

The Influence of Storytelling on Elementary Level Students: A Triangulated Study among Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract: *In EFL contexts where stories are considered as a potent educational tool in language learning, conducting research on the influence of stories on students' linguistic knowledge and affective conditions can play a crucial role in achieving future prosperities. This paper is an attempt to investigate the influence of storytelling on elementary level foreign language learners' motivation and school achievement. To this end, it exploits a triangulated approach to access the most reliable results. The 110 homogenized subjects are assigned to experimental and control groups whose post test and questionnaire results are compared after a one-term storytelling treatment. While a post test helps the researchers to find the effect of storytelling on students' language achievement, AMTB questionnaire assists them to find its effect on their motivation. A semi-structured interview is also conducted to verify the quantitative data and to access the ideas of students regarding storytelling project. The results demonstrated that although storytelling can boost the students' school achievement, it is ineffective in motivating learners in foreign language learning. Confirming the quantitative results, the interview clarified the reason why storytelling could not attract students. At the end, the findings are discussed and some pedagogical implications are proposed.*

Key words: *Motivation, school achievement, storytelling*

Introduction

Storytelling is “a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time” (Chambers, 1970, p.43). Stories have been used in classrooms over centuries in case of children learning first language. Its impacts on young children's psychosocial, language, and narrative development have long been shown (Cooper, 2005). Stories have been a very important part of each syllabus in order to develop reading skills and improve readers' imagination capability. Second language practitioners long ago decided to introduce stories in language classroom and make use of this educational aid for enhancing language skills of students. This fairly long tradition i.e. introducing stories in language classroom has turned out to be successful as the literature proves it and as the current situation sees its vast use across language classes. Cooper (1993) believes that the pedagogical benefits of storytelling can be mainly considered under affective and linguistic categories. From affective point of view, including fun themes and making the students interested in learning, stories can lower students' affective filter and provide a learning environment that is free of stress and anxiety. Having a language classroom supplemented with different stories, a change of atmosphere would be created which brings a feeling of camaraderie among students who then will be able to communicate their ideas freely without being bound by

their psychological drives. According to Harmer (2001) stories have the potential to increase learners' enthusiasm toward language learning, foster creativity and create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere in which learners do not feel afraid of language learning task and benefit from their learning experience

From linguistic point, storytelling can be considered an influential integrative strategy for acquiring all reading, writing, speaking and listening skills as well as sub-skills (King & Ippolito, 2001; Wright, 2003). Young learners benefit from stories since they are so valuable resources of linguistic, affective, cognitive, cultural and social aspects (Malkina, 1995). Literature has made this point clear that stories help in both stimulating children's imagination and understanding of the world, and also developing their language ability (Aiex, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Koki, 1998; Zobairi & Gulley, 1989).

Therefore, stories have been found to be so efficient in increasing language proficiency and motivation of learners while these benefits gain more power when young learners are taken into account (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). In Iran, stories are currently regarded as one of the constant educational aids in foreign language classrooms and as an element that promote language acquisition of students. Being theoretically and practically justified through many studies, the need to examine the effects of stories on Iranian young learners' proficiency and motivation becomes evident when there is scarcity of major investigation on this issue. In spite of being widely used in Iranian schools and the eagerness shown toward them on the part of syllabus designers, students, and teachers, stories' influence has not been thoroughly investigated on Iranian students' affective and linguistic status. This paper is an attempt to find out if storytelling has any influence on school achievement of Iranian students at secondary school level and also if it results in creating more motivated learners in foreign language learning classes. Since it is expected that applying stories at school language classes boost the achievement of Iranian students regarding their grammar, vocabulary and reading skill proficiency, the focus of this study is on these aspects and generally calls them school achievement in this paper. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following questions:

Q1. What is the effect of storytelling on secondary school learners' school achievement in foreign language learning classroom?

Q2. What is the effect of storytelling on secondary school learners' language learning motivation in foreign language learning classroom?

Storytelling and School Achievement

As was mentioned before, by school achievement we mean learners' ability in grammar, vocabulary and reading skill. Many studies proved the beneficial effects of stories on the aforementioned language skill and subskills, few of them are reviewed here.

Stories are full of grammatical structures that can be learned and used as formulaic expressions which do not need grammatical analysis and can be learnt in an ongoing way because they are frequently used in story context. Rodrigo (2006) found that if learners are exposed to a great deal of comprehensible input through listening and reading stories, they can

acquire grammar incidentally because they do not need to attend to language forms and are able to apply it intuitively in the actual language use. Abstract modeling of syntactic patterns of language introduced in stories provides this opportunity for learners to “extract syntactic rules from the modeled utterances embodying these rules, which then enables them to generate an almost infinite variety of new sentences that they have never heard” (Bandura, 1986, p.501)

About vocabulary, we can refer to the contextualization of new vocabulary in stories as their foremost benefits, because they are usually repeated more than once; therefore the listener has more opportunity for understanding and retaining them (Wood, 2003). Furthermore, by engaging more senses and creating an emotional reaction, stories encourage people to retain the new vocabulary more actively (Willingham, 2009). If additional information is also given to help learners with the comprehension of the story (as with visual aids for example), the introduction of new words need not be a huge task. De la Fuente (2002) found that learners exposed to input during negotiated interaction with or without production of pushed output will attain higher levels of L2 receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition than learners exposed to non-negotiated, pre-modified input. Also, it is found that stories have a structure that helps retrieval of information, including words meaning (Graesser & Ottati, 1995; Wood, 2003). In a study attempted by Bower and Clark (1969), participants in experimental group who arranged vocabulary words into story form were five times more able to remember new vocabulary than those in control group.

Stories can benefit students' reading comprehension by making them focused on meaning and by keeping them interested all through the story which can initially be so helpful for their reading. Active engagement of learners in stories has been proved to be an effective tool in improving reading comprehension (Aix, 1988; Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Crowder, 2001; Phillips, 1999). Besides, stories encourage the use of effective strategies to make sense of the sequence of events. Conducting her empirical study on second language learners, Carrel (1984a) found that students' knowledge of story increased their language comprehension level and helped them to be more strategic readers while encountering different reading materials. Vipond (1980) also reported that familiarity with story structure brings more skillful, strategic readers. Many experts assert that the power of stories for activating the prior knowledge of learners improves their comprehension of second language and encourages them to be autonomous readers (Carell, 1984a; Carell, 1984b; Kintsch & Yarbrough, 1982; Mandler, 1978).

Storytelling and Motivation

Dörnyei, (1998) defines motivation, as a psychological term, which refers to the initiation, intensity and persistence of a behavior. He believes that motivation is the reason for learners' carrying out certain activities that enhance their learning, the amount of effort they are prepared to invest in order to carry out such activities, and the duration of time that they are willing to sustain these activities. In his idea, these are the reasons that so much effort has been dedicated to motivational research in the field of educational psychology and L2 learning.

Stories can be motivating because children reading a story in their L2 use all the available resources to make sense of it, and to find out what happens in the end (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). When they reach that understanding, they experience the satisfaction that comes from using a

foreign language to achieve a real goal: “Motivation becomes synonymous with a process of sense of involvement with the target language” (p. 262).

Stories increase interactional opportunities among the students because the lively atmosphere and real life environment created by stories encourages the students to talk and discuss with each other. Besides decreasing nervousness by learners’ fully attending to the plot, stories are capable of bringing reality to the language classroom because children can actively take part in dramatizing the stories, extending and adding more details to them (Ji, 1999).

Young learners really enjoy stories because they activate children’s imagination and sense of enjoyment, are interesting for them, meet their emotional, cognitive and psychological needs and bring variety and change (Malkina, 1995). Also, stories provide a context that holds students’ attention (Cooter, 1991).

Lordly (2007) in a study examined the effect of storytelling language classroom and motivation of individuals. Survey responses indicated that storytelling could positively influence the learning environment. This occurs through the creation of a greater focus on personalized information, glimpses of real-life experience, a connection with a topic as participants recognize similarities in their own personal experience and knowledge, and connections between different topics and through the emphasis on key concepts.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to find out the influence of storytelling on improving school achievement and motivation of foreign language students at secondary school level. Since storytelling roots in second language acquisition and language pedagogy theories, there is a gap between theoretical and practical aspects because they cannot reflect each other perfectly (Brune, 2004). Both of these theories are relatively young and include a wide range of variables which cannot be merely studied via the empirical studies, thus they should be confirmed through one or more qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, portfolios, video-recordings, etc. Accordingly, this study applied a triangulated approach containing questionnaire and test along with interviews to maximize the validity and deepness of the results of its aforementioned investigation.

Participants

The study was conducted among 110 first grade students of a secondary school in Iran. The experimental group contained 62 and the control group 48 male students at the age range of 12 to 13 years old at elementary level of English proficiency. For the interview part, 40 volunteers were randomly selected out of the experimental group to attend the interview sessions.

Instrumentation

Stories: Storybooks were selected based on the level of the students, the themes of these stories were similar to those of the chapters of the course book. The stories revolved around general themes such as colors, fruits, animals, jobs, etc. and was tried to contain many colorful pictures.

Tests: Two parallel achievement tests were designed and pilot tested by the researchers to be used as pretest to homogenize students based on their general proficiency level and as post-test to see the influence of the stories on school language achievement of learners in treatment group.

Questionnaire: The Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB): In order to assess the primary motivational level of the learners, a motivation questionnaire called “Attitude/Motivation Test Battery” (AMTB) was applied. AMTB has been used in many different forms whose original one was developed by Gardner (1958) and extended by Gardner and Lambert (1972). Gardner and Smythe (1975a), computed internal consistency reliability of the sub-tests and found Cronbach’s alpha of 0.89 for the test. The composition of the AMTB varies somewhat from form to form depending upon the purpose and the culture of the group for which it is intended. For the sake of the present study, some questions were deleted and some were changed according to the age of the participants and the context of study. The modified version of the questionnaire used in this study includes 39 items consisting of 5 content areas which are “Interest in Foreign Languages” (9 items), “Attitudes toward learning English” (10), “English Class Anxiety” (5 items), “Motivational Intensity” (9 items), and “Desire to Learn English” (6 items).

Interview: After finishing the course, a semi-structured interview was conducted among the experimental group. Each student was asked some open ended questions in 7-8 minutes long to be briefed. The interviewees were asked about their ideas about the stories and the way they were carried out in their language classes. They were also asked about their expectations of using stories in their classrooms and their suggestions for improving it.

Procedure

The design of the quantitative part of this study was Randomized Pretest, Posttest Control group design. Administering the pretest and homogenizing students based on their proficiency level, the researchers randomly assigned the learners to control and experimental groups.

While the control group was instructed through the traditional approaches of English teaching, the lessons of experimental group were accompanied by stories. Before starting the treatment, the teachers were instructed about the way they should implement the stories in their classrooms. Since following the steps in order was of crucial importance, it was emphasized that the steps be taken appropriately during the treatment. The specified steps for carrying out stories were as follows:

First, the vocabulary and structural points of the assigned chapter in the syllabus are introduced and class continues its regular learning plan based on the course book. Then, the story with similar theme to the chapter is read by the teacher and the meanings of new vocabulary are taught through gestures or actions. Then, some grammar points are raised and repeated in the context of story. Subsequent practice makes sure that all students have understood the key terms. In the third step, story is narrated by the teacher while students act out the story. Also, the teacher tries to create some situations which help students’ understanding of the story plot. During this step, the teacher tries to ask several comprehension questions, review the target vocabulary, and asks for students’ ideas about characters and events. During the fourth step, students are paired where they retell the story in their group or to the whole class.

Accomplishing storytelling treatment in experimental group for one semester, AMTB, and a post test were administered to both experimental and control groups to compare their level of motivation and language achievement after the study.

At the end of the period of the study, 40 participants were randomly selected to attend in the interview. The recorded voices of participants were transcribed and analyzed immediately after the sessions.

Findings

In this part, first some information about subjects is provided to avoid any marginal interference and prove that the two groups are homogeneous in terms of their age, proficiency level, and gender.

Table 1: Participants characteristics

Group	N	Gender	Proficiency level	Age
Experimental	62	Male	Elementary level	12.40
Control	48	Male	Elementary level	12.38

T-test was used to measure the statistical differences of their age and proficiency level. The results of table 2 demonstrate that there is not a sharp age difference between subjects so it is quite justifiable to have such groups as our control and experimental groups.

Table 2: T-test result for controlling age variable

Scope	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. value	Sig. level
Age	experimental	62	12.40	.495	.298	.766	Not Sig.
	control	48	12.38	.489			

As mentioned before, we ran a pre-test to put the students at the same level of proficiency in the same classroom at the start of the educational year. Results of table 3 confirm the fact that subjects are all at the same level of proficiency before the study.

Table 3: T-test result for controlling proficiency variable

Scope	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. value	Sig. level
Proficiency	experimental	62	87.76	9.204	1.882	.063	Not Sig.

	control	48	84.08	11.276			
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The data were collected through a pretest-treatment-posttest design and analyzed via the statistical package SPSS. The statistical analysis of the data collected through the study is presented in this part. The researchers hypothesize that the students who were taught through storytelling method would show better achievement than those who were taught through the traditional method. This hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

To answer the first question:

- 1- Does storytelling in the language classroom have any significant effect on young learners' school achievement?

According to table 4, the mean score of the experimental group's post test is 86.76 with standard deviation of 11.876 while this is 81.21 with standard deviation of 14.535 for control group. The participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group in post test. To see if this difference is significant at .05 level of significance, a t-test was conducted.

Table 4: Group statistics

Post Test	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	Experimental group	62	86.76	11.876	1.508
	Control group	48	81.21	14.535	2.098

Table 5: Independent sample t-test for post test scores

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. 2-tailed	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								lower	upper
Equal variance assumed	4.770	.031	2.204	108	.030	5.550	2.519	.558	10.542
Equal variance not assumed			2.148	89.67	.034	5.550	2.584	.416	10.683

Reporting on the results of the second row of table 5 where equal variances are not assumed, it can be seen that the t value is 2.148 and the significant value is less than (.034). This indicates that the observed difference between the experimental group and control groups is significant at .05 level of significance. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of storytelling in the

language classroom had a significant effect on language achievement of first graders in secondary schools of Iran.

For the second research question:

- 2- Does implementing stories in language classroom have any effect on learners' motivation in learning a foreign language?

To assess the influence of storytelling on students' motivation, AMTB was administered among both groups after the term. As it is shown in table 6, the means are calculated and compared.

Table 6: Group mean for motivation

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Motivation	Experimental	62	3.4638	.69382
	Control	48	3.5896	.41638

Looking at the results of the motivation means, we can see that the mean score of control group is a little more than the experimental group (3.58 to 3.45). There is not a sharp difference between the two means, however this result shows that those classes having storytelling in their schedule are not more motivated in learning another language compared to those who don't have storytelling as part of their schedule. Since we had homogenous groups at first and the syllabus, context, and text books were the same except for the use of stories in experimental group, we expected to see motivational differences between the two groups resulting from the use of stories in the classroom. The motivation means of the two groups are not very different and we can claim that both control group and experimental groups are motivated enough, but storytelling does not have any significant effect on their motivational behavior. Thus the experimental group whose English classes have been accompanied by stories did not show higher motivational level and we cannot claim for a positive or negative influence of stories on learners' motivation in learning another language.

Interview result

The opinion poll through the interview showed that the students generally have a positive attitude toward applying stories in their language classes. A majority of them were aware of the pedagogical benefits of storytelling like enhancing their ability in reading comprehension and increasing their vocabulary structure. The interview showed that many students see stories as the strongest supplier of new vocabulary and believe in enriching their vocabulary knowledge as the main advantage of storytelling which is brought up through the context of stories.

Beside the advantages of storytelling, the students raised some points regarding the drawbacks of the conducted treatment in their classrooms. The main reported limitation was the topic of the stories. Almost all the students agreed on the point that the topics of stories were not

interesting at all because they seem to be so childish to them. Another limitation of stories raised by students was the way storytelling was carried out in their language classrooms. According to their reports, the actual focus of the teachers seemed to be on the course book and stories were considered just some extra materials. Thus in case of lack of time, the teachers did not make it comprehensible for them and skipped some of the main steps like review, narration and acting out activities. Consequently stories were only regarded as a burden on students' shoulders which made them do more assignments at home and a wasting activity that could prevent them from more practice of their lessons in course book.

While most of the students commented that storytelling is an advantageous tool for reducing their stress and language ego via bringing fun, variety to their classes, a few students saw it a distracting activity which its fun troubles the serious educational atmosphere of traditional approaches. These students asserted that in their expectation, a language class should only focus on teaching and learning rather than creating fun for students.

At the end of the interview, the students were asked to state their expectations along with suggestions for carrying out storytelling in language classrooms. It was found that almost all of them hoped that their language ability would improve by narrating and acting stories. They expected that storytelling would assist them in meeting real life language needs. The students also raised some points to optimize the current approach of storytelling. One of their suggestions was the application of technological devices like computers and video projectors along with stories. For incorporating stories in course books, students really voted for that and believed that such course books could be more educationally beneficial. Some of the interviewees, asked for the allocation of no extra points to storytelling assignments, in a way that only interested people follow them and some suggested the replacement of stories by films which are supposed to be more varied and attractive to them.

Discussion

This study investigated whether using storytelling in language classroom has any influence on language achievement and motivation of secondary school students in Iran. This study supposed that stories reinforce learning the course book by giving a suitable context for vocabulary and offering the chance of being exposed to extra words, sentence structure practices and reading comprehension activities to students. The experimental group's better average score on post test and the statistical analysis of the results verified our supposition and showed that storytelling has a positive influence on learners' language achievement. Our quantitative test results were confirmed by interviewees' assertions regarding the benefits of storytelling on the linguistic components of their language.

Regarding the effect of storytelling on motivational level of foreign language learners, statistical analysis demonstrated that the motivation mean score for control group was a little more than that for experimental group; it means that motivation of the students in experimental group did not change after the one-term period of the study. This is in contradiction with the research literature which proved the increase in motivational level of the students as one of the benefits of using stories in the language classroom.

Our qualitative effort for discovering the reason for aforementioned phenomenon demonstrated that the type of stories, and the way they were put into action for the sake of this study were not conducted in a way that could be motivating for the students. The main reason for the ineffectiveness of our treatment in motivating learners was the inappropriateness of stories to age and interest of students. Teachers and course developers should bear in mind that stories should be at learners' age, their interest, and their language proficiency. As soon as one of these factors is not carefully considered when designing syllabus materials, can we expect the inefficiency of our use of stories in the classroom. Dull stories that are not adapted to the level and age of the students could not bring any change in motivation and proficiency of the students and using such stories in the classroom is futile and ineffective. Only being aware of the fact that stories are valuable sources available for the language teacher is not enough, the teacher should consider all in force factors when choosing the story and also apply the most appropriate way to use them in the class (Loukia, 2006). Although the teachers were trained on how to use stories in their classes and how to carry them, the results of the study cast doubts about the way story telling was carried out over the term. A very serious restriction posed upon the teachers is lack of sufficient time for all activities, then it does limit their freedom in following the framework sequence as we expected. Teachers usually hasten to cover all schedule materials because what is important at the end of the course both for teachers and school heads is teaching what is included in school syllabus.

This study confirmed the claim that storytelling can improve the school achievement level of the young learners. When thinking of the ways to improve reading skills, vocabulary knowledge and designing ways to make the newly taught structure understood, teachers cannot overlook the important role of stories. They are highly recommended to set a specific time for reading stories in the classroom, and if possible to follow them with actions so that learners can make connection between the story and the created plot which is especially helpful in case of having young learners.

Depending on the community norms of the learners and their contextual situation, stories could be localized so as to become more interesting and familiar since they become closer to their cultural values. One way of making storytelling more stimulating is to accompany them with multimedia resources such as power point slides that show the text, big pictures related to the story shown on the screen, and playing music or the voices of characters.

There are some limitations in this study, one of them is the matter of authenticity. The stories that were used during the period of the study were all pedagogically designed ones because the learners were not at a level that could read authentic stories. Authentic materials always arouse the interests and make learning activities so meaningful to the students, but it is not always possible to succeed in applying such materials in language classes because most of the time learners are not at a level of understanding texts that native speakers easily make sense of. As a suggestion for further studies, storytelling method with more proficient learners who can be assigned authentic stories could render more functional results. A serious limitation of the study was choosing structure, vocabulary and reading as our dependent variable while communicative ability of the learners is one of the significant aims of English language pedagogy. This was due to the fact that in the context of our study just these elements are considered language proficiency of the students and researchers were not allowed to conduct a

reliable proficiency test including all necessary components thus the limitation of the study. Finally, another limitation is the way the treatment was applied. Being confined to institutional restrictions, the researchers were not sufficiently free to conduct the treatment in their desired steps and allocate appropriate time and supervision over it.

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