RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF ELECTRONIC SHORT STORIES IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' LEXICAL COMPETENCE IN READING COMPREHENSION SKILL

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Abstract

This study aims to underline the role of literature, specifically e-learning short stories, in enhancing reading comprehension skill among First-Level students of English at the Faculty of Education of Saber, University of Aden. The research study mainly focuses on students' lexical competence. The study is specifically conducted to identify the underlying problems faced by students who experience difficulties in comprehending reading texts. For this reason, the researcher gave a brief outline of the objective, hypothesis, and question. The researcher besides implemented a quasi-experiment, and through a purposive (non-random) sampling she adopted a causal-comparative design where she divided a sample of (41) into two groups: A control group of (20) subjects, and an experimental group of (21) subjects. In a same manner, the researcher utilized four instruments as follows: A pre-paper pencil test, a select number of short stories, What's Application group activities, and a post-paper pencil test. Each instrument is designed to serve the research purpose. The experiment lasted for a period of (10) weeks where the researcher committed herself to meet her subjects two days per week through What's Application. The study in accordance with the objective, hypothesis, and research question adopted the statistical value of (0.05) to affirm the significant level of difference between the two groups, and hence interpreted the data collected by means of Mann-Whitney U Test (SPSS, version 28). The study demonstrated two main results: **a)** E-learning short stories proved gradual development of students' lexical competence. **b)** E-learning short stories played an effective role in the reading comprehension skills of students.

Keywords: Short Story; Lexical Competence; E-learning; Lexicon.

Introduction

Knowing a language means knowing its vocabulary, or in the technical sense knowing its lexicon. One cannot speak a word or write a massage or comprehend a given text without possessing a good amount of multifarious lexicon of the target language (i.e. a knowledge of its collocation, sense relations, idioms, clichés, homonymy and polysemy). The total knowledge an individual holds for an existing language constitutes his/her virtual lexical competence. It is this lexical competence that this paper intends to deal with in the learning process of English at university setting. This lexical competence, indeed, is growing up through years of reading, memorization, practice, and up to scratch. Students have limited -if not poor- repertoire when it comes to reading texts. Perhaps they are not prepared from scratch, that is from a point at which vocabulary meaning is the building block of reading comprehension. Based on this, the present paper sheds light on the students at the Faculty of Education-Saber, University of Aden have difficulty in comprehending reading texts. It presents literature, short stories in particular, as a supplementary electronic learning materials to enhance the reading comprehension skill of first-level students of English at the Faculty of Education of Saber at University of Aden.

EJUA

Electronic Journal of University of Aden for Humanity and Social Sciences
Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2025

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Pages 447-455

https://ejua.net

Statement of the Study

Electronic learning materials have proved their effective role in the development of reading comprehension skills. Since reading comprehension has gained growing attention among Arab and foreign investigators, e-short stories had realized effected remedy at the level of lexical competence. Patel (2013) states that "technology provides so many options as making [learning] interesting and also making [learning] more productive in terms of improvement" (p.116).

The study outlines the statement of the problem as follows: Throughout three years of teaching reading materials in the Department of English, the researcher had experienced teaching first-level English students *Effective Reading-One* and *Effective Reading-Two*. During these years it is a generally recognized fact that the students have no capacity to comprehend reading texts because of limited vocabulary. First-level students, in fact, face a troubling shortage of lexis on the whole. Though the prescribed book gives attention to cover up the three linguistic components of English: Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, it is still under the reachable level of linguistic competence. That is to mean, the tasks and exercises are mostly repetitive and go not farther than the single word knowledge. Course tasks as well do not highlight lexical constructions such as *get rid of, despite the fact, break into, either.. or, by means of*, *in terms of*, *in the case of* and *not to mention*. These grammatical constructions remain in the dark though they are the building block of lexical competence and serve crucial semantic area for reading comprehension. Put it in a nutshell, *Effective Reading* is designed for intermediate levels but not for university education.

As long as the researcher believes, all aforementioned issues along had led to a general weakness in reading comprehension skills. This poor reading outcome among first-level students might be due to the way reading materials are taught. The researcher as well, emphasizes short stories through What's Application because "literature is certainly a great media for teaching and learning language since the language used in literature is exceptionally rich in vocabulary, well-organizes and consistent" (Dio and Estremera, 2023, p.1). Reading e-learning short stories could positively enrich the lexical competence of first-level students, and build up a good knowledge of how English operates in reading texts. It is in fact, the best solution to help them expand their vocabulary knowledge.

Significance of the Study

It is the nature of human beings to habit themselves in a daily reading style especially those who eagerly like traveling broadly, yet mentally, into others' cultures and civilizations in the believe that there is a beyond that the mind cannot see or hear about.

Based on this short introductory, this study acquired its first significance in that it deals with reading comprehension skill not only as a linguistic skill in the learning process of English development but also as a social-cultural component of the English society. Choosing English short stories in this respect is the ideal mirror of English lexis, values, and morals. The second significance is that it introduces comprehension problem of reading texts by adopting a supplemental e-learning material through What's Application outside the classroom environment, which is in fact, a novel conception into the Yemeni education system in general, and the Department of English at the Faculty of Education of Saber in particular.

Research Objective

The study aims to achieve the following objective:

To expand the lexical competence of university learners through e-learning short stories.

Research Question

The study aims to answer the following question:

In comparison with the control group, are there any statistical differences proving development in the lexical competence of the experimental group after reading e-short stories?

Hypothesis of the Study

The study hypothesizes the following:

There are not statistical differences proving any development in the lexical competence of the experimental group in comparison with the control group.

Delimitation of the Study

The context of the study is the Faculty of Education-Saber, University of Lahej. The investigation is delimited to first-level students enrolled in the Department of English for the academic year (2021-2022) – Second Semester.

The literature Review

The researcher surveys the different points of view of investigators in the field of reading comprehension and lexical competence and the role of short story in this respect. The literature review is divided into three main themes as follows:

Reading Comprehension: Skills and Strategies

Comprehension is the significant part and the core of all processes of reading. According to Dechant (as cited in Hamra and Syatriana,2010), it is the procedure of thinking through reading (P.30). Hamra and Syatriana (2010) said that the students should have previous experience to comprehend the texts such as vocabulary knowledge, thoughts, ideas and language competence (p.30). Dennis (as cited in Gilakjani and Sabouri,2016) defined reading comprehension as "a complex process between identifying printed symbols and interpreting the meaning behind the symbols" (p.182). Hasibuan (2019) also defined reading comprehension as "a complex skill that requires an active interaction between text elements and the reader" (p.16). Concisely, reading comprehension is the ability of reader to understand and get the information from a text. To improve this skill effectively the researcher used short stories. Reading comprehension skill is very essential for students to become effective readers. They need to use some strategies to understand what they read and able to interact with fiction and non-fiction texts. Moreillon (2007) defined the reading comprehension strategies as "tools that proficient readers use to solve the comprehension problems they encounter in texts" (p.10). Based on the underlying assumption that "real comprehension has to do with thinking, learning, and expanding a reader's knowledge and horizons" (Zimmermann and Hutchins, 2003, p.7). They demonstrated seven keys to real comprehension as follows: "sensory images", "background knowledge", "questioning", "drawing inferences", "determining importance", "synthesizing" and "fix-up strategies" (Zimmermann and Hutchins, 2003).

Short Story: Enriching Lexical Competence

Short story is one of genres of literature which plays a vital role in teaching and learning English. According to Bainbridge and Panteleo (as cited in Oktaviani,2019), short story is defined as a "brief fictional narrative (around 500 to 15.000 words) which consists of more than just a mere record of an incident" (p.9). Correspondingly, Hasibuan (2019) defined short story as "a short fictional narrative in prose that can be read in short time" (p.9). The researcher next, focused on enriching lexical competence related to the present paper. Due to the importance of lexical competence in teaching and learning a language, students should have adequate knowledge of vocabulary to comprehend and practice a language. This is emphasized by the Council of Europe (n.d.) that lexical competence means the knowledge of vocabulary of a language and the capacity to use it (p.110). Thirmumalai (as cited in Din and Ghani,2018) stressed that "lexical competence not only means knowing the meanings of the words but it also means having the knowledge the way these words are

used in their sociolinguistic, linguistic and cultural context" (p.164). In a same manner, it is what Malek (as cited in Din and Ghani,2018) briefly said "the lack of lexical competence is a major obstacle for learners in learning language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing" (p.164). Therefore, short stories are adopted in this paper to increase students' lexical competence and develop their reading comprehension skills.

E-learning and What's Application

A number of investigators defined e-learning according to their points of view. Bringman-Rodenbarger and Hortsch (as cited in Ismail, Rahmat, and Emzir,2020) for instance, defined e-learning as an "interactive education tools formatted to run on a computer, mobile phone, or computer table" (p.123). Ruggeri et. al., Frehywot et. al., and Ruiz (as cited in Ismail, Rahmat, and Emzir,2020) also defined e-learning as "the delivery of training material via information and communication technology (ICT), including the internet, CD-ROM, DVD, smartphones, and other media, both inside and outside of the classroom" (p.120). Bristol (as cited in Siyah,2021) likewise, posted a definition of e-learning as "the use of electronic technology to send, support, and improve teaching, learning, and assessment" (p.7).

Alexander and Mckenzie (as cited in Alexander, 2001, pp.10-11) listed a good deal of advantages students had come to realize after using e-learning products. In fact, the results showed increased productivity in learning and teaching between students and teachers altogether as follows: First, e-learning opened doors for students to interact globally with different people of different personalities, cultures and educational backgrounds. Second, it improved understanding of different concepts by supplying internal and external information. Third, it provided a high component of factual information considering language learning. Fourth, it facilitated internet assessment through computer-based qualitative and quantitative tools. Fifth, it helped students to develop skills to solve real-world problems through e-mail and databases. Sixth, in increased interaction between students and their teachers. Seventh, it developed skills and knowledge of a particular course or field of study to prepare students for future work market needs. Finally, and the most important result is it "increased content of learning in a given time through the availability of multiple representations" (Alexander, 2001, p.11). See also Alexander and Mckenzie in (1998, p.232).Tjokro (as cited in Siyah,2021) also presented other advantages of e-learning as follows: E-learning is easy to absorb. It contains multiple media facilities. It is cheap and reachable. It is available all the time. It needs no control or guidance (p.8). Despite all these benefits, some investigators pointed out to the disadvantages of e-learning such as Bullen and Beam (as cited in Siyah,2021) who revealed a number of negative sides of e-learning. They listed six major facts as follows: First, e-learning ignores academic and social aspects. Second, the absence of the role of lecturers and teachers. Third, students underestimate e-learning because they have no high learning motivation. Fourth, there are no internet facilities in all places because of electricity's, cellphones', and computers' problems. Fifth, students do not understand e-learning because they have no enough computer knowledge. Sixth, students cannot interact and communicate with their teachers and classmates easily in e-learning environment (p.8). Following Bullen and Beam (as cited in Siyah,2021,p.8), Daniel and Schwier (as cited in Ismail, Rahmat, and Emzir,2020,p.124) presented a number of disadvantages and agreed with the fact that there is no interaction between students, their classmates and teachers in e-learning environment.

What's Application is a further means of social media. It is the most widespread application among people, students in particular, where they employ it on their smart phones and computers. It is in fact, a new technique emerged in (2009) to serve multiple functions say social, educational, political and so forth. It is abbreviated and commonly pronounced as "WHAT'S APP". Ashiyan and Salehi (2016) recorded that "What's Application is emerging as a tool that can be used for different educational purposes" (p.114). Likewise, Bensalem (2018) counted the functions and uses of it as "an application used for free texting and calls as well as content sharing namely audio, video, images, location, and contacts. It is available on different mobile platforms including Android, Apple, and Blackberry" (p.24). According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2025), the word application is defined as "an act of putting or applying something to use". The word itself is borrowed from

Middle French "applicacion", borrowed from Medieval Latin "application" to mean "bringing into contact, …, bringing into use for a particular purpose" - going back to Latin it is the "act of attaching or joining". In a nutshell, this new application is invented to serve multiple functions, not to mention, communication and attachment. Siyah (2021) defined What's Application group as "a virtual classroom that facilitates each member to be able to communicate with fellow members who are in it inviting goodness only and relating to lecture material, not only that students and lecturers can also use What's Application to share messages in written form or student work or the lecturer himself who can be posted to social media and shared in the form of a message in an online messaging application" (p.6).

In terms of the advantages and disadvantages of group work through What's Application, Siyah (2021) continues his discussion by listing a number of advantages to show how easy to communicate with others and how What's Application is the easiest tool in comparison to the other social networks: First, students can share notes, PDF, e-book, and so on. Second, students can discuss about missing lessons when they are not in the class. Third, students get the lessons and data of the class from What's Application group without returning to the teacher. Fourth, conversations of What's Application group are very safe and easy. Fifth, students can keep or delete their texts if there are some mistakes in sending them. Sixth, students can send and receive files, emails, photos, videos, audios, and so on, to all other members (pp.6-7).Siyah (2021), on the other hand, did not speak thoroughly about disadvantages, perhaps he believed that group work produces good and helpful results that promote students' learning. He listed the following as being disadvantages of group work on What's Application: First, communication sometimes is overloaded because a member of group sends a lot of messages about a particular topic and this leads to annoy the other members and leave the important information. Second, some members of group ask same questions and this makes unimportant messages. Third, some commentary messages bring about quarrels and conflicts between the members on the group (p.7).

Research Methodology and Design

The study follows a causal-comparative design, and basically adopts the quantitative approach through which the data collected are interpreted and analyzed by means of Mann-Whitney U Test, SPSS program (version 28). To give reliable answer to the questions, and the hypotheses, four instruments are employed. They are: A collection of six short stories, a pre-paper-pencil test, online activities, and a post paper-pencil test. These instruments are designed for a sample of (41) subjects. The sample is subjected to a quasi-experiment and therefore is divided into two groups: The control group includes (20) subjects, and the experimental group includes (21) subjects. The sample as well, is collected through a non-probability sampling, that is, a non-random sampling. The quasi-experiment lasted for a period of (10) weeks during the second semester exactly from (30.5.2022) to (8.8.2022).

Limitations of the Study

The researcher identified four limitations encountered during the study. The first limitation was that five students were absent after two weeks of the experiment due to challenging family circumstances. As a result, the control group became seventeen in number while the experimental group was nineteen students. The second, not all students possess What's Application account, therefore they have been excluded. The third, a few students in the experimental group had old applications on their cellphones. Accordingly, short stories were taken as screenshots and PDF format. The fourth, due to bad internet connection, students were given two days limits in order to complete reading the story, answering the questions, and sending back their answers on What's Application before discussion.

Data Analysis and Results

In order to attain the objective of the study the researcher outlines the results of the reading comprehension skill for the pre-test and post test as follows:

Pre-Test Results

The purpose of the pre-test is to determine the extent of reading comprehension skill equivalence between the two groups before the experiment. The pre-test would ensure the validity of the results considering lexical competence as follows:

Testing the Equivalence between the two Groups Regarding Lexical Competence

The researcher tests the equivalence between the two groups concerning lexical competence in the first question of the test which contains five items. The results presented in **Table 1** below confirm statistical equivalence between the two groups in the pre-test. The value of Mann-Whitney U Test is 141.500 in the significance level of 0.509 which is more than the level of significance of 0.05 adopted in the study.

Table 1: Results of Mann-Whitney U Test Regarding the Lexical Competence Equivalence between the Control and Experimental Groups

Group	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.	The decision
Control	17.32	294.50	-0.660	141.500	0.509	Not significant
Experimental	19.55	371.50				

Based on the results of the pre-test, the researcher emphasizes that there is not statistical difference on the basis of lexical competence between the two groups. The control group's mean rank is 17.32, and the experimental group's mean rank is 19.55. The results therefore confirm the level of difference as "Not Significant". In a same manner, the researcher makes a further comparison between the overall mean rank of both groups in the pre-test in **Table 2**. The researcher have been purposing to compare the overall achievements of the two groups for approving clearly that the reading comprehension skill of the control group and the experimental group is nearly in equal degree in the pre-test. Consider the results of Mann-Whitney U Test below:

Table 2: A comparison of the Overall Mean Rank of the Reading Comprehension Skill between the Two Groups in the Pre-Test

Group	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.	The decision
Control	17.38	295.50	-0.605	142.500	0.545	Not significant
Experimental	19.50	370.50				

From **Table 2**, it is apparent that the value of Mann-Whitney U Test is 142.500 at the level of significance of 0.545 which is more than the significance level of 0.05 adopted in the study. That is to confirm that the reading comprehension skill of the two groups is equivalent in the pre-test, and there is not statistical difference between them in this respect. In response to the results, the researcher continues to emphasize the second result in the following: There is not statistical difference on the basis of the overall reading comprehension skill between the two groups. The mean rank of the control group is 17.38, and the mean rank of the experimental group is 19.50. The results therefore confirm the level of difference as "Not Significant".

Post Test Results

At the end of the experiment, the researcher assigned a post paper-pencil test for both groups to examine whether or not students in the experimental group had reaped the benefits from e-learning short stories throughout the duration of the experiment. The post test is a repetitive version of the pre-test. According to the students' scores in the post test, the researcher gives answers to the research question by testing the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: There are not statistical differences proving any development in the lexical competence of the experimental group in comparison with the control group.

Based on the hypothesis above, the results in **Table 3** indicate that the value of Mann-Whitney U Test is 87.000 at the level of significance of 0.015 which is less than the significance level of 0.05 adopted in the study. The mean rank of the control group is 14.12 while the mean rank of the experimental group is 22.42.

The results therefore confirm that there are statistical differences proving development in the lexical competence between the two groups. That is, the lexical competence of the experimental group who was given short stories as a supplemental e-learning material was higher in rank in comparison to the control group. The results of the hypothesis are illustrated under in **Table 3**. After testing the hypothesis the researcher has to give the answer to the research question:

Qu. In comparison with the control group, are there any statistical differences proving development in the lexical competence of the experimental group after reading e-short stories?

Short stories as supplementary e-learning materials had proved positive statistical differences in favor of the experimental group. The experiment comes to emphasize the effect of using short stories along with the prescribed book on students' lexical competence. Students in the experimental group could realize the existence of lexical vocabulary in terms of meaning and structure at a rate of 22.42, and the rate for the control group 14.12.

Table 3: The Significance of Difference between the Two Groups Regarding Lexical Competence According to Mann-Whiteny U Test

Group	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.	The decision
Control	14.12	240.00	-2.425	87.000	0.015	Significant
Experimental	22.42	426.00				

Finally, with the aforementioned results, the study rejects the hypothesis and proved a progress in the reading comprehension skill of the students in the experimental group at the level of lexical competence. The researcher finds it more effective to present the statistical differences altogether between the control group and the experimental group in **Table 4**:

Table 4: A comparison of the Overall Mean Rank of the Reading Comprehension Skill between the Two Groups in the Post Test

Group	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.	The decision
Control	13.12	223.00	-2.908	70.000	0.004	Significant
Experimental	23.32	443.00				

Table 4 illustrates the total mean rank of Mann-Whitney U Test between the two groups regarding their reading comprehension skill. It shows that the mean rank of the control group is 13.12 while on the contrary the mean rank of the experimental group is 23.32. This obvious statistical variation between the two groups maintain that some kind of gradual progress happened in favor of the experimental group where the value of Mann-Whitney U Test is 70.000 at the level of significance of 0.004 which is far less than the significance level of 0.05 adopted in the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper gives straight answer to the question and lists a summary of the main findings respectively as follows: First, first-level students suffer of an acute shortage of lexical vocabulary and therefore difficulties with comprehension of reading texts. Second, short stories cannot be ignored in the process of teaching a foreign language. They are the virtual reflection of social values, culture, and language. Third, integration of e-learning short stories along with the prescribed book(s) is demandable. Fourth, e-learning short

stories proved its true effectiveness in the development of students' lexical competence. And finally, technology in general and e-learning materials in particular are essential requirements rather than a matter of choice in reading classes.

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دور القصص القصيرة الإلكترونية في تعزيز الكفاءة المعجمية لدى الطلاب في مهارة القراءة الاستيعابية

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المُلخَّص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على دور الأدب، ولا سيما القصص القصيرة الإلكترونية في تعزيز مهارات القراءة الاستيعابية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في المستوى الأول في كلية التربية صبر جامعة عدن حيث تركز الدراسة بشكل أساسي على الكفاءة المعجمية للطلاب. تم إجراء الدراسة بشكل خاص لفهم المشكلات التي يواجهها الطلاب الذين لديهم صعوبات في فهم النصوص القرائية. ولهذا السبب، قدم الباحث ملخصًا موجزًا عن الهدف، والفرضية، والسؤال. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، نفذ الباحث تجربة شبه تجريبية، ومن خلال عينة موجهة (غير عشوائية) اعتمد تصميمًا سببيًا مقارنًا حيث قام بتقسيم العينة المكونة من (41) طالبًا إلى مجموعتين: مجموعة ضابطة مكونة من (20) فردًا، ومجموعة تجريبية مكونة من (21) فردًا. بنفس الطريقة، عيّن الباحث أربعة أدوات على النحو الآتي: اختبار ورقي مسبق، وعدد مختار من القصص القصيرة، وأنشطة جماعية عبر تطبيق واتساب، واختبار ورقي لاحق. كل أداة مصممة لتلبية هدف البحث. استمرت التجربة لفترة (10) أسابيع حيث التزم الباحث بلقاء المشاركين مرتين في الأسبوع عبر تطبيق واتساب. وفقًا للهدف والفرضية وسؤال البحث، اعتمدت الدراسة القيمة الإحصائية (0.05) لتأكيد مستوى الاختلاف بين المجموعتين، وبالتالي تفسير البيانات المجموعة باستخدام اختبار مان-ويتني يو(SPSS ، الإصدار 28). وتوصلت الدراسة إلى نتيجتين رئيسيتين هما: أ) أن القصص القصيرة عبر الإنترنت أثبتت تطورًا تدريجيًا في الكفاءة المعجمية للطلاب. ب) أن القصص القصيرة عبر الإنترنت لعبت دورًا فعالًا في مهارات فهم القراءة للطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القصة القصيرة؛ الكفاءة المعجمية؛ التعلم الإلكتروني؛ القاموس.