

Improving Vocabulary Learning Through Digital Stories with Iraqi Young Learners of English at the Primary Level

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Abstract: This paper tries to explore the effects of Digital Stories on Vocabulary learning by Iraqi young learners at the primary level. In order to accomplish this aim a three week experiment was carried out at Al- Imams' Ali private primary school for girls in Al-Diwaniyah City (Iraq). Then a test was designed to investigate whether computer and internet- based technology could improve vocabulary learning in English as a foreign language. Findings indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the test. These results raise interesting issues related to the use of technology in the context of foreign language learning. Further research on how to integrate internet and computer- based technology materials within a traditional methodology is needed in order to help English Language teachers take advantage of the Web and to bring that part of the world into the language classroom.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, digital stories.

1. Introduction:

It is a well known fact that teaching a foreign language is a challenging thing to do, especially when this means dealing with young learners. Creating a playful and enjoyable context is essential for children to develop their overall language proficiency. And that is why the National Curriculum of Iraq concerning English language teaching at the primary level encourages communicative teaching strategies such as, the use of games, role-plays, songs and theme work that promote active and creative language learning. But what really happens inside the classroom, as Iraqi English teachers and researchers we all know that very well, is that the methods employed in English language teaching in Iraq, at the primary level in particular, are traditional, textbook-centered and teacher directed. Furthermore, whole-group instructions, grammar exercises, the use of workbooks and reading aloud seems to be the most

dominant methods used by Iraqi teachers. Many International studies dealing with such kind of methods have proved them to be unsatisfactory and many students find them de-motivating especially when studying detached items that test vocabulary and grammar out of context(e.g. Laufer,1999; Biemiller,2005; Nation,2008). Also, many studies show that some applications of computer-based technology in the foreign language classroom, such as Digital Stories, Computer Games, Moving Pictures and Digital Songs, if appropriately selected and organized can play a significant role in enhancing young learners' learning abilities ,especially vocabulary learning,(see Phillips,1993; Kruse,1990; Nation,2008; Nation,2010; Laufer et al.,2004) supporting the fact that the initial stages of foreign language teaching should be devoted "almost entirely to vocabulary development" (Cameron, 2005:77).

Helping young learners to facilitate their development of a large "word bank" plays a key role in developing the four basic skills of English; reading, writing, speaking and listening,(ibid:75). Stories are thought to be a very powerful educational tool in promoting language proficiency in both the first and second language (Haven,2000:75). They draw young learners' attention to new words and convey certain messages more easily (ibid). Besides, presenting new words in a story based language context can lead young learners to simple ways to internalize "these important blocks of language"(Brown, 2001:222). According to Cameron (2005:159) using stories in the classroom is a very affective way to improve and develop language skills in general, which in turn motivate students to be active learners developing within them a contrastive approach to English language learning.

Putting this important fact in mind, this study tries to explore the effect of Digital Stories on vocabulary development and learning by Iraqi young learners at the primary level. The reason behind choosing these kind of stories- Digital ones- is that they tend to be visual, interactive and reiterative. In order to follow up with the story, young learners have to click on parts of the screen or picture

after listing to and understanding a simple order. It is hypothesized that this may facilitate vocabulary learning since children are actively involved in understanding the story, which in turn may help the children progressively learn the foreign language. Thus, to full-fill the aim and hypothesis of the study an experiment was carried out at Imam's Ali Privet Primary School for girls in Al-Dywaniah City (Iraq). (40) eight year old Iraqi primary students participated in the study, i.e., the third grade. Concentrating on the primary level in this study is due to the reason that many studies dealing with Computer and Internet - Based Technology as an educational tool for foreign language learning in Iraq has focused on the University level leaving aside the importance and motivational effect this technology may have on Iraqi young learners' foreign language proficiency, especially when they are in their initial language learning stages.

2. Review of literature:

2.1 Strategies relevant for Vocabulary teaching and learning:

Useful research on the area of vocabulary development have all agreed upon the importance of context in vocabulary teaching and learning, emphasizing the fact that language reflects the context which it is used and the purpose to which it is put (Nation,2001; Cameron,2005; Cobb,etal.2004; Schmitt& Clapham,2001). According to Brown (2001,277) memorization of long lists of words has been criticized through out the recent years and many studies have shown that the best way to internalize words is through comprehension and production of them within context of surrounding discourse. Therefore, Brown (ibid) , states that teachers should attend to vocabulary within a communicative framework in which items appear not through isolating words or focusing on dictionary definitions.

There has been many recent empirical investigation in the area of vocabulary development much of it involving the research of Paul Nation and his colleagues, (Nation and Chung,2009; Nation, 2008; Nation et al, 2009; Nation, 2001). Based

on their study, Nation et al (2009:541) state that a well planned vocabulary lesson in any language teaching class should have the following features:

1. It focuses on the appropriate level of vocabulary.
2. It provides a balanced range of opportunities for learning.
3. It monitors and assesses the learners' vocabulary knowledge in useful ways.

Putting it in other words Nation et al (ibid) summarize these important features into three dimensional questions that every teacher must ask when dealing with this kind of area in language teaching:

First feature.....what vocabulary?

Second feature..... how should vocabulary knowledge be taught?

Third feature.....how should vocabulary knowledge growth be assessed?

It is worth mentioning that the researcher in this study will try to investigate the validity of the study's hypotheses so far as it is concerned with the three feature i.e. the three question mentioned above, putting in mind the dependence of each feature on one another. But, what is of more relation to this study is the second feature because (the researcher believes) the specification to use Digital stories with Iraqi young learners will provide a balanced range of opportunities for vocabulary learning and development.

On answering the second question (second feature) Nation et al (ibid) presents four "strands" to vocabulary teaching and learning: Meaning focused in-put, Meaning focused out-put, Language focused learning and fluency development. The researcher finds it necessary to give a brief summary on each strand mentioning only the way that each strand could be applied by the teacher in the foreign language classroom.

2.1.1 Meaning focused in-put

This strand involves learning vocabulary by comprehensible in-put gained through listening and reading. The activities that this strand encourages when coming to vocabulary teaching and learning include:

- a. listening to stories, where the teacher notes unfamiliar words on the board or quickly explains the meaning.
- b. Extensive reading.
- c. Taking part in interactive speaking and reading activities.

2.1.2 Meaning focused out-put

This strand involves learning vocabulary through speaking and writing. Joe et al (1998:65) argue that if vocabulary is used in a generative and creative way, then memory for these words is strengthened. The activities that can be very effective sources of vocabulary learning in this strand are:

- a. Retelling of a story or a conversation.
- b. Rewriting for a different purpose.
- c. Group and pair work involving negotiation.

2.1.3 Language-focused learning

This strand involves learning through deliberate learning and deliberate study of vocabulary learning strategies. Nation (2001:296-316) describes one activity that could be used with this kind of strand, through the use of small word cards with the target word or phrase on one side and the first language translation on the other. Other activities like training learners to guess from context, to use dictionaries and word pairs could be very effective sources of vocabulary teaching and learning.

2.1.4: Fluency development

This strand involves learning vocabulary through the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It emphasizes the importance that learners must not only learn new language items but must also be able to access them fluently.

The activities that this kind of strand emphasizes to vocabulary development are:

- a. Speaking fluency activities where learners try to deliver the same talk to three successive learners in a 4 minute, 3 minute and a 2 minute time frame.
- b. Reading fluency activities which include timed text with questions and repeated readings.
- c. Writing activities which include ten minute writing where learners get positive feedback on quantity and content, but not on form.
- d. Listening activities where learners listen to stories or different passages and try in two minutes to retell it on answering related questions on the story or passage.

Despite the importance of Nation's procedures to vocabulary development, it is necessary to take into account a number of factors before deciding which procedure is suitable for a specific teaching situation. Van et al (1999:253) points out some obvious factors which will have to be considered like **a.** motivation of the learner **b.** aspects of the actual teaching situation, such as the presence or absence of certain media and **c.** characteristics of the learner such as their level of language proficiency and age. It is a well known fact that adults have a different attitude than children towards certain instructional materials. Besides young learners have some difficulties with the direct and visual representation of words and objects(ibid). Also, it is important to mention that, teachers dealing with young learners should concenter the use of the first language for the case of modification only since young learners' foreign language proficiency is still at its initial levels(Cameron,2005:127). Thus, one can conclude that creating a playful and enjoyable context with considerable use of the first language all play a key role in increasing the efficiency of young learners language learning proficiency.

2.2 Digital Stories as one strategy for vocabulary development

Many studies have shown that using stories in the foreign language teaching classroom is a powerful and effective way to improve and develop the four basic

skills of language: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Moreover making students participate in such activities can motivate them to be active learners, developing within them a constructive approach towards English language learning (Cameron,2005; Isabel, et al,2004; Haven,2000). Isabel et al (2004: 158) state that stories are a very promising and influential educational means for foreign language teaching and learning. They do not only draw learners' attention to new words but also help them to recreate new vocabulary through "spontaneous, energetic performance assisted by participation and interaction" (ibid). and this is why teachers of young learners, have been replicating this model of learning in young learners' classrooms around the world (ibid).

In his study, Haven (2000:75) showed that stories when used with young learners in particular, can have a powerful and motivating effect, stating that "factual and conceptual information is learnt faster, remembered longer, recalled more readily, and applied more accurately, when that information is delivered as a well told story." He states that teachers dealing with primary level learners must always consider such a strategy especially in vocabulary teaching. He argues that, such a strategy can be incorporated into various types of materials such as musical instruments, pictures, real objects, computers , internet and of course the school textbook, in a way that will be of high motivational effect and fun for young learners (ibid).

As foreign language teachers we must try to engage our learners in digital storytelling activities taking care of more than just language forms and presenting language skills in a most natural way (Cameron,2001:23). In his study on enhancing CLT through stories in the foreign language classroom Karlsson (2012:25) proved that listening to stories can very naturally lead to story telling, while reading stories can equally naturally lead to story writing. He concluded that, because Young learners acquire language unconsciously, the activities teachers do in class should help this kind of acquisition. He argue that, stories are the most valuable resource teachers have which can offer children a world of supported meaning that young learners can relate to. Later

on teachers can use stories to "help children practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing." (ibid).

3. Methodology

3.1 The participants and settings:

In total, 40 eight year old primary students participated in the study, i.e. the third year primary stage. The decision to select such an age arises from the fact that this is the age when Iraqi children officially start their EFL instructions at schools. The primary school selected is Imam Ali's (peace be upon him) privet primary school for girls in Al-Dywaniah City (Iraq). Choosing to work with a privet primary school not a public one is due to very important reasons relevant to the study: the first reason is concerned with the study's experiment. As mentioned in the introduction, the experiment is a computer-Internet based one, which means that every child needs a computer in order to follow up with the story and interact with it. And, such schools can provide not only a computer lab which has computers for every single student but also Internet services 24\7. Students in such schools also have some experience in using computers, since they take computer lessons from the first primary grade. Secondly, children in privet schools begin to study the alphabets and sounds of the English language from the first year they enter the primary school at the age of 6 years in order to be ready to receive EFL instructions at the age of eight. Finally, concerning the division of the sample into two groups, experimental and control group, the researcher is allowed to divide the participants into the two groups, in order to make sure that the number of students in the experiment group are the same as the number of students in the control one. So the average number of students per group is 20. It is also important to mention that both groups have the same EFL teacher, so one teacher participated in the study.

3.2 The Experiment:

As mentioned in the introduction, the use of digital stories, the researcher believes, may facilitate vocabulary learning since children are actively involved in understanding the story, which in turn may help the children progressively

learn the foreign language as compared with those who receive the story without the use of such technology. Therefore, the researcher aims to verify whether there is a significant difference in the performance between the control group and the experimental group throughout the experiment in understanding the story and gaining new words. The experiment is carried out at Al-Imam's Ali privet primary school for girls during three weeks in the second semester of the academic year 2012-2013,(April). The digital stories are selected from the Kinder site Project (www.kindersite.org), this is an international project-Internet site founded in the U.K.. It has a global objective to provide free access to primary schools around the world for good educational and entertainment content as an aid to early introduction to EFL, in a secure environment. It offers hundreds of direct links to contents in the form of games, songs, and stories that teachers and students can use in the primary English classroom.

The three stories are selected according to the degree of difficulty (suitable for 8 year old students). Taking in to consideration the text book used in EFLT at that grade, each digital story is classified into two categories: Topics and Vocabulary relevant to the topics as appeared in table (1):

Table (1) Topics and notions covered by the selected digital stories

The digital stories	Topics	Vocabulary relevant to topic
The Adventures of Debbie-Duck	Animals and Family	Fish, cat, bird, dog, mouse, chicken, sheep, cow.....etc Mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, cousin.....etc
The Butterfly Trail	Places and Animals	The country side, city, village, home, forest, the park.....etc Worms, ants, awl, butterflies, lady bird, grasshopperetc
Count With Moby the Mouse	Numbers and Colors	One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,.....etc White, black, red, yellow, brown, blue.....etc

It is important to note out that the two groups received two lessons per week, i.e., 6 lessons through out the experiment. As for the kind of instructions students received during the lessons, the control group received the story based on their teachers, instructions during the 6 lessons, no computer or internet-technology used at all. While the experimental group received the same kind of instructions for 3 lessons and the other three were devoted to work on the three selected digital stories online by computer. It is worth mentioning that the kind of instructions the two groups received during the lessons were all agreed upon by the researcher and the teacher. A total of 30-40 words should be known by the students at the end of the experiment. Therefore, the teacher participating in the study should connect to www.kindersite.org during the lessons, and select the specific digital stories chosen previously. Students, then, should work with the internet as a part of the lesson and respond to the story by themselves. Some children expressed their difficulty in using the web alone on their first lesson only. Also, some problems concerning the access to the internet were reported. But all these shortcomings were all overcome with the support of the teachers in the school.

3.3 Data collection and Data analysis:

The teacher's weekly diaries, the researcher's classroom observations together with a final test were all created and designed as quantitative and qualitative research tools for gathering relevant data. The researcher in this paper will specifically discuss the results of the final test, which was created and administrated in a printed version in order to trace out young learners' progress in vocabulary learning through scores and numbers that could be discussed and proved clearly. The test was divided into two sections: the first one contains seven items to check out students' knowledge about the vocabulary they have learnt through out the experiment. While the second section was designed to test whether the students were also able to understand yes\no general questions in English, and built up some new vocabulary of actions, colors, animals, places and numbers. Table (2) below shows the performance of the two groups in the two sections of the test:

Table (2) The score percentages of students' performance in the two sections of the test

THE TEST	GROUPS	CORRECT	WRON	TOTAL
		N %	G N %	N %
SECTION 1	EXPERIMENTAL	15 75	5 25	20 100
	CONTROL	8 40	12 60	20 100
SECTION 2	EXPERIMENTAL	13 65	7 35	20 100
	CONTROL	6 30	14 70	20 100

As shown in table two there is a significant difference in the performance between the control group and the experimental group in both sections of the test. The score percentages obtained by the experimental group in both sections (75% , 65%) were higher than the scores obtained by the control group (40% , 30%). This significant difference reflects the fact that although both groups departed from a similar level of English proficiency, but the experimental group managed to respond to the questions and statements in both sections of the test. The out performance of the experimental group to the control group in the first section of the test indicates that the use of digital stories promoted vocabulary learning and development, which in turn helped the young learners in the experimental group to improve their over all language skills especially the listening ones. While the results of the second section of the test indicate that the students in the experimental group were also able to build up on some new vocabulary of actions, colors, animals, places, Numbers etc., taught during the

experiment. These results raise interesting issues related to the use of technology in the context of foreign language teaching.

4. Conclusions

The outcome of this study proves the researchers' initial believe regarding the fact that the use of digital stories with young learners may facilitate their vocabulary learning and help them progressively learn the foreign language. It is also concluded that web sites for children, if appropriately selected and organized, can offer a great range of opportunities to develop their foreign language proficiency in a playful and enjoyable context. At an early stage of language acquisition, stories can be a valuable way of contextualizing and introducing new language. Thus, in order to explore whether the use of digital stories could improve vocabulary learning an experiment was conducted by the researcher on Iraqi third year primary students. The results of the study reflected very important facts concerning the use of internet and computer-based technology in the foreign language classroom. Results show that students in the experimental group managed not only to comprehend new vocabulary through out the experiment and provide correct answers in the test, but also improve the four basic language skills especially listening comprehension and outperformed the control group. These positive results, the researcher believes, could be due to some important reasons:

- a.** the use of digital stories might have motivated the children and promoted their concentration which in turn focused children's attention on their received input.
- b.** the ability for the young learners to play the story by themselves and more than one time also played an important role in their comprehension of the vocabulary learnt.
- c.** finally, the positive feedback which the learners gain for their performance of the tasks through out the experiment was of great help in obtaining such results.

However, in order to obtain better results the researcher believes that there is an urgent need, especially at the primary level in Iraq, to use Internet- based stories in the foreign language classroom. It can provide a realistic picture of the new language and culture inside the classroom. Unfortunately, many English teachers in Iraq feel uncertain on how to take advantage of the Web to bring that part of the world into the language classroom. Deciding how to use such materials, the researcher believes, demands great efforts for educators to include technology into the curriculum to help teachers with the task. All of this suggests the need of conducting further research to explore the ways that technology, both in the initial language learning stages or advanced stages, can be brought into the context of the language learning classroom.

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Appendix

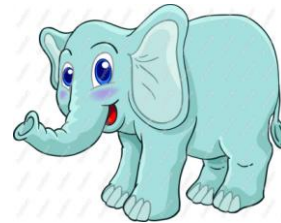
Note: The teacher will read the items of each part of the test carefully and the student must circle the correct answer. To make sure that the students have fully known the word in Arabic the teacher asked them to write down the Arabic equivalent of each word they choose in part A of the test only .

A- listen and then circle the right option from the pictures:

1. duck



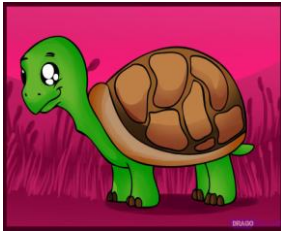
2. elephant



3. butterfly



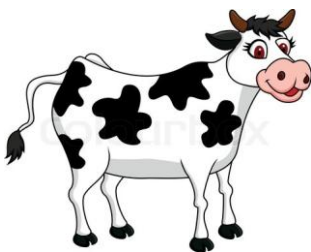
4. turtle



5. umbrella



6. cat



7. house



B- listen to the question and then circle the right option from the pictures:

1. Are the bananas yellow?



2. Are there trees near the house?



3. Is the girl wearing red?



4. Is the monkey on the tree?



5. Is the baby crying?



6. Can you see five butterflies?



7. Is there a strawberry in the plate?

