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The Effectiveness of Story-based Teaching Technique on EFL Adult Learners' Vocabulary Retention

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
	This study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of stories on EFL adult learners' vocabulary retention. Thirty-six elementary EFL learners of the age group between 18 and 37 were assigned to the experimental and control groups. The control group received the traditional method of teaching vocabulary using definitions, translations into the mother tongue, drilling and etc., while the experimental one was exposed to stories as a treatment. The results of the ten-week experimental study revealed that the effects of stories-based activities on participants' vocabulary retention on the two groups are not significantly different. However, adult learners consciously recognized the benefits and enjoyment in learning vocabulary with story-based technique.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English has an essential role in the development of education, economy, science, technology, and the interrelationship among countries around the world. The communicative competencies of an English user require a lot of practical skills and linguistic knowledge, in which knowledge of vocabulary should be considered as one of the main influences. Vocabulary is considered a central part of communicative competence, so it is essential to learn a language. Harmer (1991) emphasizes the great importance of vocabulary that "if language structures make up the skeleton of language then vocabulary provides the vital organs and the flesh". He also overemphasizes the importance of acquiring vocabulary and states that people can still communicate in a limit without grammar, while without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Hence, assisting learners in acquiring a wide range of vocabulary knowledge seems indispensable for any language teaching programs. In Ge (2015) two stages in the process of vocabulary learning are described with actions or activities as (1) to get to know the word or to memorize the word and (2) to retain the word in memory as long as possible. Compared with the first stage, the second one often presents more challenges to language learners to forget a word's meaning over a specific time span. Holden and Usuki (1999) state that one of the most important foreign language teaching issues is vocabulary learning with a difficult aspect of word retention.

Similarly, although learners exert themselves to improve their vocabulary knowledge in our teaching context, they have claimed a lot of obstacles in their learning, especially in memorizing the meaning of words. Learners recognize that low vocabulary knowledge causes a wide range of inconveniences in acquiring language knowledge and participating in in-class activities. Learners normally forget the words they learned with ease and find it impossible to use them in an effective communication. More importantly, they fail to transform short-term memory words into long-term ones.

2. Literature Review
2.1 EFL adult learners
Adult learners are 18 years and up and engage in learning activities, with any sustained changes in thinking. Taylor et al. (2000) show that adult learners participate in many types of formal and informal education activities which may help them "function

effectively in changing world around them, or "for the purpose of achieving some personal senses of fulfillment, for bringing about improvement in their lives, or even for the sake of leisure and recreation" (Mott, 2000, p. 135). In the current study, participants are learners who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a Language Center in Can Tho City, ageing from 18 years old and engaging in learning EFL activities.

Being different from young and teenage learners, adult learners carry out distinguishing characteristics that could be fully understood to optimize teaching and learning quality Merriam and Bierema (2013): (1) The accumulation of life experiences: they enter English courses with diverse knowledge and experiences in many life aspects, so they prefer to take practical learning activities, where they can apply their prior skill to the learning process; (2) The establishment of their opinions, values and beliefs, which should be respected rather than being dismissed the process of learning; (3) Intrinsic motivation: Learners increase their effort when being motivated by a need, an interest, or a desire to learn. They are also motivated by the relevance of the materials and learn better when the materials are related to their own needs and interests; (4) Individual differences: Adults learn at various rates and in different ways according to their intellectual ability, educational level, personality, and cognitive learning styles. Teaching strategies must anticipate and accommodate different comprehension rates of learners; (5) The democratic, participatory, and collaborative environment: they need to be actively involved in determining how and what they will learn and they need active learning experiences; (6) Goal-orientation: they want to know why they are learning something. Adults have needs that are concrete and immediate. They are task- or problem-centred rather than subject-centred. (7) Autonomy and self-direction: they are self-reliant learners and prefer to work at their own pace. Individuals learn best when they are ready to learn and when they have identified their own learning needs.

2.2 Integrating stories in teaching vocabulary
Several reasons encourage the use of short stories in an ESL classroom. The most revealing one is their suitable length, which allows the learners to conclude reading in one sitting or depending on the teacher's approach. It can be entirely read within one or two class lessons (da Silva, 2001, pp. 171-178). As students are always worried about the amount of work they need to perform and often feel overwhelmed, reading short stories seems less frightening.

In the past few decades, several researchers (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Bretz, 1990; Erkaya, 2005; Gilroy et al., 1997; Kelly & Krishnan, 1995; Kim, 2004) have discussed and illustrated the benefits of utilizing such stories in the language classrooms for developing language skills and recommended the use of short-stories in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. In Bretz (1990), while discussing the importance of the use of short-stories in foreign language teaching, stories is illustrated to improve communicative competence by providing "a springboard for the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation" (p.338). In addition, Wright (2003), an expert of the use of short-stories argues that "in using stories in language teaching, we are using something much bigger and more important than language teaching itself" (p.7). In a different research, Pathan (2013) classifies the use of short-stories in EFL classroom into different categories, such as linguistic, socio-cultural, personal, and emotional benefits and discusses possible implications for EFL teachers and learners.

According to Lazar (1993), short-stories in ELT classroom provide authentic materials and might add a great educational value to teaching and learning activities. Elaborating on this linguistic aspect, Murdoch (2002) argues that stories allow the instructors to teach four language skills to all levels of language proficiency and if selected and exploited appropriately, 'short- stories provide quality text-content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" (p.9).
The use of short-stories has many socio-cultural benefits as well. In this regard, Kirschenbaum (1995) asserts that storytelling is "one of the effective tools for inculcating morality, especially for youngsters, as stories contain powerful images and symbols and operate on both conscious and unconscious levels, conveying intellectual and emotional meaning" (p.68). In addition, by learning about the culture, learners learn about

2.3 Criteria for selecting stories in vocabulary teaching
Stories are considered as a holistic approach to language teaching and support the natural acquisition of language. We believe that language is acquired within contexts and in chunks, not in isolation, word by word or sentence by sentence. Stories are meaningful inputs, similar to comprehensible input in Krashen (1985) that learners receive as they listen to and retell them from their language. Comprehensible input refers to the language given to learners just above the level of their present language competence. This helps them get engaged and motivate them to understand, find out the new words and structures, and make meaning out of the input. In addition, stories also develop learners' knowledge about other cultures and respect others. Stories help learners develop critical thinking and the ability to make a judgment about things, what happens, and the actions of people, ideas, and so on.

The ability of material selection is one of the teachers' critical general competencies, who always decide on teaching materials, resources, methods, and other things for the most effective teaching and learning process. In this research, stories should also be carefully selected because not all authentic stories are applicable and relevant for EFL teaching use.

It may be useful here to clarify the term "authentic stories". These so-called "real" stories have not been written specifically for teaching EFL because their primary aims are to serve popular readers. The language is not selected or graded, and thereby authentic stories constitute various sources of authentic input to the language in contrast to books published specifically for classroom use. These stories often contain an adapted version of the language and do not employ or develop essential language ability.

Brewster et al. (2002) define the guidelines for choosing real compelling stories for the above-mentioned reasons. Details of the guideline are presented in Table 1. It is unlikely that every story will contain all the above criteria, but all good stories will have some of them.

Table 1. Guideline for choosing effective stories (Brewster et al., 2002)

Criteria	Notes
Level of the difficulty of vocabulary and structures of the language	Is the level accessible?
	Does it provide an appropriate level of challenge?
Literary devices – dialogues, predictability, repetition, cumulative content, rhythm, humor, suspense, surprise, and contrast.	What literary devices does the story contain?
	How will these help learners understand and participate in the storytelling, encourage anticipation and remembering, enrich their language and add to their enjoyment?
Content – amusing, relevant, interesting, memorable, and length.	Will the story engage my learners?
	Is it relevant to their interests?
	Is it possible to read the story in one go or can it be broken down into parts?
Illustrations, layout – size and attraction.	Are the illustrations attractive and colorful?
	Are they big enough for all the class to see?
	Does the layout support learners understanding and maximize their interaction with the story?
Educational potential cross-curricular links, learning to learn, world/cultural knowledge, and learning styles/intelligence.	How does the story enable learners to become aware of and develop their learning strategies?
	What can learners learn about the world and other cultures?
	Can the story link in with other subjects across the curriculum?
Motivation – enjoyment, positive attitudes, curiosity, successful learning, experiences, and confidence building.	Will the story motivate my learners by drawing on their personal experience?
	Will it develop their imagination and appeal to their sense of humor?
	Will my learners respond positively to the story and develop positive attitudes towards the target language, culture and language learning?
Values – emotional development, cooperation, collaboration, and self-esteem.	Will the story help learners become aware of and question important values?
	Does the story help learners explore and share emotions?
	Does the story help learners come to a better understanding of them and develop their self-esteem?
Global issues – multicultural education and intercultural awareness	Does the story offer learners a broader view of the world?
	Does it develop an awareness and understanding of environmental and ecological issues, gender issues, human rights, health and safety, tolerance, etc.?
Language, content – authentic and	Is the language representative of the variety spoken

appropriate.	in the target culture?
	Does the story provide any information about life in the target culture?
The potential for follow-up work	Does the story provide a starting point for related language activities and lead on to follow-up work in the form of concrete outcomes, such as making something, organizing some events or other activities based on a topic of the story?

2.4 Related Studies

A number of educational researchers have studied the impact of stories on language skills development over the world for the past few decades (Ge, 2015; Moosazadeh & Motallebzadeh, 2017; Morsali, 2016; Parvareshbar & Ghoorchaei, 2016). However, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, not much research focuses on stories in terms of their effectiveness on EFL learners' vocabulary retention.

In search of studying the effect of using short stories on enhancing vocabulary learning of Iranian intermediate EFL learners, the study of Parvareshbar and Ghoorchaei (2016)come up with new methods of enhancing learners' vocabulary, which enable both teachers and students to better cope with language learning and teaching. The quasi-experimental pretest-posttest study results show that the use of stories positively affects learners' English vocabulary learning and the proper application of the short stories could bring about the effectiveness of teaching and learning English vocabulary.

In addition, Ge (2015) conducts a study to investigate the effectiveness of a storytelling approach in Chinese adult e-learners' vocabulary learning. The results of the data analysis showed that the storytelling method was more effective than rote memorization in both short-term retention and long-term retention, through its effects tended to diminish a little bit with time. Possible suggestions to perfect the method were given in the paper.

In a different context, Morsali (2016) conducts a study on utilizing two storytelling techniques of summarizing and stripping story arrangement in an EFL case. It focused on exploring which type of storytelling technique was more effective and thus could help EFL learners master the new words better. The results show that the summarising group's learners perform better than the stripping story arrangement group and both groups outperformed the control group.

Another study conducted by Moosazadeh and Motallebzadeh (2017) focuses on investigating the effects of digital storytelling on Iranian EFL elementary male learners' vocabulary retention. Regarding the achieved data, the results indicated that the majority of students in the experimental group had positive attitudes towards applying digital storytelling for learning English. They believed that the stories were attractive, amusing, and helpful. On the other hand, learners in the control group believed that studying eight stories traditionally was a little difficult.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research question

To what extent does the use of the story in teaching vocabulary affect adult learners' vocabulary retention?

3.2. Participants

There were thirty-six elementary EFL learners of the age group between 18 and 37, in which the number of male and female learners were equal in both groups. Most of them were students from universities and colleges, and others worked for companies in the city. They took the English courses for a variety of reasons, but primarily for improving their English ability. Besides, all of them had obtained English Certificate Level A1 at the same language center before enrolling in the A2 class. Being qualified A1 level, learners can use English for essential communication in genuine situations. They can also understand the short conversations and use simple structures and expressions for daily activities. The researcher met the classes once a week for two hours.

3.3. Teaching Materials

During the ten-week experiment, the control group was taught with the coursebook Objective KET (published by Cambridge University Press), while the experimental group was additionally provided with six stories and relevant activities. The researcher mainly prepared these stories based on qualifying the guideline in Table and suitable with learners at A2 level of English proficiency and the contents of the units from the coursebook. That means the literary text was neither too simple nor too complex for learners. The content of the stories was about various topics, which can be listed as follows.

1. True friends

2. Finds bargains at the thrift shop
3. Shopping for food
4. Unforgettable trip
5. Visiting a zoo
6. Finding an apartment

Each story with more than 200 words at the elementary level was employed in the classroom in 60 minutes. There were 48 target vocabulary items for learners in the experiment; 8 words were chosen from each story. The number of new words was considered appropriate for adults in this experiment though the number of chunks of information should not exceed seven, and the short-term retention would not be effective (Moras & Carlos, 2001).

3.4. Research instrument

The vocabulary test is used to measure learners' achievement in learning vocabulary would be used as the instrument in the current research. According to Gronlunch (1981), a test of achievement might be used for selection, placement, diagnosis, or mastery certification. Similarly, achievement tests were also designed to indicate the degree of success in some past learning activities Tinambunan (1988).

In this case, the test was based upon the learners' vocabulary retention. For measuring the participants' vocabulary retention before and after the treatment course, a pre-test and a post-test were designed based upon Objective KET Student's book by Annette Capel and Wendy Sharp (2010) and Cambridge Placement Test (2010) because they were suitable to the researcher's aim of measuring the learners' vocabulary knowledge before and after the experiment.

The vocabularies were selected from the first six units of the Objective KET textbook. The test comprised 25 matching and multiple-choice question, which are common and familiar to all learners. Each multiple-choice question was provided with four options of A, B, C, and D. The duration of each test was 30 minutes. The pre-test and post-test were similar in text type, instruction, length and level of difficulties, the allotted time, and the number of the tasks. The participants were not allowed to use dictionaries and cheat during each exam.

3.5. Piloting Tests

Mackey et al. (2000) state that piloting tests can help avoid costly, time-consuming problems during the data collection procedures. Before administering the tests for data collection, two English teachers at the language center were invited to review them with carefully reading, checking the consistency of the format, instruction, length, level of difficulty, and content of the test, and giving some suggestions for improvements. The revised draft was then piloted in a different class with similar conditions to ensure the validity of this instrument. Twenty learners with similar backgrounds and English proficiency levels as those in the official study got involved in the pilot test. The result from the pilot tests showed that with clear initial instructions and examples given, the pre-test and the post-test on vocabulary knowledge used in this study were valid.

The reliability of the piloted pre-test was $\alpha = .76$ and of the piloted post-test was $\alpha = .72$. The results showed that the test was reliable and could be used to collect the study's data.

To score the pre-test and the post-test, the same scoring system was used. Each correct item got 0.4 marks. Therefore, the score of the test is ranked from 0 as the minimum to 10 as the maximum. There were no minus marks for providing incorrect answers. The raw data of 25 test items were run into SPSS version 23 for analysis to compare the retention of the vocabulary between the two groups.

4. Results
4.1. Participants' vocabulary retention at the two points of measurement between the two groups

Descriptive statistics tests initially were conducted on participants' vocabulary retention achievement to find the minimum, the maximum, the means, and the standard deviation of scores that each group obtained before and after the experiment. Table 2 summarized the results from the descriptive statistics tests.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistic Tests of Participants' vocabulary retention between two groups before and after study

		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Control group	Pre-test	18	2,0	7,2	5,111	1,6266
	Post-test	18	4,0	8,4	6,056	1,2645
Experimental group	Pre-test	18	3,2	8,8	5,178	1,3406
	Post-test	18	3,2	9,2	6,000	1,3720

This table indicated differences in the total mean score for participants' vocabulary retention between and within the two groups before and after the study. Both two groups obtained higher total mean scores after the experiment. In addition, the mean scores of the experimental group (M-pre = 5.17; M-post = 6.00) were slightly different from the control group (M-pre = 5.11; M-post = 6.05) before and after the study. However, the evidence from descriptive statistics tests was insufficiently to conclude a statistically significant difference. Therefore, T-Tests were essential to be conducted to evaluate the significance of the mean score differences. The results of the t-tests would be evidence to compare the participants' vocabulary retention between the two groups before and after the study. The results of the pretests of both groups were described in the following table.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test on Pre-test and Post-test

	t	df.	Sig.(2-tail)	MD	SD
Pre-test	-.134	34	.894	-.0667	.4968
Post-test	-.126	34	.900	.0556	.4398

The results from pre-tests indicated that the mean difference (MD= -.06) between the control group (M=5.11) and the experimental group (M= 5.17) was not statistically significant (t= -.134, df =34, p= .89). This meant that the two groups belonged to the same population in term of vocabulary knowledge at the beginning of the experiment.

Table 2 also indicated that after the study, the mean scores of the participants' vocabulary retention of the control group (M=6.056) were slightly higher than that of the experimental group (M=6.000). However, the result from independent samples t-tests showed that the mean difference (MD= .056) in the participants' vocabulary retention after the experiment was not statistically significant (t= -.126, df= .34, p= .90). It proved that the result of the post-test of vocabulary retention in both groups was statistically similar after the treatment.

The results showed the significant similarity between the two groups both before and after the study interrogated the possibility of the learners' ability to enhance vocabulary retention after the study within each condition. That inquiry asked for other t-tests to check for the significant differences of the development of vocabulary knowledge in two conditions of (1) the stories as an intervention in the experimental group and (2) the methods using the designs from the programmed coursebook.

4.2. Participants' vocabulary retention within the two groups before and after the study

The Paired Samples T-Tests were conducted to evaluate statistically significant differences in the mean scores in vocabulary retention tests within the two groups before and after the experiment. The results were displayed in the following table for the controlled condition.

Table 4. Paired samples T-test on Pre-test and Post-test

	MD	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group	-.944	1.1142	-3.596	17	.002
Experimental Group	-.8222	.5897	-5.916	17	.000

Before the study, the result as in Table 2 from the vocabulary tests performed by the control group indicated that the mean scores at the two points of measurement (M pretest = 5.111, M posttest = 6.056) were significantly different (t= -3.596, df = 17, p= .002). This supported that the control group increased vocabulary retention achievement after the study.

Similarly, Table 2 showed that participants' vocabulary retention in the experimental group changed after the study. The mean scores of participants' vocabulary retention of the experimental group after the study (M-post= 6.000) were higher than before the study (M-pre= 5.178). In addition, the result from the paired samples t-test showed the statistical evidences that the mean difference (MD= -0.8) was statistically significant (t= -5,9, df= 17, p= .000). It was concluded that the experimental group also obtained a higher level of vocabulary retention after the intervention. A summary of the significant results of the conditions before and after the study can be seen in the following Figure.

Figure 1. Summary of participant's vocabulary retention achievement
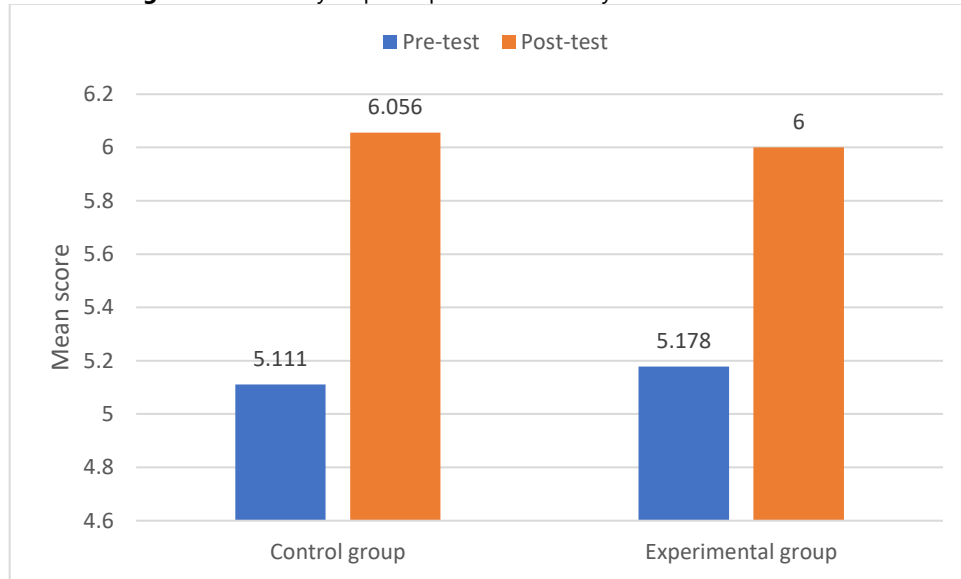
The above Figure summarizes participant's vocabulary retention achievement. It revealed that both two groups considerably increased mean scores after the experiment.

In short, although no significant difference between the two groups both before and after the experiment, it could be concluded that both conditions were effective in terms of vocabulary retention achievement. This result indicated that the learners' vocabulary retention developed regardless of which methods were intervened during the experiment. It also interrogated the values related to the estimated limitation of this study that the vocabulary retention was measured within the exact condition of the curriculum design for the course of KET 1 although different interventions with vocabulary teaching were assigned in two different conditions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Concerning the previous studies in the use of stories, the current research confirmed more value of stories for learning vocabulary and that was compatible with the indications of the positive impacts on learners' retention (Moosazadeh & Motallebzadeh, 2017; Morsali, 2016).

It was hypothesized that participants' vocabulary memorizing capacity would be enhanced after being actively involved in story-based activities and that participants would manifest their positive attitude towards story-based activities in learning new words. Considering the hypothesis, the study proved it to be true that the mean value of pretests and posttests of the two groups showed a sign of considerable increase after the intervention. Although statistically reporting, the mean score of the control group (M= 6.056) was slightly higher than that of the experimental group (M=6.000) and the independence sample t-test between the post-tests in two groups were not significant (t= 126, df= .34, p= .90), the vocabulary retention of the participants in the experimental group was significantly improved and the same result was found in the control group. This result would imply that the methods of vocabulary teaching as described used in the control group did not bring less effectiveness than that of the experimental group in terms of vocabulary retention.

In other words, it indicated that learners' vocabulary retention was enhanced with or without the intervention of using stories in vocabulary teaching, which meant that the effects of stories-based activities on learners' vocabulary retention were recorded and significantly found.

More specifically, the effectiveness of story-based activities created to improve learners' vocabulary retention in the experimental group should be a bit higher than that of the traditional vocabulary teaching techniques in the control group. The study's worth-considering finding lies in the vocabulary learning progress of some participants from each group although the participants both improved their retention ability. In details, the test results of all participants in the experimental group showed an increase while that some participants in the control group presented a decrease after the treatment. Evidently speaking, the pretest and posttest results of the participant numbered 3 is 6 and 5.2 respectively, while that of participant numbered 9 is 7,2 and 6.4 respectively; the participant numbered 15 is 6 and 5,2 respectively.

One of the most precious implications is that this study may be a useful suggestion for EFL teachers and syllabus designers in the context of Mekong Delta. This study contributes to the research context of the applications of stories in teaching vocabulary and how effective this intervention is in EFL classrooms. It also reveals that stories facilitate learning. It greatly depends on how pedagogically appropriate stories are used and their effectiveness in teaching. Stories and special features are of great help to develop an effective learning environment. Poor learners tend to have little background knowledge about the text, which causes them to have difficulty comprehending what they are learning (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Since stories supply additional background information, they can activate schema to help learners learn better Chen (2012). Teachers can employ story-based instructions to improve students' vocabulary knowledge and retain vocabulary for a long time. Applying stories in EFL classroom also improves learners' reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills if the activities to explore EFL teachers' stories focus on vocabulary learning as a means and the learners' growth of knowledge and skills as an end. Different activities using stories for teaching vocabulary help learners access the language input, facilitating the retention of target words. In particular, the activities derived from the stories, such as dictation, group discussion, and oral presentation, can also enhance students' reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills.

This research project also contributes to the teaching experience of the researcher's own professional development. The results in the process of entering the academic world do not end when the experiment is done or when the courses are ending, but become a start of what an EFL teacher should be aware of in any lessons in the classrooms with more sensitivities about who the learners are, what their attitudes are and should have, what and why the activities should be designed and utilized, what values of each task should be considered, and even what the focuses should be for real and useful learning.

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