

تأثير القصص القصيرة والمفردات الخاصة بها على تطوير كفاءة اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق

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الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تأثير القصص القصيرة والمفردات الخاصة بها على تطوير كفاءة اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق. وتكمن أهمية البحث في تسليط الضوء على كيفية دمج القصص القصيرة في المناهج الدراسية لتعزيز المهارات اللغوية الأربع: القراءة، الكتابة، التحدث، والاستماع. كما يمكن في ضوء هذه المواد التي تم إدراجها في المناهج الدراسية والكتب المدرسية، أن يحسن الطلاب مهاراتهم في التحدث والتفكير الناقد. ويمكن للمتعلمين أيضاً الاندماج بشكل ممتع في هذه الأنشطة التي سوف تعزز بدورها قدراتهم على التحدث. كما تؤكد الدراسة على أهمية الأدب في تعزيز إمكانيات التحدث بجانب معالجة التحديات والقيود والمعوقات التي تواجه الطلاب العراقيين في المدارس عند دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي.

تحاول الدراسة أيضاً وضع خطة تتضمن لمحة عن تدريس الأدب، ولا سيما القصص القصيرة، لطلاب المدارس المتوسطة، سواء بشكل تقليدي أو حديث، تتعرض فيه بشكل موجز للأجناس الأدبية في الكتب المدرسية لتوضيح وجهات نظر حول هذا الموضوع. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تعمل الدراسة على إبراز الفوائد المحتملة لدراسة الأدب في تعزيز اكتساب اللغة والكفاءة في التحدث والتعلم من داخل السياق لدى الطلاب. تستند الدراسة إلى مراجع موثوقة ورؤى تتعلق بالممارسات التعليمية المستقبلية بغرض تطوير المناهج الدراسية. وتؤكد النتائج على تأثير القصص القصيرة في تطوير الكفاءة في اللغة الإنجليزية بين طلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق. ثم جاءت التوصيات بتنفيذ بعض الاستراتيجيات لتعزيز تأثير القصص القصيرة في المدارس العراقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : القصص القصيرة؛ الأدب والتعليم؛ طلاب المدارس المتوسطة في العراق؛ تحسين المناهج

The Impact of Short Stories and Their Vocabulary on the Development of the English Language of Intermediate School Students in Iraqi Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of short stories and their vocabulary on the development of English language proficiency among intermediate school students in Iraqi schools. The significance of the research is that it sheds light on how the incorporation of short stories into the curriculum enhances the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Based on the material included on the academic curricula and textbooks, the students might improve their conversational and critical thinking skills. Learners can also be enjoyably engaged in the activities that will accordingly boost their speaking abilities. The study also emphasizes the importance of literature in maximizing speaking potentials as well as addressing challenges, limitations, and barriers faced by students when studying English literature in Iraqi schools. The research attempts a plan that includes an overview of teaching literature, particularly short stories, to intermediate school level students, both traditionally and recently. This outline of literature review is provided about literary genres in the textbooks to illuminate the topic perspectives. Additionally, the study highlights the potential benefits of literature study for enhancing students' language acquisition, speaking proficiency and contextual learning. The research is supported with authenticated references and insights for future educational practices and curriculum development. The findings assert the impact of short stories on developing English language proficiency among intermediate school students in Iraqi. To maximize the impact of short stories in the Iraqi schools, some strategies were also recommended.

Keywords: Short Stories; Literature and Education; Intermediate Iraqi School Students;

I. Introduction

The study of the impact of short stories and their vocabulary on developing English language proficiency among intermediate school students in Iraqi schools is very crucial. English plays a significant role in various aspects of life: education, communication, and career opportunities. It is one of the cornerstones at the intermediate level, since it helps students to properly further their studies for achieving academic success and future goals.

English language education has been subject to change over the years. A lot of social, political and educational reforms have taken place to evolve teaching English as a second language in all Arab countries, and Iraq is no exception.

Since the beginning of teaching English in Iraq, it has undergone modifications in the curricula and textbooks, particularly at the intermediate level. There was a shift from grammar-focused learning to adopting more communicative methods, including the incorporation of short stories with the aim of making learning more appealing and context-based. In other words, students are “exposed to daily language usage within relevant contexts instead of isolated fragments of the Language.” (Luo, Yibu & Chen, Xiangting, 2021, p. 62).

The first stage of teaching English in Iraq started at the beginning of the 20th century when English instruction mainly focused on grammar and word translation. It emphasized the memorization of rules without paying heed to authentic communicative learning. Since the 1970s, English in Iraq was traditionally taught. Most classes were teacher-dominated; teachers were the only source of information. They prepared simple activities to present lessons, focusing on the theoretical aspects of introducing language: vocabulary and grammar. There was hardly any variation of techniques. Students have to sit for written exams and recall basic information and rote knowledge for assessment and evaluation. Quoting one of the English teachers who later changed jobs to become a lawyer, Momen Yaseen M.Amin states that the teachers “summarized the content of the textbook into some dead papers [handouts] just to help [the students] pass the exams.” (M.Amin, Momen, 2017, p. 580).

Nevertheless, this stage witnessed ideological and nationalist changes later on. The focus of teaching English language was to keep in touch with Western countries for promoting scientific and technological knowledge. However, there was a simultaneous tendency to promote Arabic as the central language of national identity.

The second phase came after 2011; slight modifications in curricula and textbooks took place to reform and develop the educational process of teaching English. Momen Yaseen M.Amin comments: “the primary skills to be developed were reading and writing. Little attention was given to speaking and listening skills and almost none to pronunciation.” (M.Amin, Momen, 2017, p.578).

Regarding the educational framework and teaching strategies after 2011, the atmosphere has changed over the twenty last years. Traditionally, “the contents and reading texts [were] difficult and there were no attention to new technology in the world.” ((M.Amin, Momen, 2017, p. 580). However, globalized ideals and the increased emphasis on scientific and technological

education opened eyes of educators, policymakers and syllabus designers to the importance of upgrading English methods and content within the Iraqi schools, universities, and professional fields. Mayamin Altae argues that this has been the dominant case in Iraq, clarifying that “there was no natural development of the national curriculum that would have led to a progress that is based on the real needs of the education sector and that is concomitant with the international development educational setting.” (Altae, 2020, p. 2).

II. Literature Review

Like in many other countries, teaching English has taken priority in Iraq. It has become essential for students to learn English so that they can have access to research, technology, international business and working opportunities overseas.

Another prime objective for teaching English in Iraq schools in the primary, intermediate and secondary levels is to enhance the students' proficiency in and mastery of the four skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. The earlier type of instruction is broadly focused on teaching grammar and vocabulary. Contrary to this conception, some researchers argue that, by the age of four, children can be imaginative. Acquiring some basic structures of the spoken languages around them, they start to invent stories and think of queer things and ask questions. They can “give commands, report real events, and create stories about imaginary ones, using correct word order and grammatical markers most of the time. (Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N., 2013, p. 12).

English Language Teaching at the Intermediate Level:

Teaching English to students at intermediate school level seems crucial. Students are exposed to more complex grammar and vocabulary, making it a crucial period for language development. However, they start learning English at an early stage, memorizing grammar rules and basic vocabulary; but shortly after they go through an intermediate stage at which they are exposed to more complex grammar forms, lexical items and text types.

In his survey of the syllabuses of English used in Iraq (1873 – 2003 A.D.), Natiq Taha Abdul – Kareem (2009) asserts that “teaching the literary reader began at the intermediate stage.” (p. 11). Moving from the fundamental primary education to an intermediate school level, students' learning styles vary, and accordingly, teachers have to completely develop their teaching techniques and strategies. To address these challenges, textbooks have been significantly modified: a variety of texts was tailored to reflect curriculum alignment and realize educational standards in Iraq. Instead of merely teaching grammar and vocabulary, other engaging reading materials are added on the lessons, focusing on accuracy rather than on competence.

In terms of vocab and grammar focus, considerable material is supplied in the curriculum to measure the students' acquisition of basic rules through exercises and drills on classifying word lists and other lexical items without much concentration on contextual situations or language communication skills.

This limited emphasis on speaking and listening skills has involved students in doing tasks consolidating grammar and vocab, but struggling with other speaking activities or interactively communicating with each other when they exposed to a listening text by native speakers.

The Role of Short Stories in English Language Education

Studying literature in English contributed significantly to the development of speaking skills for intermediate school students. The incorporation of short stories into the English curriculum in Iraqi schools added glamor and content to textbooks. Short stories have an impact on the intermediate students' language acquisition, improving their language proficiency. Research has indicated that when students are exposed to reading literature, particularly narratives, this can help boost their speaking and reading skills.

It is noteworthy that studying literature can promote critical thinking skills. Students are asked to analyze literary texts, identifying the plot, themes, and characters' motivations, desires, and impulses. On the other hand, students are encouraged to articulate their ideas once they are given the opportunity, which, in turn, fosters their speaking abilities and helps accelerate language acquisition. When students think critically, they can apply higher-thinking strategies: they can imagine, process data, and infer information besides drawing conclusions. They can also evaluate the situations the characters are going through and speak their minds when they attempt dialogues, conversations, and open discussion.

Analyzing literary texts is another advantage of studying English textbooks. It significantly increases students' self-confidence as well as enhancing public speaking. Given moral support and gaining internal motivation, students are able to make presentations, conduct group discussions, and practice public speaking.

Another advantage of studying stories in literature classes is that it provides the opportunity for students to role play the reading lessons and act out the scenes. For example, when the students are assigned a task to create a story based on the jigsaw game, they cooperate together producing the whole text. Another technique is that "one student can change the story into reported speech and retell the story to the class" (Haskell & John F.,1978, p. 45).

They perform the incidents in the narrative texts. These activities promote students' speaking skills, making them more fluent and self-assured to express themselves freely and make intonation variations in public-speaking situations.

Reading stories aloud and dramatizing events can also help students identify stress patterns and varying intonations. They try to rhythmically mimic the characters' actions, producing utterances that help with pronunciation in an attempt to convey the message. When a student reads a poem, they are instructed to follow the appropriate tones of prosody, accompanied with stress and rhythmic patterns.

Textbook stories broaden students' minds to grasp new knowledge and practicing active learning strategies. The students can listen, respond, and communicatively interact with their partners. This enhances social learning, getting students engaged in real-life activities. Besides, doing tasks in groups makes them more tolerant and co-operative. They become eager to speak and express their opinions.

Reading stories builds cultural awareness and deepens students' sense of community issues. It also instills values since it addresses social problems and helps students to think of possible solutions and share their life experiences when they reflect on the delicate situations the story characters are exposed to. This offers a good chance to tackle these challenges in speech from different perspectives.

When students discuss the themes in the stories they study, they can develop a deeper understanding of human worries and concerns. They can talk about critical situations, bearing on the topics contained on the narrative texts. Their responses differ on complicated matters and controversial aspects of life. In this way, their speaking abilities get improved.

When students are invited to summarize or comment on a story, they can use active learning strategies. They interact with each other, working collaboratively. This creates a healthy environment in addition to sharpening the students' productive skills.

The Role of Reading Materials in Enhancing Language Proficiency in Iraq

Within the educational framework, teaching reading materials, particularly short stories, sounds crucial. It opens the students' eyes to the various aspects of language acquisition since it offers a rich variety of material which appeals to the students' learning styles including reading comprehension, vocabulary development and grammar retention.

Studying short stories enables students to use language communicatively. It provides them with a rich background to practice language in authentic contexts; this encourages collaboration through using expressions, idioms, collocations and realistic language structures as well as lexical variants. The school textbooks in Iraq are dedicated to teach grammar rules. Short stories, however, offer large space for more dynamic contextualized environment. In this way, students can internalize knowledge and apply grammatical rules in wider contexts when they speak or write.

When students are instructed to engage with narratives, they come up with new ideas, making inferences and reaching conclusions. This helps them to use longer sentence patterns and more complex language structure. On the other hand, they become more reassured to practice speaking and writing skills within a stress-free atmosphere.

Reading stories enriches one's experiences of the world around them. Students learn about other cultures, other people's customs: their habits, lifestyles, and traditions. It's only through these stories that they have an insight into other cultures in the west and in America or other parts of the world.

In Iraq, like in many other countries, students usually feel bored with traditional teaching methods and techniques. They complain about sitting all these long hours in the classroom, waiting to be filled with grammar and vocabulary items like vessels. Out of changing the scene, they look forward to studying narrative forms such as short stories or novels or other literary genres. These texts leave them motivated and engaged in the lesson, participating actively in reading or speaking activities. Hence, students tend to read stories as a way of breaking boredom and lessening mental lag. They are kept on their feet, anticipating what will happen next or how the story will end.

At the post-reading stage, students can reflect on the events or incidents when they are invited to write summaries or make reflections on the reading material. They can produce coherent formats, starting from the very beginning and scaffolding the writing process, maintaining coherence and cohesion. In Iraq, students find this task challenging, but rewarding. Short stories can help enhance their writing skills as well as improving their speaking abilities

The role of short stories in improving language skills for Iraqi intermediate school students.

Studying short stories students can infer lessons contained and interpret layers of word meanings. Lightbown and Spada reported that stories contain a lot of discourse types that could be conducted through peer and group-work. Second language learners and native speakers can also use language more authentically when they draw on the text materials in newspapers and television broadcast. (Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N., 2013, p. 128).

Studying literature in English contribute to the development of speaking skills in intermediate school students. When students discuss the topic sentences to identify themes, or characters and plot complexities, they practice speaking and this fosters their oral fluency. They also become more familiar with positions of intonation and word stress when they articulate something or imitate the characters in the narratives. Additionally, it has been noted that “adults who continue to make greater use of their first language may have stronger accents in the second language.” (Piske, T., I.R. A. MacKay, and J. E. Flege. 200, pp. 191- 215).

Motivated to make summaries and provide a character analysis, students practice academic writing. They need to reflect deeper understanding of what to write about. This enhances critical thinking about the narrative text at hand thereby widening the scope of their imagination. In addition, students are tasked to write systematically, scaffolding the flow of thought and molding it into a coherent written format.

In terms of listening skills, teaching short stories also has its impact on the development of the students' speech and language acquisition. Put in an auditory situation or listening to an audio script of a story or a tale or any narrative text, students' ears will be naturally attuned to the variety of accents and tones produced. According to researchers, students can learn through “modified input”. In other words, students of the same first language may find little difficulty, understanding each other. But, coming from different language backgrounds, “they may modify their language

as they seek to communicate successfully.” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 128). This can refine their apprehension of the spoken word as well as their comprehension of the input of English language.

The literary genres enhancing the speaking skills of language learners at intermediate levels

Literature study influences students’ confidence and fluency in English-speaking tasks. The use of literary genres and specific literary elements such as dialogue, character analysis, and narrative techniques plays a crucial role in enhancing speaking skills, particularly in language learners or students at intermediate levels.

1. Dialogue and Conversational Fluency

Conducting dialogues on the themes adopted from the stories in the textbooks is the magic key to enhancing the students’ speaking skills and topic presentation. When students strike a talk, giving their opinions on the characters in the text, or elaborating on what has happened, they gain more confidence as authentic speakers. They can talk about a variety of daily activities, using varied tones. Their talking styles are diverse as they communicate orally to deal with different issues, adopting relative levels of formal language. Therefore, they get acquainted with different forms of speech and self-expression.

Based on the textbook stories, dialogues also promote interaction between students who can take turns or alternate roles to act out the story or substitute one another in a rehearsal or a conversational context.

2. Performance of Dramatic Texts

Stories drawn from dramatic texts can be orally performed. When students play the roles of the characters, they practice speaking, quoting the lines or narrating the scenario. They work on word diction, miming, pacing and intonation, all of which are aspects of communicative language.

To express their emotions, students perform the narrative texts with different tones. They vary their accents to modulate the voices of the characters. This reinforces public speaking.

3. Narratives and Descriptive Writing

Stories are highly effective in enhancing speaking skills. As literary genres, short stories “seem to be the most suitable option to help students train the four language skills because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories.” (Pardede, 2011; Rahmawati, 2020). Simply worded, narrative texts are rich with descriptive language. When students are involved in storytelling, they devise ways of decoding the meaning for communication. They can organize thoughts and convey ideas in different forms of verbal expression. They can draw on figurative speech, making use of metaphors, similes, and other language devices to make narration more enchanting.

Challenges and Opportunities of Studying English Literature at the Intermediate School Level in Iraq

In spite of being advantageous, it has been challenging to integrate short stories into Iraqi schools. There are some barriers that could be faced. Stories are known to broaden horizons and create opportunities for students to improve critical thinking and cultural awareness. However, teaching literature as a tool for sharpening students' speaking skills has a number of limitations, not only in Iraq, but in many Arab countries and other parts of the world. To address these challenges, narrowing research down to the situation in Iraqi, the following key factors should be taken into consideration:

1. Lack of Teacher Training

Most teachers focused on traditional teaching methods. It has been reported that before the seventies, teachers lacked experience on how to deal with the textbook material. (Altae, 2020, p. 2). Another obstacle was that "the lack of teacher training on new methods and how to use the textbooks has depressed and unmotivated teachers to teach." (Issa & Jamil, 2010, p. 366). Even in the recent years, the problem still exists. According to the *NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL*'s report "*Gaps in formal education in Iraq*" (December 2021, pp.52), it has been stated that some teachers were given training opportunities in pedagogy; other teachers in more than 60 percent of schools in Iraqi areas like "in Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Anbar reported not having participated in any training." (p. 32). Another disadvantage was the low-quality infrastructure which limited access to quality education. (p. 3).

2. Cultural Differences

Another problem was the cultural differences. Story texts were carefully chosen to reflect and strengthen students' values and interests. Contrastively, curriculums have some stories celebrating the historical content of other foreign communities while alienating their own heritage. A clear example was provided by Mahdi Sofi-Karim (2015). He talked about the Kurdish learners' reading topics including "British history and essential figures such as Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sean Connery, Deacon Brodie" (p. 74); while there was an "absence of appreciation of Kurdish culture and heritage" (p. 74).

On the other hand, students in Iraq have a cultural gap, feeling unfamiliar with their own literary works or the cultural context surrounding them (Mohammad Hosseinpur, R., Jebbar, M. B., & Rajayi, S., 2024, p. 56). This affected the students' rate of language acquisition because of limited exposure to real-life situations. Additionally, it created a culture block. Looking at English as a second language, Iraqi students have found difficulty decoding ideas and moral lessons in the narratives of another culture and heritage (Haskell & John F., 1978, p. 28).

3. Large Class Sizes

Large classes are usually overcrowded and have too many students. Sometimes, this can't provide healthy environment for learning. Nevertheless, "large classes" as a term has several definitions making it controversial. Considering it one of a big challenge in the intermediate level

institutions, Catherine Mulryan-Kynethe (2013) comments that the teaching staff members “have to deal with a student population that is more diverse in age, experience, cultural background and socioeconomic status than ever before.” (p. 176). Other researchers and educators hold contrary opinions. They argue that large classes can be advantageously utilized to practice engaging activities such as working interactively and collaboratively in groups to act out a story or solve problems or making projects. In respect of the challenges of teaching literature in intermediate schools, studies have attributed that to “lack of resources, lack of engagement and student anonymity” (Shaikh, Ghazal & Chandio, Fozia & Shaikh, Tania., 2021), in addition to lacking experience of using “social media and technology to help student engagement” (p. 159)

III. Methodology to Address the Research Questions

Based on the viewpoints about classroom observations of English teachers presenting stories in the textbooks, it has become clear that stories could help students acquire new skills and insight into narrative texts. Research has confirmed that short stories can influence students’ characters and attitudes. Another method supporting data in the research was the student reflections and class portfolios which indicated that reading short stories impacts vocabulary learning and overall language skills. Assessment and feedback reports emphasized the impact of teaching stories on the development of students’ levels, besides improving both reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. This combination of mixed methods showed that short stories have effectively contributed to language learning at the intermediate stage.

Conclusion

The main question in the research was to investigate the impact of studying literature, particularly, short stories on students at the intermediate level schools in Iraq. Numerous studies have been notably limited to tracing this impact on beginners at primary schools or adults at university. However, the intermediate stage is still crucial. The main purpose was to show how studying short stories contribute to enhancing students’ language proficiency at this school level. Giving an overview of the historical context of teaching English in Iraq, the research revealed that the integration of short stories made a difference. Students have developed their learning skills at the intermediate school level when they read or discuss narrative texts. Literary genres like stories, poems, drama texts and descriptive narratives enhanced their learning potentials and conversational proficiency.

The research also provided an analysis of the challenges and barriers faced by students when studying literature, especially, short stories at the intermediate level in Iraqi schools. It has been noticed that there are still some limitations that can hinder effective teaching of short stories in the Iraqi schools. Insufficient teacher training, overcrowded classes, and cultural differences are major challenges.

To tackle these challenges, some suggestions have been provided to boost the positive impact of incorporating short stories in the curriculum for enhancing vocabulary and overall language development in Iraqi intermediate schools. Besides curriculum enhancement, the research recommends incorporating narrative material that is more related to the students' own culture and heritage. Teaching strategies and training programs should be upgraded as well.

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