon discipline of storytelling. In this sense, it is a resource for people engagement (Miley. 2009: 358).

Short Story and English Language Skills

Elley (2000: 234) admits that English language skills are improved if ESL/EFL teaching is built on story books and literature that is related to reading resources. Besides, Murdoch (2002: 9) shows that if short stories are chosen and used properly, they can offer good content which will significantly enrich ELT courses at intermediate proficiency levels for learners. It can be said that the four language skills can all be tutored through using stories. Furthermore, Ghosn (2002: 174) remarks that the natural language acquisition theory adapts to several story features: in addition to being interesting to learners, it also eases the integration of language skills, affords expectable natural language and chances for authentic writing and reading, and provides grammatically sequenced language. The matter of how stories affect the four language skills will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Listening

Classroom interaction studies reveal that learners devote a long period of time listening to each other, their teacher, or to material that is pre-recorded. When English is used by the teacher for explaining something, offering instructions, telling a story or praising someone, that teacher is inspiring listening on the part of the learners. Problems are likely to arise if the teacher does not tutor learners in a way that they want to listen (Brumfit, Moon and Tongue. 1991: 158).

Listening activities have great value in English language classrooms, they offer a learner a rich source of data from which he/she starts to construct his/her own thoughts on the way language can work. That knowledge generates a basis which the learner can finally build on in producing language. In fact, the language learner grasps more than what he/she might say. Therefore, when learning their first language, learners listen to language long before learning to speak. With regard to foreign language, using short stories can improve listening skills since foreign language contains a "silent period" in which the language (short story), can be listened to, internalised and formulated by the learner. As a result, the more the learner is exposed to short story listening, the more familiar he/she will be with the language (Philips. 1997: 17).

Speaking

William, S. (1983:5) defines speaking as "a developing relationship between speaker and listener. Furthermore, speaking determines which logical linguistic or psychological rules need to be applied in a given communicative situation". Communication then is the major objective of speaking.

Teachers of English tend to see that speaking is a difficult skill to be taught, since learners need to control countless language elements in order to successfully speak: "functions, structures, pronunciation, vocabulary, and so on". Providing a storytelling activity is considered as one of the ways to teach speaking in the classroom. Teachers need to keep in mind that learners want to know the purpose of doing this activity. Moreover, talking about the story which has been listened to is an important stimulating activity, frequently more significant than the topic (Philips. 1997: 38).

Reading

Reading is an additional valuable source of learning a foreign language. Books can open up other worlds to learners. The most important part of the language learning experience is that teachers need to make reading enjoyable (Scott and Ytreberg.1991: 25).

Ellis and Brewster (1991: 30), on the other hand, suggest that overloading learners with many reading tasks is not right because it can be unstimulating. In addition, Harmer (1994: 191) states that it is very important to convince learners that a short story can be understood even though there are structures and vocabulary items they have never seen before. He further says that an intelligible way of reading can be developed for learners as well as by some of the following skills:

1. Deducting meaning from context.
2. Recognising function and discourse patterns.
3. Getting the general picture and extracting detailed information.
4. Extracting specific information.
5. Predictive skills.

Writing

Writing is a kind of tough cognitive activity by which the writer is responsible for having control of spelling and letter formation, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure, format and content. Moreover, the writer should be able to organise and join information into coherent and cohesive texts (Bell and Burnaby. 1984 cited in Nunan. 1989: 36).

Generally, it is good "to use English through listening, speaking reading, and leave writing at the end". This order of skills is appropriate for English classrooms. Concerning writing, it is typical to require learners to practise their handwriting by copying the words and sentences of a story . Themes connected to the learners' daily lives or schoolwork can be reflected through these words. Writing is far more than the "simple mechanics of getting the words down: it also involves text construction, sentence linking, selection of appropriate words, punctuation, grammar, spelling, and being creative" (Philips. 1997: 63).

Methodology

The Experimental Design

This experiment adopts the design of pre-test-post-test control and experimental group design (Tavakoli. 2012: 264).

Population and the Sample of the Study

Third-year pupils at the intermediate schools for boys in the city centre of Al-Najaf Governorate, during the academic year (2019-2020), represent the study population.

The sample of this study is represented by Al-Ahrar intermediate school.

Table 1: The Sample of the Study

Number of Pupils after Exclusion	Number of Pupils before Exclusion	Section	Group
30	35	A	Experimental
30	35	B	Control
60	70		Total

Equivalence of the Two Groups

Some variables which may affect the experiment outcomes were controlled to guarantee the equalisation of the two groups. These variables are: age of the learners (measured in months), educational level of the learners' parents, and pupils' first course scores in English of the same academic year.

Instructional Materials

Four short stories were carefully chosen from the syllabus of *English for Iraq*, 3rd intermediate student's book. The topics of the mentioned short stories are as follows:

- Lucky customer 50
- Iraq's first national park
- A powerful lesson for everyone
- Life is like a cup of coffee

The Achievement Test

The researcher has constructed the short story achievement tests which are used as pre-and post-tests for the study sample. The pre-test's aim is to compare its scores with those of the post-test and see the effect of using narrative content on improving pupils' four language skills.

Pre-Test Description

The pre-test is composed of four different questions. The first one deals with reading skill, whereas the second deals with writing skill, the third is about listening and the fourth is a simple personal conversation that invites pupils to speak.

Reliability

Kuder-Richardson 20 and Interrater methods were followed to estimate the reliability of the test in the current study.

The testees' responses were scored by the researcher himself and another rater. Applying these two methods yielded reliability coefficients of (0.801) and (0.899) successively. This means that the test is suitable for application since Tavakoli (2012: 542) mentions that reliability coefficient of a test would be enough and acceptable if it is not less than (0.50).

The Pre-Test Administration

Both groups, the experimental and control, were pre-tested on the 20th Oct 2019. The aim of this pre-test was to guarantee the equalisation of the two groups (see 3.3).

Experimental Application

The experiment is designed to be presented in the first semester. It started on the 1st Nov 2019. It lasted two months and ended on the 31st Dec 2019. In order to control the teacher variable in the experiment, the researcher himself taught both groups the whole material.

The Final Administration of the Test

In each group, the experimental and control, learners were post-tested on the 30th Dec 2019. When conducting the post-test, the same procedures of the pre-test were followed, namely following the same scoring scheme, validity, piloting, finding items' difficulty and discrimination, and reliability. The post-test was also exposed to a jury of fifteen specialists in linguistics and ELT.

The Experimental Group

The experimental group was tutored using the whole material of the stories interrelated with the four language skills teaching. The lesson was divided into four quarters: in the first one the pupils listened to the story; in the second quarter pupils read the story; the third one was about writing as pupils wrote some new vocabulary and questions about the story in their notebooks; and the fourth quarter was an open conversation to discuss things related to the given short story.

The Control Group

The guidelines and steps in the 3rd Intermediate Teacher's Book were followed in teaching the control group.

Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Post-test Scores

The results obtained from the post-test on both groups show that the mean scores of the experimental and control group in the post-test are (30.00) and (21.75) successively, which means that the achievement of the experimental group in the four language skills outperformed that that of the control group.

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation, and T-values of the Pupils' Post-test for the Experimental and Control Groups

Groups	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Degree of Freedom	T-values		Significance Level
					Calculated	Tabulated	
EG	30	30.00	9.75	60	4.422	2	0.05
CG	30	21.75	5.11				

The formula of T-test is used for each sample to show if there is difference between the two groups or not. The result of applying this formula shows that the calculated post-test T-value is (4.422), whereas it is (2) for the tabulated. This indicates that the difference between the two groups is significant at significance level of (0.05) and under the freedom degrees of (63) (see Table 2). Consequently, this indicates that the null hypothesis of the study which sits in (1.3) and states that "no statistically significant difference is to be found between the mean scores of the experimental group which is tutored English according to stories and the control group mean scores which is tutored conventionally" is rejected.

Discussion of the Results

Building upon the current study results, it has been figured out that a significant difference can be found between the experimental and the control groups. As far as the post-test is concerned, the mean score of the experimental group is (30.00), whereas it is (21.75) for the control group. This signifies that the pupils' achievement of the experimental group is significantly better than that of the control group.

Conclusion

It has been concluded that the narrative content which is employed to teach the third year intermediate pupils of the experimental group, is considered more effective, useful, and favourable to teach the four English language skills than the conventional one.

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