THE USE OF SHORT STORIES TO IMPROVE VOCABULARY: UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTIONS OF EFL STUDENTS

EL USO DE HISTORIAS CORTAS PARA MEJORAR EL VOCABULARIO: ENTENDIENDO LAS PERCEPCIONES DE ESTUDIANTES EFL

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The Use of Short Stories to Improve Vocabulary: Understanding the Perceptions of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The integration of technologies, such as virtual learning environments, web-based collaborative setups, and gamified applications, tend to promote the positive effects of short stories on vocabulary learning in a foreign language. This study investigates the effectiveness of using short stories as a pedagogical tool for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Two cohorts of participants took part simultaneously in a course to improve vocabulary through short stories graded according to their level of proficiency. The highly validated tool MSLQ was applied to gather perceptions of motivation and learning strategies throughout the course. Correlational analyses suggest that short stories, combined with appropriate technological and pedagogical strategies, offer a powerful approach to vocabulary learning in diverse educational contexts. The study also emphasizes the importance of self-regulated learning mechanisms, which promote learner autonomy and self-efficacy, leading to better vocabulary outcomes. This research contributes to the understanding of effective vocabulary learning and provides practical insights for educators seeking to enhance EFL students' language mastery.

Keywords: vocabulary, EFL, short stories, self-regulated learning, MSLQ

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El Uso de Historias Cortas para Mejorar el Vocabulario: Entendiendo las Percepciones de Estudiantes EFL

RESUMEN

La integración de tecnologías, como ambientes de aprendizaje virtual, entornos colaborativos basados en la web y aplicaciones gamificadas, tienden a promover los efectos positivos de las historias cortas en el aprendizaje de vocabulario en un idioma extranjero. El presente estudio investiga la efectividad de usar historias cortas como herramienta pedagógica para fomentar la adquisición de vocabulario en estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera. Dos cohortes de alumnos tomaron parte simultáneamente en un curso para mejorar el vocabulario a través de historias cortas categorizados de acuerdo con su nivel de competencia. La herramienta MSLQ que es considerada de alta validez se aplicó a los estudiantes para recopilar sus percepciones sobre motivación y estrategias de aprendizaje a lo largo del curso. Los análisis correlacionales sugieren que las historias cortas, combinadas con los recursos tecnológicos y estrategias pedagógicas adecuadas, ofrecen un enfoque potencial para el aprendizaje de vocabulario en diversos contextos educativos. Este estudio tambien enfatiza la importancia de los mecanismos de aprendizaje auto-regulado, los cuales promueven la auto-eficacia y autonomía de los estudiantes, lo cual conduce a mejores resultados en el vocabulario. Esta investigación contribuye a la comprensión del aprendizaje efectivo del vocabulario y provee una comprensión práctica para los educadores que buscan fortalecer el dominio del vocbaulario en estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: vocabulario, Inglés como idioma extranjero, historias cortas, aprendizaje autoregulado, MSLQ

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is paramount in the learning of a foreign language. In an EFL context, several pedagogic strategies have been explored to facilitate the expansion and acquisition of new words. One of those strategies is the use of short stories to augment students' vocabulary, which has proven to be not only an enhancer of new words but also a booster of motivation and generator of great interest in students when learning a foreign language.

The current work focuses on examining how short stories can be an effective tool for the acquisition of new lexicon in EFL students. To start, related studies will be analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Literature review

The study of English vocabulary learning has attracted considerable attention in educational research due to its critical role in language acquisition and proficiency. This literature review synthesizes findings from recent studies to explore the effects of various strategies and technologies on English vocabulary learning, motivation, and self-regulation among different learner groups. The review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of effective vocabulary learning interventions and the underlying mechanisms that contribute to their success.

Vocabulary and short stories

From the times of *One Thousand and One Nights*, stories have been used in various contexts to transmit knowledge from generation to generation. Since then, stories have changed in various forms and lengths but have never lost their essence and effectiveness, even in modern times. Research, as detailed in the upcoming paragraphs, has demonstrated that short stories significantly improve students' vocabulary acquisition and overall language skills when used as part of interactive and dynamic teaching approaches. For instance, Bhatti et al. (2022) highlight the effectiveness of short stories in diverse educational contexts, as does Mohamed (2022) and Adyana (2016).

It is advisable to integrate activities that include vocabulary instruction in reading programs to enhance overall language proficiency. Similarly, incorporating varying levels of cognitive complexity in stories can enhance vocabulary acquisition while managing learner anxiety (Yang et al., 2020), in ways as effective as reading newspapers, due to their engaging narratives and context-rich content (Wijayanti,

2020), since vocabulary knowledge becomes a significant predictor of reading comprehension skills (Agung, 2017; Gebre, 2016; Ma & Lin, 2015).

The potential of short stories can be seen through improvements in vocabulary retention and comprehension, attributing these gains to the contextualized and engaging nature of short stories (Parvareshbar & Ghoorchaei, 2016), and the natural context for vocabulary usage, which makes the learning process more intuitive and enjoyable (Abdalrahman, 2022; Bakhodirovna, 2015) for students from early levels (Bhatti et al., 2020; Tarakçıoğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014) up to university students (Eklesia & Angelina, 2019). These gains have been evident independent of the context, including gender or rural and urban settings (Ahmed, 2017), as long as stories show relevancy to students due to their local (Sariana et al., 2022) or cultural appeal (Paramma & Shafa, 2022)

While students are improving their retention and acquisition of new vocabulary, they are also exercising their self-regulation. Therefore, self-regulated learning mechanisms (e.g., goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflection) are associated with the stimulation of vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language by promoting sustained learner autonomy (Chen et al., 2018). Higher self-regulating capacities in students usually become predictors of better vocabulary learning outcomes (Ziegler, 2015). For instance, learners who engaged in self-regulated practices exhibited higher self-efficacy, which in turn positively influenced their vocabulary learning outcomes (Deng & Trainin, 2020; Farajee & Arabmofrad, 2015; Mizumoto, 2013). The use of effort regulation strategies is crucial for successful vocabulary learning (Onoda, 2014).

Motivation also seems to increase when using stories to enhance vocabulary supported by self-regulating learning strategies (Choi et al., 2018). The same, the inclusion of ICT-related sources have also shown potential in improving learners' performance and motivation from early levels of education (Albán Bedoya, & Ocaña-Garzón, 2022; Ocaña et al., 2022; Quinga et al., 2022; Vega et al., 2022) to upper levels (Ocaña et al., 2019; Ocaña et al., 2021)

In the case of short stories for vocabulary learning, virtual learning environments containing interactive elements were effective in increasing both motivation and vocabulary retention among learners (Hong et al., 2022; Kızıl & Savran, 2018; Wang & Huang, 2017), as were web-based collaborative setups (Liu et al., 2014) and mobile applications with gamified components, such as points and rewards (Chen et

al., 2019; Elaish et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020; Lai & Chang, 2021). However, technology would be worthless without the adequate strategies, as is the case with gamification, which serves as the right link to connect vocabulary learning outcomes, motivation, and satisfaction (Yu, 2023).

Other technology-mediated strategies have proven effective as well. For example, digital storytelling significantly enhanced vocabulary retention and learner motivation by combining the benefits of narrative techniques with digital media to create an engaging and memorable learning experience (Canlı-Bekar, 2019). Other examples include the development of other language skills, e.g. listening (Bazurto Palma & Ocaña-Garzón. 2023)

Likewise, the combination of multiple strategies, including mnemonic devices, context-based learning, and technology-enhanced methods, were most effective in achieving vocabulary mastery and retention (Mehrabian & Salehi, 2019).

Short stories provide a versatile and powerful tool for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts. By integrating them with modern pedagogical strategies and technologies, educators can create an engaging and effective learning environment. The evidence thus far suggests that when used appropriately, short stories not only improve vocabulary retention and comprehension but also enhance motivation and self-regulation among learners. Consequently, the aim of this research is to examine the effectiveness of using short stories as a pedagogical tool for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and evaluate the impact of short stories on vocabulary improvement and self-regulation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative correlational and cross-sectional design. A total of 68 subjects participated in this study (34 from junior high school and 34 from senior high school). The students were selected on the basis of their knowledge and course seniority. Using a virtual environment, students took a course with short stories to increase their vocabulary interleaved with a questionnarie. The responses were collected by means of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) which is considered to have a high reliability (Pintrich, 1991; Pintrich, 1993). As the name implies, the questionnaire was designed to measure motivation and learning strategies which were crucial in the completion of the course.

The dataset containing the responses to MSLQ was properly coded through:

Data Cleaning: to ensure that the data is adequately structured, with clear headers and consistent data types, identifying and renaming columns accordingly and handling missing values.

Descriptive Statistics: to obtain mean and standard deviation for each question.

Correlation Analysis: to check for correlations between responses to different questions and so identify patterns. In this step, we also generated histograms, and correlation heatmaps using Matplotlib to visualize the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The central tendency values show that the average response for most questions is between 5 and 7. This range indicates that the respondents generally perceive themselves positively. For instance, a mean value of 6 on a question such as " I'm certain I can understand the ideas taught in this course" suggests that students are confident in their understanding of the course material. The median values are also around 6 or 7, aligning with the mean values and reinforcing the positive self-assessment. Regarding variability, the standard deviation for most questions is relatively low (around 1). This low variability indicates that most students have similar perceptions and confidence levels. Responses for most questions span the full range from 1 to 7, with the majority of responses concentrating in the higher values (4-7). However, some questions have lower mean values, indicating areas where students might feel less confident. For example, a question related to handling difficult study materials might have a mean closer to 5, suggesting a more varied response. These nuances prompted the authors to run correlations to help identify relationships between different responses.

Correlation Analysis

We ran correlation analysis to detect how changes on certain variables can change other variables. Based on this, we found positive and negative correlatins as follows:

Figure 1: Positive correlations
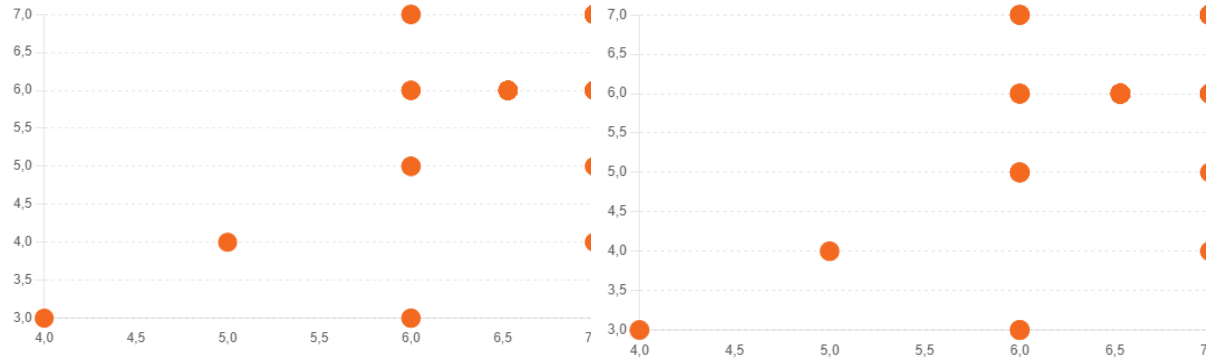
Q3 and Q12 (correlation 0.63)   Q4 and Q5 (correlation 0.56)

The analysis between Q3 and Q12 show a strong positive relationship, meaning that students who have high expectations of performing well in the class (Q3) also tend to have high motivation to do well in their academic tasks (Q12). Similarly, confidence in relative performance and confidence in specific academic tasks are related which suggests that building students' confidence in their academic abilities can also enhance their perceived relative performance among peers.

On the other hand, there are also negative correlations.

Figure 2: Negative correlations
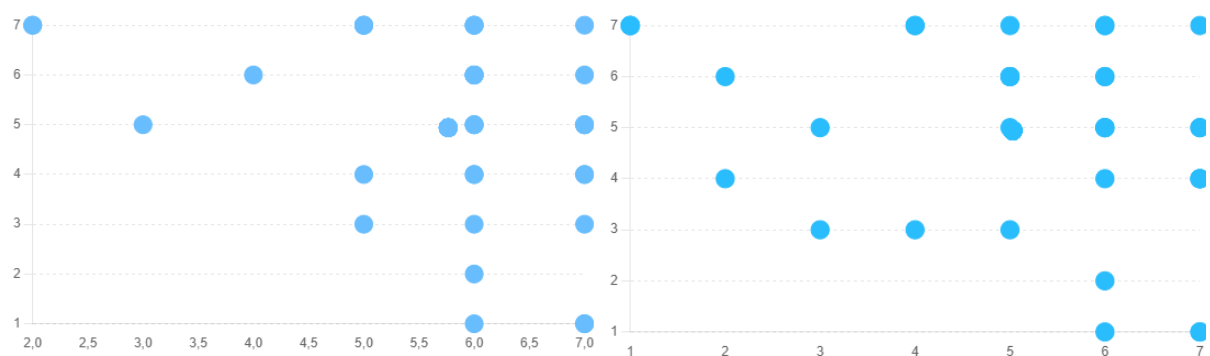
Q4 and Q42 (correlation -0.37)   Q38 and Q42 (correlation -0.36)

Figure 2 shows that there may be a disconnection between students' confidence in their performance (Q4) and their actual attention in class (Q42). This suggest that overconfidence might lead to less engagement during lessons, or that those who are more attentive might be more critical of their own performance compared to peers. In the same way, students who are able to focus on learning, even when study materials are boring (Q38) tend to be less focused when the teacher is speaking (Q42). That is, students who are good at concentrating on unengaging materials independently may find it harder to pay

attention during lectures, or vice versa.

Regression Analysis

In order to understand how one or more independent variables influence a dependent variable, we ran regression analysis. This analysis helped to explore how responses to specific questions (independent variables) predict responses to another key question (dependent variable). To accomplish this, we chose a key question as the dependent variable and used other questions as independent variables. Based on the previous analyses and questions from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), we selected the key indicators according to the following criteria:

Q12: This question reflects self-efficacy in learning and understanding course material, which is decisive for academic success. Analyzing what influences students' confidence in their understanding can help identify support needs.

Q3: directly reflects the students' overall expectation of their performance in the class which is a crucial metric as it often correlates with their confidence, motivation, and academic outcomes. Understanding what influences this expectation can provide valuable insights for educators to improve teaching strategies and student support.

Fiugre 3
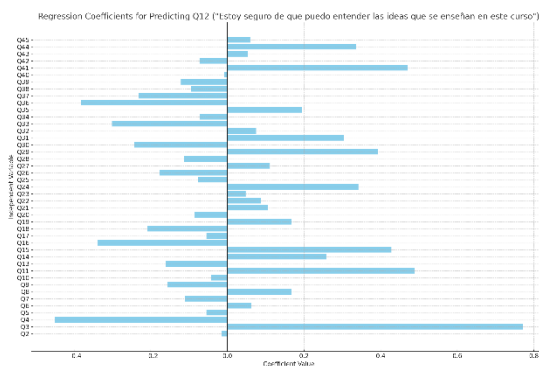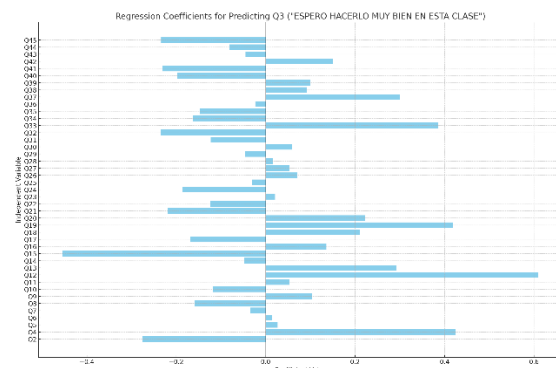
Regression coeficients for Q12   Regression coeficients for Q3

Q12 has positive coefficients with Q3 which indicates that students who expect to do well in the class (Q3) are also confident in understanding the course ideas. Also, positive coefficients with Q11 and Q15 which suggests that confidence in understanding course ideas is bolstered by finding oneself understanding during lectures (Q11) and perceiving one's study skills as excellent (Q15).

Regression analyses on Q12 also showed negative coefficients with Q4 which might indicate a discrepancy between self-perceived student ability compared to others and actual confidence in understanding course ideas.

For Q3, variables such as Q4, Q12, Q19, and Q33 have positive coefficients, indicating a positive relationship with the expectation of doing well in the class. For instance, higher values in Q12 (confidence in understanding) significantly increase the expectation of high performance. However, Q3 also has negative coefficients with variables such as Q2, Q15, and Q31. This suggests that higher values in these questions slightly reduce the expectation of doing well. For example, overconfidence (Q2) might negatively impact performance expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research highlight the effectiveness of short stories as a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Through the integration of engaging narratives, short stories not only significantly improve vocabulary retention and comprehension but also enhance learner motivation and self-regulation. The contextualized and dynamic nature of short stories makes the learning process more intuitive and enjoyable, benefiting students across various educational settings.

The research highlights that while technology and gamification strategies play a crucial role in supporting vocabulary learning, the inherent appeal and educational value of short stories remain meaningful. Educators are encouraged to incorporate short stories into their teaching practices, leveraging their potential to create a more engaging and effective language learning environment.

Future research should continue to explore innovative methods of integrating short stories into language learning curricula, focusing on maximizing their benefits and addressing any challenges that may arise. By doing so, educators can further enrich the vocabulary learning experience for EFL students, ultimately contributing to their overall language proficiency and academic success.

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