

**Towards Voicing the Multidimensional Impact of Digital
Storytelling on Vocabulary Extension in a Foreign Language
English-Learning Context: The Case of First Year English-Major
at Biskra University**

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays an important part in language learning and teaching since it strongly affects the other language skills. Therefore, it is critical to learners to build up their knowledge of words in order to be able to communicate effectively. The present study aims to explore the effects of using digital stories on vocabulary learning. In order to collect rich and relevant data and for the sake of accomplishing this aim, a survey was carried out with forty first year students of English at Biskra University. The current paper also uses a semi-structured interview with eight university teachers. The findings of this paper have revealed that digital story is a successful tool to promote vocabulary knowledge. Participating in such collaborative digital stories increased students' motivation and boosted their focus on topics. Implementing this pedagogical tool developed their communication skills, reduced stress and anxiety as well.

Keywords: Digital stories; planned instruction; unplanned instruction; vocabulary

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a language component that allows learners to be communicatively competent whether in the spoken or written form of the language since it enables learners to practice language effectively. In fact, vocabulary growth is directly related to students' achievement. Therefore, learners of a foreign language are in need to possess a satisfactory collection of vocabulary. However; the majority of the SL teachers tend to ignore the importance of vocabulary teaching because they themselves were not taught to emphasize vocabulary knowledge during their period of studentship. To put it differently, the main goal of this study is to check the existing literature through determining the significant effect of digital stories on enhancing EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Moreover, it aims at highlighting the importance of using different teaching strategies in order to develop students' vocabulary in the second language. In other words, this study investigates the useful methods that are applied by educators and that are appreciated by learners. Furthermore, within the specific Algerian context, research has revealed that university students suffer from the deficit of word knowledge in the second or foreign language. Hence, it is postulated that there is a significant effect of using digital stories on enhancing vocabulary learning.

The current research focuses on investigating the impact of digital stories on improving vocabulary learning. It is an attempt at answering a few questions that pertain to university teachers as well as to first year English students. The specific objectives of the investigation are expressed in the following research questions:

Q1. What are the appropriate vocabulary teaching strategies that help teachers develop EFL learners' lexical knowledge?

Q2. How significant is the use of digital stories on vocabulary learning?

Q3. What are teachers' and students' perspectives on using digital stories in enhancing students' vocabulary mastery?

Thus, in an attempt to meet the aims that drive this study, a questionnaire was administered to 40 freshmen students of English at Biskra University. Moreover, the researchers interviewed eight university teachers of English in order to benefit from their experience. It is worth mentioning that the research included the ones who accepted to conduct this interview.

2. Literature review

Vocabulary instruction involves enabling students to maximize their stock of words (Nasri, 2022). Vocabulary instruction aims to engage learners in the process of learning meanings, spelling, the relationships among words and how can be used in different contexts.

2.1. Principles to guide vocabulary instruction

Vocabulary instruction refers to teaching words of a certain language to particular learners with particular needs. This process focuses on how words can be learned easily, how these words could be effective and how to use such items in different situations. A number of studies have revealed that teaching and learning words could be more efficient if language users do not rely only on knowing the apparent meaning of a word i.e. they need to know the other things that are related to that word including the elements that affect this process. In this context, Vacca et al. (2006, pp. 260-265) believed that there are six principles that guide teaching vocabulary.

2.1.1 Selecting new words from reading literature and content material

Encountering new vocabulary, for the first time, may create problems to learners, which would hinder their improvement in that language. However, improving comprehension through focusing on

vocabulary will pave the way for them. This can happen when learners put the emphasis on acquiring a large size of vague words (McKeown & Beck, 2004, pp. 16-18). Graves (2008) and Kame'enui, and Baumann (2012) claimed that "vocabulary instruction is a necessary part of comprehension instruction because understanding a text is significantly influenced by vocabulary development" (as cited in Klingner et al., 2015, p. 49). In fact, the more learners have a satisfactory stock of words the more they guarantee understanding. Vacca et al. (2006) believed that mapping or clustering is a very helpful method for identifying words. This method permits students to expand their knowledge through organizing their words into draws and circles to identify and derive new words.

2.1.2 Teaching words in relation to other words

Through this principle, Vacca et al. (2006) believed that the learners access the process of learning through recalling their prior knowledge to establish words relationships such as similarities and differences. They assumed that learning new words can be constructive if language users use their schema to make connections between words. Background information allows learners to gain time since it helps them to get back words and it also helps with making quick interpretations. In this respect, Henry (1974) suggested four cognitive processes contributing to learning words and concepts:

- a. The act of joining: through asking learners to do a set of activities such as classifying, generalizing and explaining how words are put together.
- b. The act of excluding: this may occur when learners are asked to single out, reject or choose some words that are not belonging to the same class or category.

- c. The act of selecting: in this act, students learn how to make good choices and be able to explain the reasons behind their selections relying on their experience. This act involves, for example, the best word learners can choose in a multiple choice task.
- d. The act of implying: this refers to learners' ability to make decisions based on if-then, cause and effect between concepts and words (as cited in Vacca et al., 2006, pp. 262-263).

2.1.3 Instructing students to relate words to their prior knowledge

Judith Thelon (1986) said that learners have file folders inside their brain (i.e. they need to use their background knowledge to understand new things). File folders contain different notions of previous explanations that contribute to understanding new ideas and concepts and they differ from one another. In addition to that, Pearson (1984) believed that to have better results in building up vocabulary, teachers should change the question of “how can I get this word into the students' heads” to “what is that students already know about that they can use as an anchor point, as a way of accessing this concept?”, which leads us finally to the idea of file folders of vocabulary. Therefore, using background knowledge would facilitate the process of learning new words (Vacca et al., 2006, p. 263).

2.1.4 Teaching words in pre-reading activities to activate knowledge and use them in post reading, discussion, response and retelling

Teachers need to focus on teaching ambiguous vocabulary before they start doing pre-reading activities. Those activities should contain vague words to prepare students to what is coming. This way can help students strongly to actuate their schemata in predicting. Students predict words and expressions that would be connected in the passage they are going to read. To support that claim, Vacca et al. (2006, pp. 263-264) stated the findings of Freeman and Freeman (2003) who emphasized the English language learners' difficulties in

using their prior knowledge, gained from isolated activities, to make connections between words. Consequently, they assumed that teachers should apply pre and post reading activities that are related to the text and which would facilitate the learners' understanding that is linked to text.

2.1.5 Teaching words systematically and in depth

Teaching words in depth means providing something new to students instead of making them repeat definitions. It is more than applying the useful tasks such as looking for words that fit others or searching for words that are antonyms, which are part of the systematic teaching of vocabulary when retelling those definitions using their own style or comparing the new data with the previous students build up new chunks called: novel products. Nevertheless, Stahl (1986) stated that the effective way to teach words deeply is through classroom discussion where students could draw conclusions and use different aspects of a language to combine what existed with what is new. Systematic instruction refers to following an organized way of teaching vocabulary like attending extensive read-aloud sessions that enables learners to discuss, restate the story or determine their improvement in vocabulary. In addition to that, activities of matching words within a group and rewriting in written tasks are very effective (Vacca et al., 2006, p. 264).

2.1.6 Awakening interest and enthusiasm for words

Vacca et al. (2006, p. 265) believed that vocabulary learning becomes a boring task, for children of elementary school, especially when teachers limit them to using dictionary to search for words, definitions and making sentences. Needless to say that this way to learn new words is worthy in different situations. However, the overuse of that method leads to creating a routine. Thus, they stated that the process of acquiring new words will

be enjoyable when teachers show interest towards words and use them in different situations. Intelligent teachers can awake interest for words by using games to play with words, mentioning words' origins, telling stories as well as related terms. Relying on pedagogical aids can work in several cases. Technology can enhance the process of learning through creating a relaxing atmosphere. However, it cannot replace the role of a teacher.

Several studies such as Fortes Ferreira (2007); Bromley (2012) and Chatrsimab (2015) have been conducted to prove how much vocabulary is important in language teaching and language learning. In addition, they focused on the necessity of building up vocabulary knowledge as a key element to comprehend a given text. This leads teachers as well as students to employ the appropriate strategies to enhance their stock of words. According to Palmberg (1990), developing such strategies depends on two vocabulary points, which are planned and unplanned vocabulary strategies.

2.1.6.1 Unplanned strategies

This happens when learners acquire new words incidentally or accidentally in classroom or when students ask for more clarification for vague words or when teachers notice that there are words which they need to focus on (Shen, 2003, p. 190). That is, learning new words can happen without making previous plans or without making decision to acquire words. In other words, they do not expect what words they are going to learn. It is up to teachers to choose the appropriate method to provide meaning such as using gestures, body-language or illustrations.

2.1.6.2 Planned instruction

Planned instruction “involves deciding what lexical knowledge you will teach” (Beliste, 1997, p.3). Seal (1991, p.298) defined planned instruction as making decisions of what to teach and what are the vocabulary items you will deal with before teachers go to class. Beliste

(1997, p. 3) added that teachers' decision includes what content should be taught, for what purpose and what are the key words to focus on as well as what are the related words students may benefit from. Therefore, according to her, teachers should build a vocabulary stock for their students, and for that they need to plan beforehand. Hatch and Brown (1995, p.415) stated that planned vocabulary refers to teaching vocabulary intentionally.

2.1.6.3 Digital stories and vocabulary learning

Vocabulary knowledge reflects the ones' understanding of the language since it is a corner stone in teaching and learning any language. Nowadays, vocabulary mastery becomes one of the main issues that language users experience (Nation, 2013). In fact, technology has a great impact on the world in general and on education in particular. Many studies have shown the importance of implementing digital stories in the process of learning as a tool to enhance vocabulary knowledge. One simple definition of digital stories is using the advance technology or computer devices to share stories (Anggara, 2023, p. 111). In other words, it is an entertaining and informative way of enlarging vocabulary and learning about the language (Ahmedi, 2018, pp.115-120). In other words, digital stories help learners to approach a certain topic through bringing together the digital devices with the text, pictures, music and audio. As Robin (2008) noted, digital stories are powerful way of instruction in the second language learning. Generally speaking, stories are a loved tool that leads students to successful vocabulary building since it offers them joy through the positive environment which helps them to get involved in the learning activity.

3. Methodology

The following section includes describing the methodology used in this study:

3.1.The research design

The researchers used the mixed methods research. It is worth mentioning that mixed methods research allows researchers to collect richer information using distinctive methods. In other words, the use of different approaches to investigate a phenomenon and to reach the same results will make a research more valid and reliable.

3.2.The population and sampling

The study at hand was carried out with 40 freshmen of English at Biskra university. i.e. the first year students of English to investigate how digital stories affect their vocabulary improvement in English. The rationale behind choosing such a level is that all the participants are beginners and they need to build up their vocabulary so that they will be able to produce the language according to different contexts.

3.3. Data collection methods

O’Leary (2004) confirmed “collecting credible data is a tough task, and it is worth remembering that one method of data collection is not inherently better than another” (p.150). That is, in research, obtaining data from participants is a crucial element when implemented correctly, it improves the quality of research. It is worth mentioning that collecting data is a hard and demanding process for any researcher. The paper at hand includes using two different methods. The first data collection method that was used in this study is the semi-structured interview. The latter is an in-depth way to collect data through conversation (Gray, 2004, pp. 215-217). This includes a series of questions which are generally open-ended questions. Open-ended questions provide the opportunity for both the interviewer and the interviewee to investigate, discuss and manipulate the role of using digital stories in enhancing the vocabulary knowledge.

The second data collection method used in this study is the semi-structured questionnaire which was submitted to forty first year students of English from university of Biskra, Algeria. The objective of using this tool is to collect information that we think is appropriate

for gathering and recording information about our phenomenon. It is one of the most common methods used for gathering opinions and attitudes from a large group of participants. A questionnaire is defined as a method of collecting information about a certain issue. It includes a set of clear and precise questions that are related to the research objectives. The answers of respondents help the researcher in presenting findings (Abawi, 2013; Mathers et al., 2009, p. 19).

The aim of using this questionnaire in this quantitative method is a practical and economical way that allows us to collect and quantify large amounts of data from a large sample in a short period of time. This questionnaire provides both qualitative and quantitative data. According to Acharya (2010, pp. 2-3), there are three types of questionnaires: structured questionnaire, unstructured questionnaire and quasi-structured (or semi-structured) questionnaire. In this study, we used a semi- structured questionnaire. A semi-structured questionnaire is a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. Relying on such a type permits the researcher to collect quantitative and qualitative pieces of information (p. 137).

3.2 Data analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA for short) was the qualitative data analysis procedure that has been opted for in order to meticulously analyze the interview data. Distinguishably, TA is a poorly-branded, rarely-acknowledged, yet a widely-used analytical procedure in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities (Saou & Nasri, 2023). More specifically, after having transcribed and coded the raw data, TA has been conspicuously applied in such a way that helps exceedingly in identifying, examining, organizing, depicting, and reporting the relevant themes entrenched in the overall dataset. Accordingly, throughout the use of TA, it became way too possible not only to examine and dissect the interviewees perspectives vis-à-vis the

phenomenon under scrutiny but also, and quite importantly, to openly delineate the similarities and discrepancies between them with the aim of generating plausible deductions.

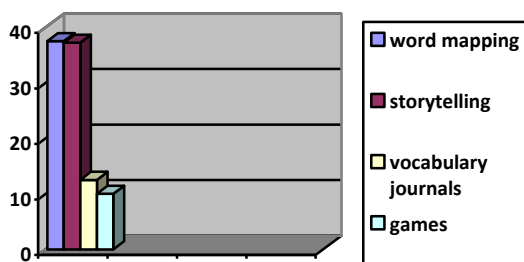
3.3 Results and discussion

Based on the results of the teachers' interview, there are different strategies that can be used to enhance vocabulary mastery, among them using language games. 4 participants asserted that using games within class creates a comfortable atmosphere for vocabulary acquisition. This result is in line with Marzano et al., (2011, pp. 57-58) who have explored the crucial role of the pedagogical games. 37.5% of the sample added that word mapping or clustering is one effective strategy that aids students for better and deeper understanding of words. According to Reutzel & Cooter (2008), semantic mapping develops the English language learners in terms of making relationships, determining and classifying words since learners use their schemata to build new vocabulary. One participant (12.5%) indicated that vocabulary journals assist students to write down all the unfamiliar words come from reading or listening.

According to Byon, (2012, pp. 237- 239), the main aim of those journals is to let students be aware of gathering words, looking for meaning and making connections between words which leads to finally develop their skills. Three teachers (37.5%) answered that storytelling is one crucial strategy to attract students' attention about the significance of building up vocabulary. In fact, the majority of the participants (75%) had no experience in dealing with digital stories. On the other hand, 2 participants (25%) indicated that they know and often use this tool when they teach reading and oral expression. Moreover, all the interviewed teachers (100%) agreed that the deficit of vocabulary is one of the biggest challenges students suffer from when they approach a text. That is, students are unable to understand or produce certain messages because of the limited repertoire they have. This difficulty hinders them from developing their level in English in

general and their reading comprehension in particular. As Alqahtani (2015, pp. 21-22) put it, one of the major difficulties language users suffer from while practicing the reading skill is the lack of vocabulary. The results are represented in the following figure:

Figure1 : Teachers' strategies to enhance vocabulary mastery



Furthermore; more than half of the sample (62.5%) agreed that students can build their knowledge through the use of the advance technology that is represented in digital stories. According to them, it is a handy strategy to promote classroom discussion and it facilitates the group work. 25% answered that digital stories ensures the understanding of complex content. One participant (12.5%) added that this technique enhances the critical thinking and helps students to learn problem solving skills. Most of the interviewees (87.5%) responded that digital stories can be used to teach different subjects areas not only reading. According to them, digital stories are very effective in teaching languages and developing the communicative skills of students. Therefore, all of the respondents agreed that teachers need training in how to use digital stories for educational needs.

In answering the question of the purposes of using such tool, all the participants indicated that through this technique, students can break the routine of daily classes and improve the collaborative work

since it increases the students' involvement. In addition, it boosts the focus of learners through capturing their attention especially the visual and auditory ones. According to one participant (12.5%), digital stories engage students in positive atmosphere where they increase their awareness about a given topic. In fact, combining digital stories tasks like describing pictures and discuss thoughts can assist learners in oral presentation in particular and enhance their speaking skill in general. 2 respondents (25%) pointed out that digital stories teach learners about the different cultures around the world. 75 % believed that this powerful tool decreases stress. In fact, involving students in digital learning activities can minimize anxiety as well as boost their motivation to learn English.

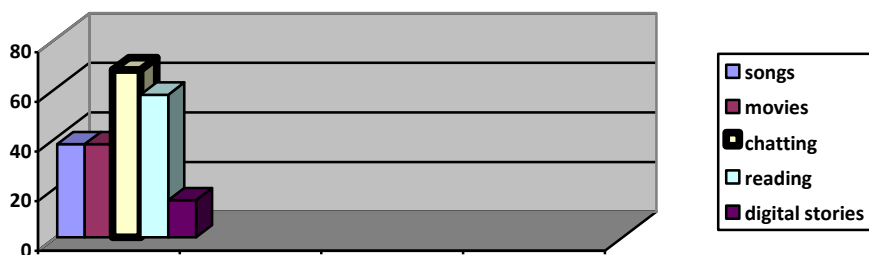
Concerning the use of digital stories, the majority of the sample (87.5%) agreed that some teachers and students alike know the significance of using such tool in enhancing their knowledge of words yet not all of them use it as a pedagogical aid in classroom. That is, they would be interested in using this educational technique if the classes are well-equipped with the technological devices for educational uses of digital stories. Another point that was shared by the teachers is some of them find it very difficult to implement digital stories because they have a modest experience in using ICT. This result is in line with Assadi et al. (2022) who have indicated that digital storytelling is an active way that motivates students to learn and obtain vocabulary.

In analyzing the questionnaire to explore the students' attitudes towards the importance of digital stories in enhancing vocabulary knowledge, the researchers got different answers from the participants about the sources of new vocabulary they encounter in their daily life. Learners were not limited to choosing only one option. In other words, they can choose more than one element. More than a quarter (37.5%) answered that they get new words, in their daily life, while listening to English songs. This strategy supported by Kusnierek (2016, p. 23) who

stated that songs and music are the main sources of English outside the classroom. The same percentage (37.5%) responded that they get new words from watching movies. Most of the time, learners relate the scenes they are watching with the words they hear or they read the subtitled in their mother tongue or first language. This result is in line with Vacca et al. (2006) who believe that the words that come from watching video seem to be learnt more quickly than other scripts.

67.5% of our sample replied that chatting is one source of building up words since it allows them to learn new lexis. Exchanging thoughts with the people especially with foreigners and native speakers leads learners to reinforce their language and to acquire new words. 23 participants (57.5%) added that reading is one way through which they come across new words. In fact, books and short stories are considered as a main source of new vocabulary. 15% of the sample indicated that digital stories are among the effective daily sources of enlarging vocabulary knowledge. The obtained data is represented in the following figure:

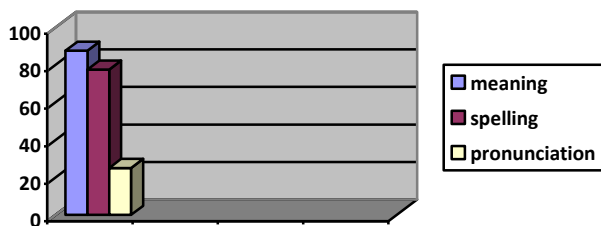
Figure 2: Students' sources of new vocabulary



Regarding the difficulties of the new learned words, more than half the participants (87.5%) responded that the meaning of new words is the main difficulty that hinders them from

understanding. Generally, the most challenging task in encountering new words is determining the meaning of these words; especially if these words have several meanings. One quarter of the respondents (25%) answered that pronouncing the new words represents another difficulty in learning a second or foreign language. In conducting our interview with university teachers, some of them believed that pronunciation represents another difficulty that students suffer from when they encounter new words. Students feel perplexed when they could not utter unusual words. In other words, the unfamiliarity with certain words makes it hard to pronounce them especially if these words are multisyllabic. 77.5% of the sample have answered that the spelling is one aspect that makes new words difficult. Students tend not to remember all the new words they encounter especially if they feel that they are hard to pronounce or to memorize. Schematically, the results are represented in the following figure:

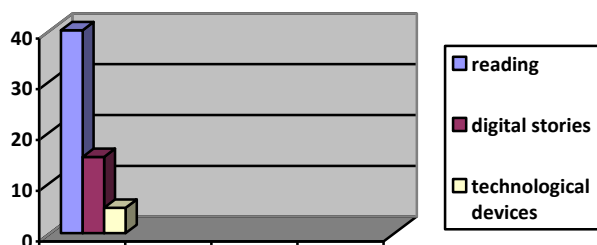
Figure 3: Students' difficulties in learning new words



In answering the question of how do they overcome these challenges, 40% of the sample said that reading enables them to learn some of the language aspects that pave the way for them to empower their vocabulary mastery. In fact, 15% specify their answers by saying that digital stories are among the effective ways to overcome the difficulty of spelling and meaning since there are some applications that allow readers to hear the right pronunciation and provide users with a glossary. The findings revealed that this

pedagogical method helps in developing both productive and receptive skills of students. In other words, the overall attitude of students towards using digital stories was positive suggesting that learners are satisfied and motivated and enjoyed studying using this pedagogical aid. According to 5 %, this technological instrument helps learners in the process of recalling and retention of information. On the other hand, only 1 participant indicated that he did not feel that this tool really helped him improving his knowledge of words. The figure that comes next represents the previous results:

Figure 4: Students' ways to overcome the difficult vocabulary



4. Conclusion and recommendations

The study at hand suggests that vocabulary knowledge can be promoted through the use of digital stories. To start with, this pedagogical tool helps students to acquire different types of words in the target language. The findings revealed that teachers and students alike can benefit from integrating digital stories. First of all, collaborative work through the use of this tool engages students in the academic atmosphere suggesting that they have equal chances in doing activities. This involvement includes developing communicative and problem-solving skills among students. Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that digital stories motivate students since they consider the use of advance technology

challenging and enjoyable at the same time. Participants declared that they found technology complicated. Nevertheless, by time, being familiar with it can increase focus on the given lesson. Based on the previously-mentioned facts, SL learners suffer from different types of difficulties. The study provided a variety of teaching and learning ways to overcome these challenges in expanding their English vocabulary.

Due to the non-traditional nature of this tool, we highly stress on the implementation of digital stories within the classroom to develop the vocabulary mastery since this tool fosters the students' involvement and motivation as well as it enhances the productivity and creativity of learners. Teachers can combine the use of technology through digital stories in non- academic settings. That is, teachers can provide students with activities to do outside the classroom via implementing digital stories. Every teacher needs to give a high preference on developing digital literacy to successfully reaches his/her objectives. Additionally, teachers need to be creative in terms of selecting suitable strategies to grab learners' attention to develop their language. To put it differently, teachers should vary their ways of teaching in introducing new words. Teachers should consider the students' difficulties when presenting new words and provide them with handy ways to overcome these pitfalls.

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