

Read Aloud Experiences in a Second Language Arabic Context: Effects upon Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

Teachers exhibit a variety of styles in reading aloud, which influences vocabulary development. This study examined the effects of two conditions on student's second language English vocabulary acquisition: listening to stories with an explanation of the unfamiliar target words and listening to stories with no explanation of the words. The sample comprised 150 Grade Two ESL children divided into two groups, treatment and contrast. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to measure the extent of new vocabulary acquired. Statistical analysis revealed that students who listened to the stories along with a brief explanation of target words learned significantly more new words and remembered them ten weeks later, compared with students who heard stories with no explanation of the words. Offering simple explanations of target words in the context of rhyming texts is discussed as an effective method of second language vocabulary learning and extends previous findings.

Key Words

Vocabulary Acquisition, Reading Aloud, English as a Second Language (ESL)

Vocabulary acquisition through read aloud experiences

There is a strong body of research that acknowledges the vocabulary gains made by children in their first language during their primary school years (Nicholson & Whyte, 1992; Fondas, 1992). It is estimated that the average child learns approximately 45,000 words throughout their schooling, which is an average of 4,000 words per year (Nagy et al., 1984). There has been a growing interest in determining how children make such large gains in vocabulary knowledge. Previous research has considered studies of the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, the role of context in learning new words and the effectiveness of different methods of vocabulary instruction. According to Werner and Kaplan (1950a, 1950b), children learn the meanings of words under two conditions: (a) through direct and explicit reference by adults when they name objects or define words and (b) through incidental encounters with words in verbal contexts. The incidental learning of new words from context has been reported in studies in which students listened to stories, rather than reading them (Swanborn & deGlopper, 1999; Rosenhouse, Feitelson, Kita and Goldstein, 1997; Brabham, Boyd, & Edgington, 2000). These studies varied conditions by changing frequency of reading, age of the students, and whether the story was read to the whole class or to individual students. In several studies, stories were read three times to individual children (Leung, 1992; Leung & Pikulski, 1990; Brett, Rothlein & Hurley, 1996). Findings from these studies indicated that repeated reading aloud of stories encouraged incidental learning of vocabulary. Elley (1989) extended this to multiple reading sessions with a whole class. Vocabulary gains more than doubled, having added explanations of target words during the reading. He also observed that the number of times a word occurred in a story was positively related to the likelihood that a student would learn that word. However, criticism from Robbins & Ehri, (1994) highlight that the conclusions that can be

drawn from these studies are limited as children may have learned new words not from listening to stories but rather from attending to discussions of the unfamiliar words.

What constitutes appropriate literacy instruction including vocabulary instruction has resulted in increased interest in programmes such as whole language and literature-based instruction (Aaron, Chall, Durkin, Goodman, & Strickland, 1990; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Brabham & Brown, 2002). Research has shown that attitudes towards reading and achievement of students for whom English is a second language improved when trade books were used instead of graded readers (Walker-Dalhousie, 1993; Gunter, 1995). Using English literature in the classroom may provide these children with the opportunity to listen to a variety of books and increase their interest in reading in a second language.

Reading aloud to second language children has been shown to be a natural and relatively low anxiety way to help increase their vocabulary (Strickland, Morrow, Feitelson and Iraqi, 1990). However to 'know' a word, a bilingual child has to have both definitional and contextual information about the word. The use of inferring the meaning of unknown words in context is a process of acquiring new vocabulary by utilizing attributes and contexts that are familiar. Second language learners, however, bring with them limited common experiences. If as Fondas (1992) claims that "listening to words in context adds to the number of meanings in a child's receptive vocabulary", then reading stories aloud could provide a common experience by giving children learning English as a second language commonality to the new vocabulary. In this way, vocabulary is not taught in a vacuum.

The present study was conducted to extend previous literature through a study of vocabulary acquisition with young second language Arabic learners and to provide information that teachers can use to make reading aloud a more powerful tool for literacy learning in the second language classroom. The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of two conditions on Grade Two students' second language vocabulary acquisition: listening to stories with a brief explanation of the meaning of unfamiliar target words as they were encountered in the stories (the treatment condition) and listening to stories with no explanation of the words (the contrast condition). The aim was to extend Elley's (1989) study in which first language children made significant gains when explanation of words was provided. Would similar results be obtained if the intervention were applied in a Second Language Arabic context?

Participants

One hundred and fifty Grade Two students from six mixed-ability classrooms in an immersion bilingual Arabic-English school, participated in the study. Three of the classes were randomly assigned to the story-with-word-explanation group (N= 75) and three classes to the story-only group (N=75). Ethnic backgrounds were 80% Kuwaiti and 20% other Arabic nationalities including Jordanian, Omani and Palestinian. The students were six to seven years of age with Arabic as their first language. Students' reading levels ranged from Grade levels of 1.1 to 3.5.

Materials and Procedure

The ten texts selected for the study were '*Rumble in the Jungle*'; '*Bertie the Lazy Crow*'; '*Walking through the Jungle*'; '*The Lost Tail*'; '*Bears Don't Scare Me*'; '*The Greedy Fox*'; '*The Mice and Mr. Newman*'; '*This is the Bear*'; '*Where's my Teddy?*' and '*The Fish who couldn't Wish*'. All texts chosen were repetitious and rhythmic in nature with simple sentence structures.

These texts were chosen because of their suitability for second language learners of English, including colourful illustrations, limited text on each page, repetitive, rhyming language and dialogue. None of these books had been read to the students previous to the study by teachers.

A total of thirty words most likely to be unfamiliar to Grade Two students was used to develop a multiple-choice pilot vocabulary test for each book. This pilot test was administered to 25 Grade Two students from a classroom not included in the study in order to determine which words were familiar to Grade Two children. On the basis of the results of the pilot test, words that were known by more than 20% of the students were removed. Words that were not known by at least 80% of the students were used in the multiple-choice pretest and posttest that was assembled for each book (see appendix 2). The 30 target words were *ravenous, gorgeous, ferocious, creeping, leaping, swinging, ache, audience, mound, snappy, terrible, stares, chuckles, sleek, weeping, juicy, murmuring, creatures, chase, mousetraps, queues, sack, pile, dump, horrible, sobbing, gigantic, wished, night, silly*. These words were a combination of verbs, adjectives and nouns.

The tests were administered by the classroom teachers; the teachers read each item aloud, and students were required to circle the correct meaning for each word. The protocols for administration were exactly the same for both conditions. One point was given for each correct item. The day prior to the reading of the first book, a pretest of the thirty target vocabulary words from the selected books was administered to the two groups, treatment and contrast. The three teachers of the story-with-word-explanation group (treatment group) read each book once, over a period of ten weeks. Three new words were introduced during each session. As they read the story, the teachers gave a brief explanation of each target word as it was encountered in the text.

The teachers were told that when they came to a target word in the book they were to stop and read the definition that was provided by the researcher. For example, for the word ‘ferocious’, the teachers read the definition, “a fierce angry animal.” The students would then be encouraged to repeat the new word. Teachers also reread the sentence from the book and then pointed out that other words could be substituted for ‘ferocious’ that would not change the meaning of the story. The teachers then read the researchers’ paraphrased sentence to the students - “The tiger was so fierce that everyone was frightened of him.” No further explanation of the target words was given. The three teachers of the story-only group also read the books aloud but provided no explanation of the target words.

Ten weeks later, a 30-item posttest of the same target vocabulary words from each book was given to both groups to see if they remembered the meanings of the words.

Comparison and Analysis of Two Groups – Pre Test Scores

The researchers wished to compare the scores of the two groups before the intervention, as marked differences in pre-test scores could affect analysis of scores on the post-test (e.g. ceiling effects if pretest scores were high). Moreover, if the two groups were found to differ in vocabulary acquisition at the outset, as evidenced from the pre-test scores, then this would have a bearing on the conclusions that could be drawn. When the mean scores were calculated for both groups, it was noted that the Contrast group had a very slightly lower mean. The difference in the means of the two groups was 2.67%, which was less than one correct answer. Additionally, when the results were subjected to a student T Test to establish the significance of that difference, there was no significant difference found. $T(1, 148) = 1.35, p=0.17808127$. Therefore, the scores can be assumed to have been generated from similar populations (See Table 3).

It was considered that the two groups were matched well enough on vocabulary knowledge at the start of the study, to warrant comparison on a post - test at the end of the study.

Comparison and Analysis of Two Groups: Post - Test Scores

The researcher compared the scores of the two groups after the intervention to ascertain the effect of read aloud experiences (using explanation of target words) on the vocabulary acquisition of the treatment group. When the mean scores were calculated for both groups, it was revealed that the treatment group had a higher mean of 27.96 (93.2%) in comparison to the contrast group's mean of 16.28 (54.27%) This was a difference of 11.68 (38.93%) (See Table 2). Both groups demonstrated increased levels of vocabulary knowledge at the end of the study, but the increase was greater for the Treatment group.

The mean gain scores of the Treatment and Contrast groups were also calculated, to compare the post-test and pre-test scores. It was observed that the Treatment group made higher mean gains of 12.16 (40.53%). Although the mean average scores improved for the Contrast group with 1.28 (4.27%), the gains were significantly lower than that of the Treatment group (See Table 2). In conclusion, the findings indicate that the Treatment group had a higher mean and greater mean gain, after the intervention of read aloud experiences with explanation of target words.

In order to investigate whether the scores obtained in the post-test for the groups were significantly different and as a result of something other than chance, it was decided to test the null hypothesis.

Testing the Null Hypothesis using the T Test

The null hypothesis of the present study is:

‘A Read Aloud approach using explanation of target words, has no effect on vocabulary acquisition, in a Second Language Arabic Context.’

By applying statistical analysis, the null hypothesis would either be accepted or rejected depending on the significance of the results. The scores of the vocabulary test were subjected to the student ‘T test’, which investigated whether or not the differences between pre- and post-test means were significant. Results revealed a significant difference between the Treatment and Contrast group scores. $T(1, 148) = 21.85, p = 3.61 \times 10^{-48}$. As the ‘p’ value was less than 0.001, it can be concluded that the results were generated from dissimilar groups in the post-test. Consequently, the null hypothesis was strongly rejected (See Table 3).

The T Test revealed that the scores of the story-word-explanation group scored significantly higher than the other group on the vocabulary words. Students in this group knew an average of 12 more target words in the post-test.

The results indicated that the students in the story-with-word-explanation group made significantly more progress from the pre-tests to the post-tests than the other group. They had a greater mean gain of 12.16 (40.53%) than the other group, 1.28 (4.27%). The story-with-word-explanation group also scored significantly higher on the post-tests than students in the story-only group, 27.96 (93.2%) compared to 16.28 (54.27%). Students in the story-with-word-explanation group not only learned more new words, but they also remembered them six weeks later. When the means were subjected to a ‘T test’, it was shown that the difference was not

brought about by chance. It was therefore significant. The findings bore out the hypothesis that: “A Read Aloud approach using explanation of target words, has an effect on vocabulary acquisition, in a Second Language Arabic Context.’

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that Grade Two second language students can acquire more new vocabulary from listening to stories, if there is a brief explanation of new words as they encounter them in the stories. Students in this study who heard the stories along with explanations of words remembered the meanings of an average of twelve new words from ten books ten weeks later. Although similar observations were reported by Elley (1989), it was in a first language, this study did not find, however, that oral presentation of words in the context of a story by itself resulted in increased vocabulary knowledge. In the studies in which listening to stories produced vocabulary growth, students heard the same stories three times (Elley, 1989; Leung & Pikulski, 1990; Warick, 1989). In the present study, however, students heard the stories only once. Other researchers, such as Stahl, Richek & Vandevier, (1991) have found that the frequency of exposure to the target word is a key variable affecting gains in learning vocabulary from context. Our findings indicate, however that repeated readings of the same story are not essential for second language vocabulary acquisition, if new words are explained as they are encountered in the story.

There is considerable support in the literature for reading aloud to children (Senechal, Thomas & Monker, 1995; Trelease, J. (1995); Campbell, R. (2001). Some researchers have concluded that the single most important activity in building the knowledge required for children’s eventual success in reading is reading aloud. Listening to stories has resulted in higher scores on measures

of decoding, reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Galda & Cullinan, 1991). Our study provides further evidence of the value of reading to children learning English as a second language. Reading aloud, accompanied by explanations of unfamiliar words as they occur in the story, appears to be an effective method of teaching these children the meaning of new words. The implications for teachers is that reading stories aloud, along with brief explanation of unfamiliar vocabulary words, can produce significant gain in the acquisition of second language vocabulary.

There are, however, some limitations of the study. Although the study was ecologically valid in that it took place in a natural reading situation, the use of rhyming books did not provide control of such variables as the number of contacts with each target word, the level of word difficulty, and other factors inherent in the texts. Another limitation is that we did not measure how much the target vocabulary words were discussed in the story-with-word-explanation group classrooms. Although teachers were asked to give no further instruction in these words, it is possible that because the target words had been pointed out and explained during the reading of the stories, students became more aware of them in other contexts. While students in this study learned the meanings of new words when teachers briefly explained the meaning of each unfamiliar word as it was encountered in the story, additional research is needed to find out whether second language students are able to internalise the new words and use them as part of their written and spoken vocabulary. The multiple-choice test used in this study, measured recall of the definition only, not the ability to use the words in oral or written context. Application could be evaluated by having students use target words in sentences or in stories about their everyday experiences or in similar written and spoken activities.

There is also a need for further research to identify the most effective, yet least intrusive way to highlight vocabulary while reading to second language children, so that their comprehension and enjoyment are optimal. To maximize the benefit of explaining words as they are encountered in the story, it would be helpful to discover which components of the explanation of the unfamiliar words are critical. Is it the definition of the word, using the word in the paraphrased sentence, the interest in the story combined with using the word in context, or the combination of all of these factors that make this an effective strategy? These questions need to be addressed by further research.

Conclusion

Certainly, reading aloud to children is not the only solution to the challenge of increasing second language vocabulary acquisition. However, this study has shown that commitment to a quality read-aloud experience, in which student listen to rhyming stories along with a brief explanation of target words significantly increased word knowledge, compared with students who heard stories with no explanation of the words. Offering simple explanations of target words in the context of rhyming texts has therefore been shown to be an effective method of supporting second language vocabulary development. What better way to extend reading aloud experiences with young ESL learners, than through listening to stories that integrates an explanation of the unfamiliar target language?

Word Count: 3093

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Two Intact Grade Two Groups

Group	Male	Female	Number of pupils
Treatment	40	35	75
Contrast	36	39	75

Table 2: Comparison of Mean Gains in Vocabulary Knowledge Test

Group	Pre Test Mean	Post Test Mean	Mean Gain
Treatment	15.8 (52.67%)	27.96 (93.2%)	12.16 (40.53%)
Contrast	15 (50%)	16.28 (54.27%)	1.28 (4.27%)

Table 3: T-test on Pre- and Post -Tests

	n	Mean	SD	T Value	Significance
Pre-test					
Treatment	75	15.8	3.57	1.35	P=0.17808127
Contrast	75	15	3.67		
Post-test					
Treatment	75	27.96	2.94	21.85	P=3.61 x 10 ⁻⁴⁸
Contrast	75	16.28	3.58		

Appendix 2: Vocabulary Knowledge Tests

Directions to teachers:

Read the following aloud to students: “Circle the word or group of words that best tells the answer.”

Read each statement and the four choices. Then instruct students to circle the correct answer.

Allow time for students to circle an answer before going on to the next item.

Vocabulary Test for ‘Rumble in the Jungle’	
<i>Ravenous means the same as:</i>	<i>Ferocious means the same as:</i>
Thirsty	Excited
Hungry	Fierce
Brave	Frightened
Ridiculous	Funny
<i>Gorgeous means the same as:</i>	
Ugly	
Beautiful	
Good	
Friendly	
Vocabulary Test for ‘Walking Through the Jungle’	
<i>Creeping means the same as:</i>	<i>Swinging means the same as:</i>
Walking too fast	Playing
Walking with a limp	Swaying
Walking backwards	Standing
Walking on tip-toes	Sending
<i>Leaping means the same as:</i>	
Running	
Jumping	
Walking	
Leaning	

<u>Vocabulary Test for 'The Lost Tail'</u>	
<i>Ache means the same as:</i>	<i>Mound means the same as:</i>
Aunt	Round
Cherry	Hill
Animal	Pound
Pain	Found
<i>Audience means the same as:</i>	
Queue	
Crowd	
Class	
Team	
<u>Vocabulary Test for 'Bears Don't Scare Me'</u>	
<i>Snappy means the same as:</i>	<i>Stares means the same as:</i>
Quickly	Stretches
Sleepy	Stands
Pretty	Watches
Happy	Waits
<i>Terrible means the same as:</i>	
Great	
Awful	
Terrific	
Bright	
<u>Vocabulary Test for 'The Greedy Fox'</u>	
<i>Chuckles means the same as:</i>	<i>Weeping means the same as:</i>
Lies	Sleeping
Cheats	Writing
Cheers	Crying
Laughs	Dancing
<i>Sleek means the same as:</i>	
Good	
Shiny	
Creek	
Small	

<u>Vocabulary Test for 'Bertie the Lazy Crow'</u>	
<i>Juicy means the same as:</i>	<i>Creatures means the same as:</i>
Spicy	People
Lovely	Flowers
Smelly	Houses
Tasty	Animals
<i>Murmuring means the same as:</i>	
Shouting	
Whispering	
Munching	
Eating	
<u>Vocabulary Test for 'The Mice and Mr. Newman'</u>	
<i>Chase means the same as:</i>	<i>Queue means the same as:</i>
Face	Queen
Run after	Animal
Carry	Line of people
Race	Kind of food
<i>Mousetraps means the same as:</i>	
Something to catch a mouse	
A cage	
Something to kill a mouse	
A kennel	
<u>Vocabulary Test for 'This is Bear'</u>	
<i>Sack means the same as:</i>	<i>Dump means the same as:</i>
Bag	To jump
Sock	To play
Pillow	To get rid of
Hat	To pull
<i>Pile means the same as:</i>	
File	
Heap	
Pen	
Fish	

<u>Vocabulary Test for 'Where's my Teddy?'</u>	
<i>Horrible means the same as:</i>	<i>Gigantic means the same as:</i>
Delicious	Beautiful
Beautiful	Grumpy
Excellent	Small
Awful	Huge
<i>Sobbing means the same as:</i>	
Sad	
Lonely	
Careful	
Crying	
<u>Vocabulary Test for 'The Fish who couldn't wish'</u>	
<i>Wished means the same as:</i>	<i>Silly means the same as:</i>
Waited for	Foolish
Excited	Selfish
Looked at	Bad
Hoped for	Unhappy
<i>Night means the same as:</i>	
Nice	
Nasty	
Time of day	
Noisy	