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Research Paper

## *Reading Achievement of Short Stories as a Way of Literature Incorporation and Improving Iranian Students' Grammatical and Vocabulary Knowledge*

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### *Abstract*

This study was an endeavor to analyze the effects of reading short stories on improving the grammatical and vocabulary knowledge of high school students in Kerman. To achieve this end, two intact classes of 52 female students who were selected based on convenience sampling, and regarding the placement test scores, 40 of them participated in the current study. The research was an experimental one and the participants were randomly divided into two groups of 20 students. The interventions administered for the experimental group involved teaching two short stories, i.e., the Beauty & The Beast and Robinson Crusoe. However, the control group received conventional method of teaching of grammar and vocabulary. The data were analyzed in quantitative way and statistical analyses were performed in SPSS software. The results indicated a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of posttest scores for the dependent variables after controlling the pretest at the  $P < 0.001$  level. Accordingly, it can be said that there is a significant difference in the scores of the dependent variables (grammatical and vocabulary skills) in the posttest. As a result, the present study revealed that reading the mentioned stories is an effective way for improving grammatical and vocabulary knowledge of high school students in Kerman.

**Keywords:** Short Story, Reading Achievement, Grammatical Knowledge, Vocabulary Knowledge

### *Introduction*

Language is the most important means of communication between

human beings, through which people communicate their thoughts, emotions, and feelings to each other

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(Bland, 2019). Nowadays, due to the pervasive role of communication, the need to learn and teach foreign languages is a very important and prevalent issue (Soleimani & Akbari, 2013). Language teaching methods have undergone many changes over time and each has played a role in improving language skills. Traditional and old methods, such as the grammar-translation method, the direct method, the listening-speaking method, and so on, as well as newer methods, such as the communication method, content-oriented teaching, and the like, have been more focused on strengthening communication skills (Hemmati, Gholamrezapour, & Hessamy, 2015). Each of these methods has been the dominant method of language teaching in different time periods with the goal of improving the learning ability of language learners. Replacing one method with another does not mean rejecting the previous method or making the next method look better; rather, each method has positive and negative characteristics that became apparent over time during the application of that specific method. Literature and short stories have been used in language teaching methods in the past, but the way they are used varies in different methods (Hemmati et al., 2015). For instance, in the grammar-translation method, the goal is to acquire the ability to read the written literature of the target language. As a result, language learners need to acquire the grammatical rules and the

vocabulary of the target language (Kalantari & Hashemian, 2016).

When learning a new language, mastering its grammar and vocabulary can be a great challenge that requires dedicated tools and methods to help the learners become competent in these aspects of language. Moreover, with the introduction of various new methods of teaching English that are based on the learner instead of the teacher, different tools are used to facilitate the learning process. For instance, computer-based or web-based applications and/or games have recently been used to help immerse EFL students in settings and situations that facilitate and pave the way for learning intricate grammatical and vocabulary aspects of the target language.

In the same vein, stories can be used in EFL classrooms as a tool for collaborative activity among the learners and the teacher. Stories create a unique experience for the students due to their structure and appealing nature. Hence, they may be able to make learning language more fun and exciting for the students, lowering the barriers to learning new vocabulary or grammatical structures.

Reading is one of the main methods for acquiring knowledge. Also, reading is the most important activity when it comes to language learning since it is the most necessary skill needed for independent learning. Once the learner masters this skill, he/she can acquire more knowledge about the language as well as his/her favorite

language-related topics (Bland, 2019).

Researchers believe that reading and beginning to read can cause mental shifts in language learners, increasing their understanding of what is read (Omidbakhsh, 2021). This perception is more likely to occur when reading stories or entertaining material because the individual does not feel compelled and forced to read a boring text. Studying foreign language literature would be a good exercise for the mental development of language learners (Khodabandeh, 2018). In this way, if the learners could translate a text into their native language, they would be considered successful learners. Feedback was given directly and instantly, and the teacher was the absolute source of power and decision-making in the classroom. In this method, due to the high focus on reading and writing skills, little attention is paid to speech, grammar, and vocabulary skills while pronunciation is ignored. Since this method was not successful in improving communication skills, it was later replaced by other methods that were less focused on literature (Khodabandeh, 2018). This was because the newer methods believed literature and stories did not have a significant impact on improving the communications skills of language learners; hence, they were less focused on the reading skill (Omidbakhsh, 2021). Based on the issues discussed, this paper tries to analyze the possible effects of reading short stories on improving the EFL learners' grammar and

vocabulary knowledge. In order to meet the research objectives, the following questions have been raised:

1. Does reading short stories have effect on improving EFL learners' grammatical knowledge?
2. Does reading short stories have effect on improving EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?

### *Literature Review*

In a more recent study, Omidbakhsh (2021) analyzed the impact of storytelling on language learners' first language acquisition. The data were collected through researcher-developed oral language production and comprehension tests. The findings indicated that the storytelling group outperformed the story reading group on both production and comprehension tests. Moreover, the story reading group outperformed the conventional group. In another study, Arjmandi and Aladini (2020) investigated the effects of applying storytelling on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning. The results showed that using storytelling could enhance the learners' conceptual and comprehensible processes in order to discover, guess and grasp the meaning of the vocabulary, and internalize them in their minds in a more successful manner. In a foreign context, Wijayanti (2020) investigated the effect of reading newspapers and short stories on students' vocabulary size. After analyzing data, both groups demonstrated a significant increase

in vocabulary size. T-test results showed that the vocabulary size of both groups is not significantly different. In addition, Bežilová (2019) examined the effect of storytelling on longer vocabulary retention. The study also focused on the importance of supplementary materials and activities that should be connected to the storytelling. In the same year, Nazara (2019) checked the perception of primary school students to develop vocabulary. The results indicated that the students' perception toward the use of short story was positive. For them, short stories were interesting materials to use to develop vocabulary.

Biswas and Anis (2017) focused on the effective use of short stories in teaching grammar. Another purpose of their paper was to familiarize instructors with the effectiveness of using short stories in EFL classes to teach grammar through contextualization. The authors believe that stories can be used for both extracting and exemplifying grammar topics. Grammar rules can be contextualized through short stories if they are selected considering the level of the class and are taught in an interesting way that involves the students interactively. Interactive and task-based grammar teaching and learning can be initiated through the proper use of short stories in a language class. Furthermore, Ceylan (2016) tried to find out the thoughts and attitudes of university students towards the short stories covered in reading skills course. The results showed that studying short stories has a

number of benefits for the students such as broadening their perspectives, enabling them to think about the reasons rather than the result, showing them different lifestyles, providing them with a comparison between their own culture and other cultures, increasing their appreciation for literature, and making them read more short stories. Additionally, Cimermanová (2015) concentrated on the effects of using authentic comics with EFL learners. The study examined the strategies applied by novice readers in reading comics with the special focus on vocabulary guessing using context. Findings revealed positive effects in vocabulary development and motivation to reading and overcoming linguistic barriers in reading authentic material using the context and prior knowledge. In the same year, Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015) investigated the effects of extensive reading instruction on knowledge of general grammar and specific syntactic features (articles and prepositions) as well as learner attitudes. From analysis of their responses to linguistic tests and an attitude survey, the results suggested that extensive reading had differentiated effects on learners' grammar knowledge and attitudes depending on their L2 proficiency.

Razmi, Pourali, and Nozad (2014) analyzed the use of digital storytelling in an Iranian undergraduate EFL classroom to see whether using computer-based tools affected the improvement of learners' narrative skills. The results showed that using digital

storytelling techniques have effect on students' oral skills and this technique could be considered as an essential tool in foreign language learning and teaching. In the same year, İnal and Cakir (2014) investigated the effects of stories as contexts on vocabulary recognition and retention. The experimental group was taught vocabulary items through stories while the control group was taught the same vocabulary items through traditional techniques. The posttest and retention test verified that both groups improved in terms of vocabulary recognition and retention; however, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group. Finally, Yazdanpanah (2011) examined the effect of explicit teaching of narrative macrostructures on the use of communication strategies. Results indicated that the explicit instruction of narrative story structure had no effect on the use of communication strategy and the type of communication strategy employed by learners. However, it helped learners to develop certain skills to meet the narrative demand of storytelling; specifically, it enriched learners' stories regarding evaluative structure to make their stories worthy.

### ***Methodology***

The statistical population of the present study consists of a high school female students in Kerman. The statistical sample was selected using the convenient sampling method among the 12th grade female students. First, the

participants took part in a proficiency test which is Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The test was comprised of grammar and vocabulary questions with multiple-choice format. It was done to ensure that all the students participating in the research are at roughly the same level of English language proficiency. Out of 52 students, 40 participants whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within  $\pm 1$  standard deviation of the mean score, participated in this research. In the next step, the selected students were randomly divided into two groups of 20 participants, i.e., the experimental and control groups. After that, based on the students' proficiency level (pre-intermediate) the interventions administered for the experimental group in this study involved teaching two short stories, i.e., the Beauty & The Beast and Robinson Crusoe. The mentioned stories published for pre-intermediate students. However, the control group received conventional method of teaching of grammar and vocabulary. In fact, they followed all the traditional teaching practices.

There are three stages in collecting data as Pre-reading activities, While-reading activities, and post-reading activities. In the first stage, the teacher explained the procedures to the students and set linguistic objectives, grammatical points, and key vocabulary items used in the text of the short story. Then, the main characters and clarified cultural information were presented that could cause comprehension difficulties. After

that, the teacher posed a variety of questions concerning the short story context in order to activate their schemata. Thus, the students would link their prior knowledge with text experiences. The teacher also showed the students the short story cover and wanted them to make predictions about the stories. These activities could stimulate the students' interest in the topics of the short story texts and would motivate them to pursue them to see what would finally happen. In the second step, the students learned how to interact with and appreciate short story text as well as negotiate meaning. The teacher read the short story, made use of facial expressions, gestures, mime and intonations so that the learners would follow the short story. The teacher involved the learners in the short story text by asking questions about the story elements, characters and important events. The teacher also asked questions to challenge the learners' imagination. Moreover, new vocabularies and grammatical items were explained. While the learners were reading it, they underlined the unknown words and inferred the vocabulary meaning from the text. In the third stage, students worked together and answered the questions orally. Referential, factual, inferential, and evaluative questions were used at this phase. They wrote a conversation between two characters and paraphrased some paragraphs. Moreover, they wrote about the characters and discussed the theme. Finally, they expressed their own personal views, criticized, and rendered a judgment about the

story based on how successful it was in fulfilling its aims. For homework, students were required to summarize the short story using new vocabulary and discussion done in the classroom. Also, they were asked to form a new coherent work by synthesizing what they had learnt about the characters and events in the short story.

The data were analyzed quantitatively and statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS software. First, normally of data were assessed among the participants. Then, descriptive analysis for research variables (grammar and vocabulary) was applied through the paired sample t-test to examine changes in students' performance over the time. The test converts the scores to ranks and compares the differences between the two time periods (Woolson, 2007). In fact, the data is obtained from independent samples, such that each participant represents one score for either variable (Brace, Kemp, & Sneglar, 2006). At the end, in order to determine the significance differences between the two groups in terms of their scores for grammar and vocabulary knowledge, the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used. Effect size was calculated and absolute effect sizes of 0.1- 0.29 were taken as indicating a small effect, from 0.3 to 0.49 a medium effect, and greater than 0.5 a large effect (Rice & Harris, 2005).

### *Research Findings*

The information presented in this section relates to the mean, standard



deviation, minimum, and maximum of the scores obtained by the participants in the experimental and control groups for research

variables, including grammar and vocabulary skills. Table 1 reveals descriptive statistics of grammar knowledge.

**Table 1- Results of Pretest and Posttest of Grammar in Both Groups**

| Variable              | Statistical Metrics | Experimental Group |          | Control Group |          |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------|---------------|----------|
|                       |                     | Pretest            | Posttest | Pretest       | Posttest |
| Grammatical Knowledge | Mean                | 85.25              | 90.10    | 85.20         | 88.50    |
|                       | Standard deviation  | 14.40              | 14.44    | 14.46         | 13.80    |
|                       | Minimum score       | 56                 | 62       | 54            | 60       |
|                       | Maximum score       | 97                 | 101      | 100           | 101      |

As the table indicates, the mean and standard deviation of the control group in the pretest are 85.20 and 14.46 and in the posttest are 88.50 and 13.80. Also, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group in the pretest 85.25 and 14.40 and in the posttest are 90.10 and 14.44, respectively. According to the results, the difference between the means of pre- and posttest of the experimental group is 4.85 which

indicates a remarkable difference between the two mean scores. Considering the results of the control group, the difference between the means of pre- and posttests of grammar is 3.30 which is lower than the experimental group. Table 2 presents the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores of vocabulary skills in both experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest.

**Table 2- Results of Pretest and Posttest of Vocabulary in Both Groups**

| Variable             | Statistical Metrics | Experimental Group |          | Control Group |          |
|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------|---------------|----------|
|                      |                     | Pretest            | Posttest | Pretest       | Posttest |
| Vocabulary Knowledge | Mean                | 40.15              | 50.30    | 40.20         | 40.35    |
|                      | Standard deviation  | 15.55              | 14.60    | 15.46         | 16.10    |

|               |    |    |    |    |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|
| Minimum score | 22 | 34 | 15 | 25 |
| Maximum score | 45 | 63 | 55 | 52 |

Table 2 indicates descriptive statistics of vocabulary knowledge. As the table shows, the mean and standard deviation of the control group in the pretest are 40.20 and 15.46 and in the posttest are 40.35 and 15.10, Also, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group in the pretest 40.15 and 15.55 and in the posttest are 50.30 and 14.60, respectively. According to the received data, the difference between the means of pre- and posttest of the experimental group is 10.15 which indicates an observable difference between the two mean scores. Whereas, the difference between the means of pre- and posttests of vocabulary in the control group is .15 which is not remarkable.

***Evaluating the Assumptions of the Analysis of Covariance***

Before analyzing the data related to the research hypotheses, three assumptions of the analysis of covariance are evaluated.

***1. The Normal Distribution of Variables among Participants***

Before analyzing the data, the normal distribution of variables was assessed among the Participants. In fact, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used and the results are presented in table 3. The fact that Z is not significant indicates the normal distribution of the variables in the selected sample. Moreover, since the significance level for both variables is larger than 0.05, the distribution of both variables is normal. As a result, the assumption of the analysis of data is satisfied.

**Table 3- Testing Normality of the Distribution of Variables**

| Metric<br>Variables | Z of Kolmogorov-Smirnov | Degree of freedom | Significance level |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Grammar             | 0.758                   | 39                | 0.422              |
| Vocabulary          | 0.486                   | 39                | 0.925              |

***2. The Homogeneity of Variances***

Table 4 shows the results of testing the homogeneity of variances using Levene’s test for the research variables in the experimental and control groups.



The table indicates that the F-value in the Levene's test for the variables of grammar and vocabulary skills is equal to 3.290 and 3.050, respectively, which is not remarkable at the level of  $P < 0.05$ . The amount of F-value which is not significant, shows no significant

difference between the variances of experimental and control groups in terms of the variables of grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, the assumption of the homogeneity of variances is satisfied.

**Table 4- Homogeneity of Variances Using Levene Test for Variables in Both Groups**

| Metric<br>Variables | F     | First Degree of<br>Freedom | Second<br>Degree of<br>Freedom | Significance<br>level |
|---------------------|-------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Grammar             | 3.290 | 1                          | 39                             | 0.069                 |
| Vocabulary          | 3.050 | 1                          | 39                             | 0.071                 |

**3. The Homogeneity of Regression Slopes**

Table 5 examines the homogeneity of regression slopes for each variable. The table analyzes the interaction between both groups and the pretest is evaluated. If this interaction is not significant, the regression slopes

are assumed to be homogeneous. Since the value for the interaction between the group and the pretest is not significant for either of the variables, the regression slopes for the two research variables are homogenous. Thus, the assumption of the homogeneity of regression slopes is satisfied.

**Table 5- Homogeneity of Regression Slopes for Variables**

| Metric<br>Variables | F     | Significance level |
|---------------------|-------|--------------------|
| Grammar             | 2.195 | 0.721              |
| Vocabulary          | 2.172 | 0.875              |

Now, in order to determine the significance of the differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of their scores for grammar and vocabulary knowledge, the multivariate analysis of covariance

(MANCOVA) was used (Table 6). This is because there were two dependent variables and a pretest, necessitating the use of multivariate and MANCOVA methods.

**Table 6- MANCOVA Results of Grammar and Vocabulary Knowledge**

| Metric |                    | Value | F ratio | Degree of freedom of hypotheses | Degree of freedom of error | P level | Effect size |
|--------|--------------------|-------|---------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---------|-------------|
| Test   |                    |       |         |                                 |                            |         |             |
| Group  | Pillai's trace     | 0.533 | 21.66   | 2                               | 38                         | 0.001   | 0.56        |
|        | Wilks's lambda     | 0.423 | 21.66   | 2                               | 38                         | 0.001   | 0.56        |
|        | Hotelling's trace  | 1.325 | 21.66   | 2                               | 38                         | 0.001   | 0.56        |
|        | Roy's largest root | 1.325 | 21.66   | 2                               | 38                         | 0.001   | 0.56        |

The results presented in table 6 show a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of the posttest scores for dependent variables after controlling the pretest at the level of  $p < 0.001$ . Therefore, the main hypothesis of the current study is confirmed. Accordingly, it can be said that there is a significant difference in the scores of the dependent variables (grammar & vocabulary knowledge) in the posttest.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

The results revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of the posttest scores for dependent variables after controlling the pretest at the level of  $p < 0.001$ . Thus, it can be said that there is a significant difference in the scores of the dependent variables (grammar and vocabulary knowledge) in the posttest. The effect size shows that about 56 percent of the difference between the two groups is related to the experimental intervention. Findings support the results of Razmi, Pourali, and Nozad (2014), showed that using digital storytelling

techniques, students developed better oral skills and this technique could be considered as an essential tool in foreign language learning and teaching. Furthermore, Cimermanová (2015) concentrated on the possible effects of using authentic comics with EFL learners and the results indicated possible positive effects in vocabulary development and motivation to reading and overcoming linguistic barriers in reading authentic material using the context and prior knowledge. Also, findings of this study are in accordance with Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015) suggested that extensive reading and translation activities had differentiated effects on learners' grammar knowledge and attitudes depending on their L2 proficiency. Moreover, Parvareshbar and Ghoorchaei (2016) tried to come up with new methods of enhancing learners' vocabulary to enable both teachers and students to better cope with language learning and teaching issues. The results showed a significant improvement in the vocabulary skill of the experimental group compared to the control group. Additionally, the results are in line with the results of Biswas

and Anis (2017) on the effective use of short stories in teaching grammar. Grammar rules can be contextualized through short stories if they are selected considering the level of the class and are taught in an interesting way that involves the students interactively. Interactive and task-based grammar teaching and learning can be initiated through the proper use of short stories in a language class.

The results of the above-mentioned studies show that short stories can clearly improve the vocabulary proficiency of language learners. This improvement occurs through familiarizing the students with new vocabulary items in the context of new and interesting sentences. In fact, learning in the conventional method was based on repetition and exercise; however, many of the new and modern learning techniques suggest easier approaches to learning. One of these approaches in teaching the English language is to read short stories. Since these stories are short and include a limited number of new words, they provide the learner with the opportunity to be creative. In this way, the curiosity of the learner is used for translating the new words in the mind, identifying their possible meaning, and understanding their meaning in the context of complete sentences. Reading and understanding a larger number of sentences in the context of short stories provides creative readers with the opportunity to understand grammar rules without any prior knowledge. These learners will then be able to make use of these new grammatical rules

in other sentences. This is true for all human beings when they learn their mother tongue since children do not need explanations for grammatical rules; rather, they learn correct words and sentences in an unconscious manner. Short stories can also help language learners to more easily learn the syntax and vocabulary items of the target language.

Regularly reading English short stories can develop one's mind step by step and bring him/her to a high level of English language learning. Learning the language in this way may seem very slow or boring at first, but it will have a very positive effect on the reader's learning. Reading English short stories in the long run will help the learner become fluent in English faster than ever. Therefore, English short stories with Persian translation are highly recommended for children and teenagers who are very interested in learning. Many professors and language teachers believe that people who do not have sufficient command of the English language cannot easily read long novels because stress and anxiety will always cause these books to remain half-finished. For this reason, researchers in the field of language education always emphasize the positive effects of reading short stories. Continuous reading of articles, stories and conversations will help the learner understand the meaning of English words in any text easily. Reading is also very effective in repeating and recalling the vocabulary the individual has already learned. Moreover, if the learner already

knows the meaning of the key words in the text of the story, it will be much easier to understand. Therefore, learning the meaning and pronunciation of common English words will help the learner easily relate to the topic of the story when reading those stories. This study emphasized the fact that grammatical and vocabulary skills are complex and multifaceted skills and language learners always seek to discover new skills in this area. Grammar and vocabulary skills are among the skills that a language learner needs more time to understand. The learner reaches a better understanding of grammar or vocabulary when he uses them in the form of sentences. As a result, short stories should be used in addition to compulsory books for learners to better understand these skills.

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