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Effective Use of Lexical Categorization in Vocabulary Development Using Short Stories Among Arab Female Learners^(*)

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Abstract:

There are clear variations in the connotations and linguistics of Arabic and English languages. It has been observed that Arab learners study English as a functional language which does not expose them to the literature of English. As a result, the concept of English as a language emerges in an extremely concise and confined area of study for them.

The purpose of this research was to identify the process of acquisition of lexical items amongst the Arab female learners. The subjects were students studying Short Stories in the Bachelor's program of English. The technique used to conduct the research was a blend of qualitative and quantitative method. To collect the data a post-test and pre-test was administered. Also, a closed ended questionnaire was distributed to collect responses from the subjects of study. The study aimed at providing solutions to the problem of low vocabulary among English language learners. The outcome of the current research holds a strong significance as the findings are impressively motivating for teachers using literature to develop language acquisition. Though the end results show a minimal decrease of 3% in incorrect responses after getting acquainted with lexical items used in pre-test, a sharp fall of 60% is seen in overall incorrect answers after collecting the data through lexical categorization. It is expected that if the technique of lexical categorization is used and the suggestions given here are implemented, the learners will be able to correctly use vocabulary items in a variety of contexts in various situations.

Key Phrases: Vocabulary acquisition - lexical categorization - short story - language skill - attrition - retrieval failure.

الاستخدام الفعال لتصنيف المعجمي في تطوير المفردات باستخدام القصص القصيرة بين المتعلمات العربيات

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المستخلص

توجد اختلافات واضحة في الدلالات واللغة العربية والإنجليزية فقد لوحظ أن الطلاب العرب يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة وظيفة بنحو لا يمكنهم دراسة أدب اللغة الإنجليزية. مما يجعل مفهوم اللغة الإنجليزية يظهر في نطاق ضيق ومحدد بشكل كبير في مجال الدراسة لهم.

تمثل الغرض من هذا البحث في التعرف على عملية اكتساب المفردات بين الطالبات العرب، كان المشاركون في الدراسة طالبات يدرسن مقرر القصة القصيرة في برنامج البكالوريوس في اللغة الإنجليزية حيث تمثلت منهجية البحث مزيجًا بين المنهج الكمي والنوعي. ولجمع المعلومات تم إجراء الاختبار اللاحق والاختبار السابق. كما تم توزيع استبيان مغلق لجمع الاجوبة من المشاركين في الدراسة، هدفت الدراسة إلى تقديم حلول لمشكلة قلة المفردات لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، حيث تشكل نتائج البحث أهمية كبيرة وذلك لأنها تحفز بشكل كبير المعلمين الذين يستخدمون الأدب لتطوير اكتساب اللغة، وعلى الرغم من أن النتائج النهائية تظهر انخفاضًا طفيفًا بنسبة (3%) في الردود غير الصحيحة بعد التعرف جيدًا على المفردة المعجمية المستخدمة في الاختبار السابق، إلا أن هناك انخفاضًا حادًا بنسبة (63%) في الأجوبة غير الصحيحة بشكل عام، وعليه فمن المتوقع أنه في حالة استخدام طريقة تصنيف المفردة والأخذ بالمقترحات الواردة بالبحث، سيتمكن المتعلمون من استخدام المفردات بشكل صحيح في مختلف أنواع السياق بحسب المواقف المختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اكتساب المفردات - القصة القصيرة - المهارة اللغوية - تصنيف المفردة - التراجع - فشل الإرجاع.



Introduction

The variations in the syntactic arrangement, connotations and linguistics of Arabic and English languages poses a challenge to the learners of English language. However, the low performance of Arab learners is not dependent on just these two factors. There are other underlying reasons which result in such belief, which are, delayed exposure to the language in early years and irregular or no interaction with the speakers of the target language. It has also been observed that the learners study English as a functional language which does not expose them to the literature of English. As a result, the concept of English as a language emerges in an extremely concise and confined area of study for them.

Language is accepted as the key instrument that enables communication. Individuals across the globe use language to interact with people around them. The key to acquiring any language of the world is to first gain the lexical items of the target language and secondly to use those items in an appropriate context. In other words, rich vocabulary and its proper use are essential features of any language-learning process. Studies conducted in the domain of second and foreign language acquisition reveal that vocabulary knowledge of any language is the single best predictor of language achievement (Richards,1980; Allen,1983, Laufer,1986; Nation,1990 & 2001). The sole purpose of learning a language is not just communication but absorbing it completely as a whole. The same goes for English. The language Lingua Franca gradually gained its importance in Middle East. In recent years, several countries in the region witnessed immense political, social and economical development giving rise to the importance of education especially in context to acquisition English language. Vision 2030 is seen as a clear example in this context and the education sector is taken as the fundamental building block. Arabs consider this step as an opportunity for the region to become more stable and prosperous and as a way to improve the quality of life for individuals and families. They see the plan and the Kingdom's leadership as a potential model for other countries in the region and hope that it can help address some of the underlying economic and social challenges.

To achieve the Vision effectively, it is essential English language which has been a reason for rapid development in many countries around the world is taught from the very beginning of the school years. Learning a foreign language eventually includes learning another culture which in most situations is different from the culture of the learner. Therefore, learners must be exposed from the very beginning to the literature of the target language along with its aspects in dealing with its functional form. Al-Seghayer (2012) states that, 'according to Article 50 of the Educational



Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia students must learn at least one foreign language so that they get an opportunity to interact with people of other cultures.'

The Necessity to Facilitate Vocabulary Learning among EFL Learners

Facilitating EFL learners with vocabulary becomes essential as vocabulary is one of the key elements of communication in any language. Without acquiring a wide range of vocabulary, learners who are learning English as a foreign language, will not be able to master English. According to J. Richards (1980), 'Vocabulary is one of the most important elements of language proficiency, for, it is the basis of how well learners speak, writes, listen, and read'. Without a good mastery of vocabulary, learners may be discouraged from using the language being learned in daily activities. Vocabulary is defined by Hornby (2000), as all the words in a particular language, or a list or collection of words and phrases usually alphabetically arranged and explained or defined. Hammer (2002), very aptly asseverates that 'without Grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.' Similarly, Rashid and Lan (2022), state that, 'Even though learners know the language's grammar, communication will breakdown if they do not know the correct word.'

Thus, there is no exaggeration in saying that it is impossible to convey and express anything for EFL learners without acquiring a wide range of vocabulary in the target language.

Reasons for poor vocabulary amongst adult EFL learners

The learning environment at university is test driven, therefore in their initial years at the university; students read the text to just pass the exams. As a result, vocabulary development is extremely below expectations. Arab learners are expected to have a huge vocabulary bank before entering the university. For instance, students entering university must have a word bank of 3000 words. On the contrary, students entering universities have a vocabulary of only 800 to 2000 words as suggested by Al Hazemi (1993) and A. Bogami (1995) and these adult EFL learners usually use English in its referential form. The content prescribed for EFL learners in their initial years is usually expository with indicative meaning. Therefore, there is little or almost no use of figurative language. As a result, such teaching material does not contribute to the development of the 'fifth language skill, thinking in English' (McRae, 1991:5). Second reason for low vocabulary is attrition for which the basic reason is 'retrieval failure'. According to Loftus and Loftus (1976) 'retrieval failure' is responsible for attrition i.e. if the newly learnt words are not used frequently; learners tend to forget 25% of them during the first year of their disuse. Therefore, in this paper, one of the



suggestions for instructors will be to separately make a list of recently introduced new words to be used in different tests or activities outside the set curriculum. Another prominent reason is foreign language anxiety i.e. feelings of unease, worry, nervousness, and apprehension. This is a significant problem in EFL classrooms especially when it comes to using the vocabulary of the target language in daily communication. According to Sparks, R., & Ganschow, L. (1991), 'Language anxiety could result in or cause poor language learning.' This anxiety has detrimental effects on EFL learners and they find it difficult to use the target language vocabulary confidently during formal and informal communication in day-to-day life.

Research Problem:

- Low level of English vocabulary amongst female Arab learners
- Factors hindering appropriate use of vocabulary in correct contexts

Research Questions

- Does lexical categorization promote vocabulary development?
- Can lexical categorization encourage correct contextual use of lexical items?

Research objectives

The objectives of the research are to:

- Measure and develop vocabulary through lexical categorization.
- Find the students' approach in context to the development of vocabulary towards using short stories in English classrooms.
- Assess if short stories develop cultural tolerance in learners, develop language skills, and help them to enhance vocabulary.
- Suggest ways to develop vocabulary through short stories.

Significance of the study

This study is deemed important for EFL teachers who find developing English vocabulary as a challenge amongst Arab learners. Moreover, teachers of other languages can implement the same strategies and methodologies to achieve their goals in context to vocabulary development. The findings of the study will help the them to understand the role of lexical categorization as an effective method to retain and use lexical items appropriately in different contexts. The study aims to motivate teachers as well as learners to use the technique of lexical categorization to retain the newly learnt lexical items.

Limitations of the study

Like all researches our study had its limitations too. The period available to conduct our research was time constrained. The tests were conducted and results were derived in ten weeks. A better contrast and comparison could have been derived if the period of study was longer. Secondly, the study was



conducted in only two universities in Sudan and Yemen and the subjects of study were just females. A similar study if conducted in other Middle Eastern universities with both male and female learners could have shown differences and similarities if present in context to English vocabulary acquisition among both genders.

Literature Review

Why teach short stories in EFL Classrooms?

Teaching English as a foreign language does not only implies giving instructions to learners and the development of language but, also making the learners get a hold of social, and cultural aspects and use of the target language, and express themselves in their daily lives outside the classrooms. Researchers have revealed that there is a well-established connection between reading the literature of the target language and the acquisition of vocabulary. Bedi. K (2011) states that Language acquisition through literature promotes creativity and thinking skills.

Short stories give learners the impression that learning the target language is simple, enjoyable, and motivational. Moreover, short stories present essential vocabulary for EFL learners to develop their ability to use words in different contexts in verbal and non-verbal communication. Other benefits of using short stories in EFL classrooms are that by using short stories teachers can design various activities and enable the learners to use newly learned words in day-to-day contexts. As reported by Zdena, Jana, and Anna (2022), 'When foreign language learners experience positive emotions during the process of learning, it can raise their consciousness of language input and perceptions of linguistic forms'.

Apart from developing vocabulary from linguistically rich material, short stories also give a new perspective to different cultures and beliefs. Furthermore, using short stories in EFL classrooms acts as a convenient tool as they are short in length and do not require long hours to complete them. As a result, it gives the learners more opportunities to take advantage of the given text for maximum output. A similar idea has been presented by Brumfit and Carter (1986), which says that the use of short stories in EFL classrooms must be exploited to its maximum to derive various benefits from it.

Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a key role in acquiring any language. In case of English it is expected that a proficient user of English should possess a vocabulary of 4000 and more words. A rich vocabulary enables an EFL learner to compare and contrast foreign language with his or her mother



tongue. Moreover, it gives an opportunity to the learner to explore the beauty of the recently acquired foreign language. Vocabulary is critical in developing other skills of the target language which leads to its proficiency. It is also observed that scarcity of vocabulary results in failure of ESL learned in making successful communication whether it is oral or written. The importance of vocabulary is stressed by various researchers in this field. Stahl (2005) writes that, 'mere repetition or drill of the word', is not enough. Vocabulary instruction must encourage students to frequently encounter words in a variety of context. This observation of Stahl further strengthens the idea of this research which stresses the use of lexical categorization to overcome barriers like attrition. Researches indicate that learners who know more L2 words are more likely to learn more words incidentally through reading. This happens because learners who have rich vocabulary bank have a better reading experience as they can conveniently comprehend what they read. However, current research finds out that if words are not repeatedly used for a period of time retrieval failure occurs.

Strategies and Suggestions to Develop Vocabulary for EFL Learners

Conventionally, in Arab Universities vocabulary is not taught separately. It is incorporated in other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. While studying the skills the learners use pre-learnt vocabulary if any or the same words which they come across during the lessons. Most of the times they prefer to use a bilingual dictionary and various other mobile applications for translation. Although, this helps them for a short term, it is not possible to retain the meaning for a longer period of time. Moreover, by using this technique they fail to understand the meaning of a word in a particular context. According to Nation (2000), 'learning new words is a cumulative process, with words enriched and established as they are met again' (P.6). Some learners tend to learn vocabulary through memorization. However, Deccarico (2001) mentions that it is inappropriate to learn words without understanding them or their use in different contexts. To refrain learners from developing 'a narrow perception of language function and style'(Chan,1992:2), we must present an extensive variety of illustrative materials which allows learners to evaluate, think critically and relate it to their own experiences. There are certain approaches and strategies which can be used by EFL teachers. Learners can be motivated to use thesaurus instead of dictionaries. This will reduce their dependency on their first language and automatically help them in acquiring the vocabulary of the target language. According to AL-Khresheh and Rawaili, 'The effectiveness of vocabulary learning is dependent on how new words are practiced. Memory strategies have been



shown to improve integration and recall by putting new words in context and increasing associations between them.'

As already discussed above, vocabulary is not taught as a separate section in EFL classrooms. Therefore, the teachers of short stories need to incorporate various methods and strategies to develop vocabulary among their students and make vocabulary acquisition an easy and smooth process. For instance, a teacher can introduce semantic maps. This is a graphic organizer that helps students to visually organize a relationship between pieces of information and it proves to be extremely productive in teaching collocations and can be taken up as a pre-reading as well as post-reading activity. Schmitt (2000) says that vocabulary development and retention are associated with the use of long-term memory. To retain vocabulary for long periods, teachers often use various strategies. One such strategy is semantic mapping. In this strategy, learners categorize words from text through visualization Duffy (2009). This strategy proves to be highly beneficial among EFL learners as it helps them to absorb the images as well as their meaning. Also, playing vocabulary games such as *collocation pelmanism*, *hot seat*, *same -opposite - different*, and *get rid of it* are effective and enjoyable activities which teachers can use to develop the vocabulary of the learners at all levels. The above stated activities help the learners to overcome retrieval failure which leads to debilitation of the learnt vocabulary items. Reading partners, reading groups can also be created where each member can read a part of the story and explain it to the other members in target language. This idea of exploiting short stories to enhance vocabulary has been advocated by many ELT specialists (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby (1989). These researchers believe that by using short stories teachers can provide different types of content in which learners can give their suggestions, exchange information with other learners in the group or even express their opinions about the text.

Methodology

This research is a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods. The following section explains the population, research tools and procedure, content of the questionnaire, and its reliability.

The population and duration of the study

The research subjects were female students of English major enrolled in the academic year 2022-23 in University of Sudan and Yemen. A total of 80 participants were tested for the present study which took a period of ten weeks to complete. The distribution of the content covered can be comprehended from the table shown below.



Week	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5-6-7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10
Content	Pre-Test	Short Story 1	Short Story 2	Short Story 3	Lexical Categorization	Post-Test	Post-Test	Feedback and Result

Research Tools

The tools used to carry out the research were a pre-test, lexical categorization exercise, post-test, and feedback questionnaire. The pre-test and post-test had a set of 25 closed-question items. Both of these tests had identical vocabulary words. A feedback questionnaire was administered at the end with 21 closed-question items. The lexical categorization exercise required the participants to classify each of the 21 words according to their part of speech, synonym/s, antonym/s, and other form/s of the word. The participant also had to use the word in a sentence of their own and write its definition. The research tool also included three short stories prescribed in the syllabus.

The pre-test included 25 words divided into three parts. The first part consisted of eleven questions in the form of 'Choose the best option'. Out of three options the participants had to choose one correct option as an answer. The second part had nine question items in the form of 'Match column A to column B'. In this part students had to match the words in column A to sentences in column B, in order to complete the sentences meaningfully. The last part contained three questions in the form of 'Fill in the blanks'. The participants had to choose correct words from the given box to complete the sentences correctly. There were extra options given in the box to make the exercise more challenging. (See Appendix 1 and 2).

Based on the pre-test and post-test the researchers developed a questionnaire keeping in mind the purpose of evaluating the learners' approach to using short stories in the EFL classroom. The questionnaire included 21 closed ended statements using Likert's 5- point scale having options as (strongly agree / agree / neutral / disagree / strongly disagree). Participants were instructed to choose the most suitable option which best represented their response towards using short stories in the EFL classroom. The questions were structured according to three dimensions: language skills, personnel reflection, and culture. (See Appendix 4).

Three short stories were selected for this research. The titles are as follows:

1. The Selfish Giant by 'Oscar Wilde'.
2. Story of an hour by 'Kate Chopin'.
3. Cat in the Rain by 'Earnest Hemingway'.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the result of the pre-test, lexical categorization, and post-test. It is evident from figures 1.1 and 1.2 that the participants without previous knowledge of the given vocabulary items did not perform well. However, by the end of the study, noticeable variations were seen in the results of the pre-test and post-test.

The result closely flipped between the category of **no previous knowledge** and **after previous knowledge**. The variation between the criteria of guessing from context showed a growth of 3% in the post-test. Incorrect responses were reduced to 9.5% from 72.50%.

Figure 1.1

Pre-Test

No previous knowledge-Incorrect answers	Guessing from context-Correct answers	Previous Knowledge-Correct answers
72.50%	12%	15.50%

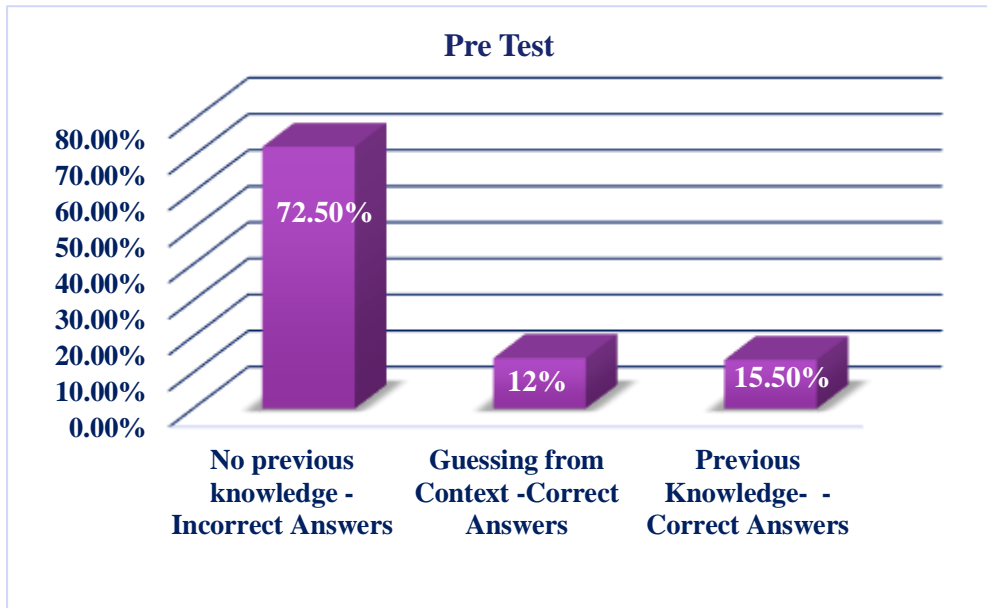
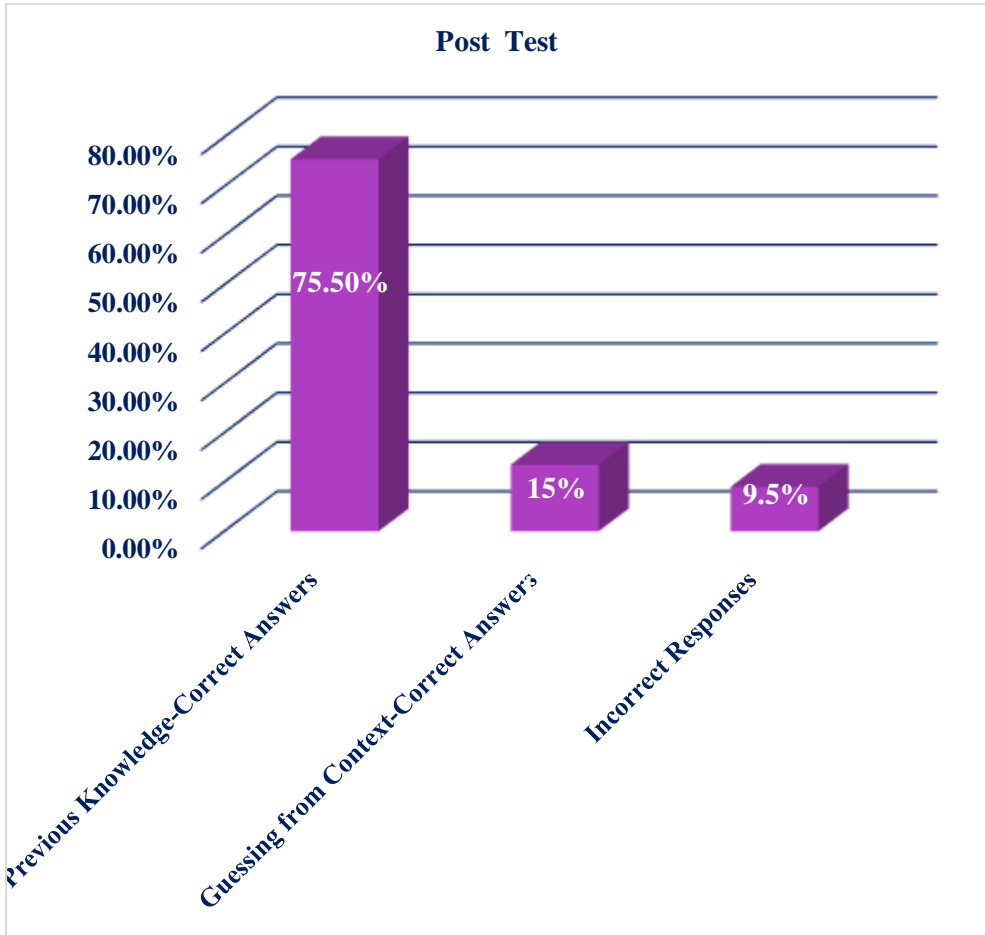


Figure 1.2

Post-Test

Previous Knowledge-Correct Answers	Guessing from Context-Correct Answers	Incorrect Responses
75.50%	13.50%	9%



The rise in the correct responses is due to the lexical categorization. During weeks 5, 6, and 7 participants were given general instructions while reading the text excerpts, which included the same vocabulary items selected for the study. They were introduced to lexical categorization and semantic mapping was shown dividing the words into categories of parts of speech, word definition, synonym, antonym, other forms of the word and use of the word in a sentence. Parallely, they were encouraged to find the meaning from the contexts. At this stage they were allowed to use dictionaries and thesaurus. In week 8 and 9 post-test was administered. The test included same elements shown during semantic mapping, however at this stage students attempted the test without the use of dictionaries and thesaurus (Appendix 3).

As figure 2.1 shows, participants performed well in the category of Part of Speech. Out of 80 participants 78 were able to identify the part of speech for each word correctly. 75 were able to write the definitions accurately,



however, more practice is required when it comes to finding and using synonyms and antonyms of the words. As the participants could identify a part of speech, their performance in the category of other form/s of the word and participant's own sentence are acceptable in context to the overall improvement. Figure 2.2 elaborate the results according to their percentage in each category.

Figure 2.1

Part of Speech	Word Definition	Synonym	Antonym	Other form/s of the word	Student's own sentence
78	75	56	50	49	59

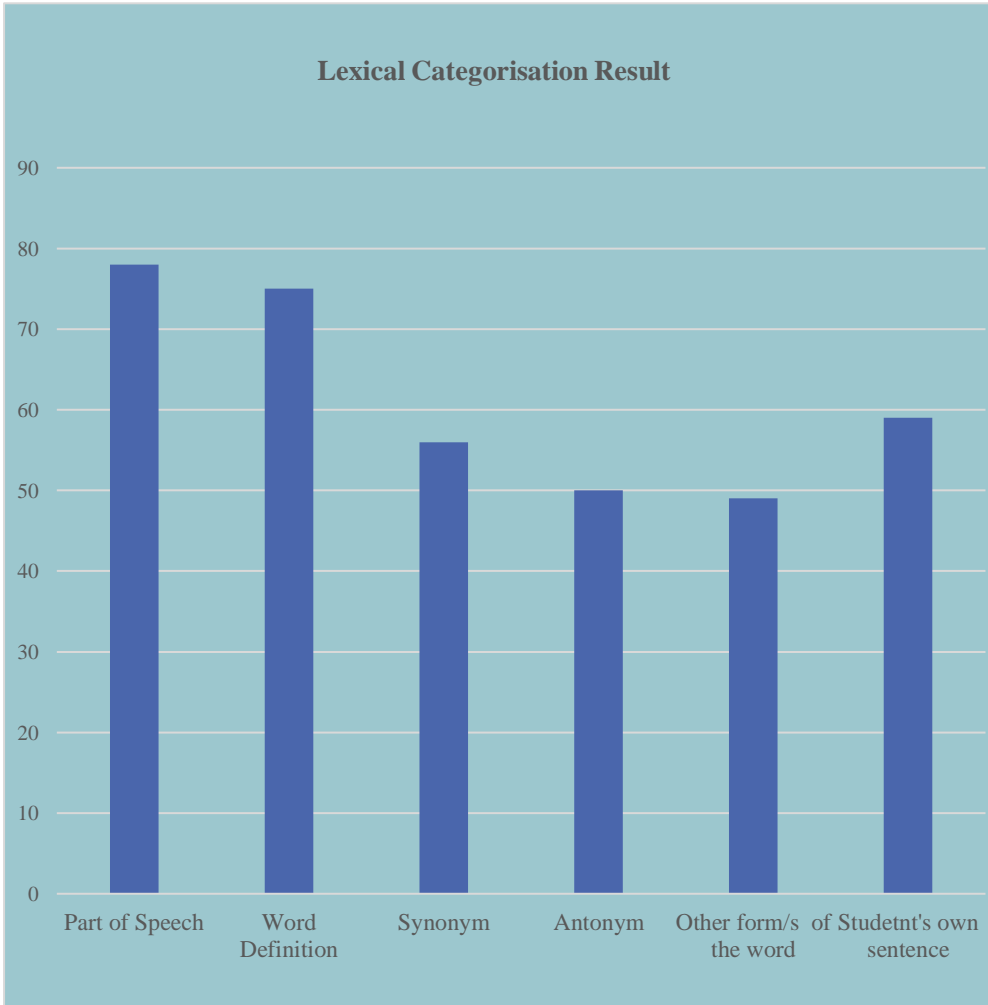


Figure 2.2

Part of Speech	Word Definition	Synonym	Antonym	Other form/s of the word	Student's own sentence
97.5	93.75	70	62.5	61.5	73.7

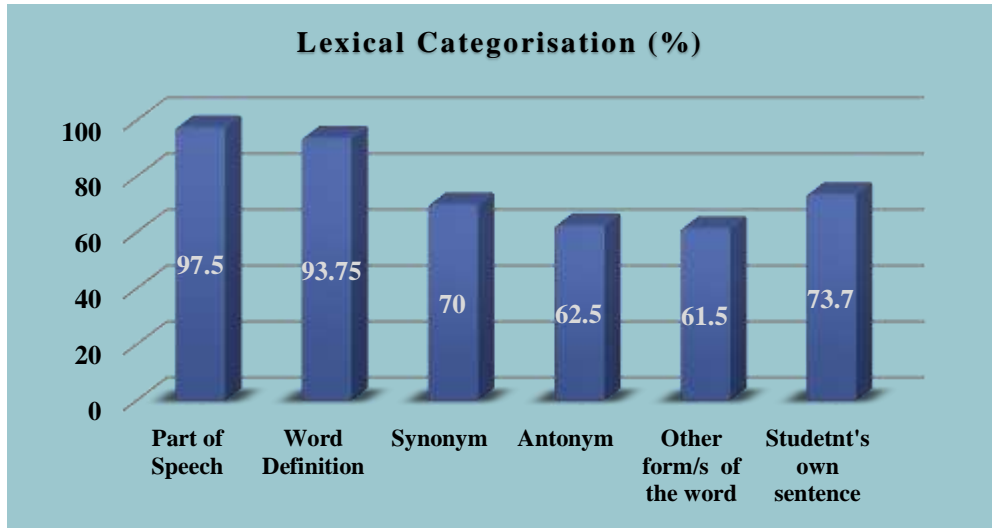
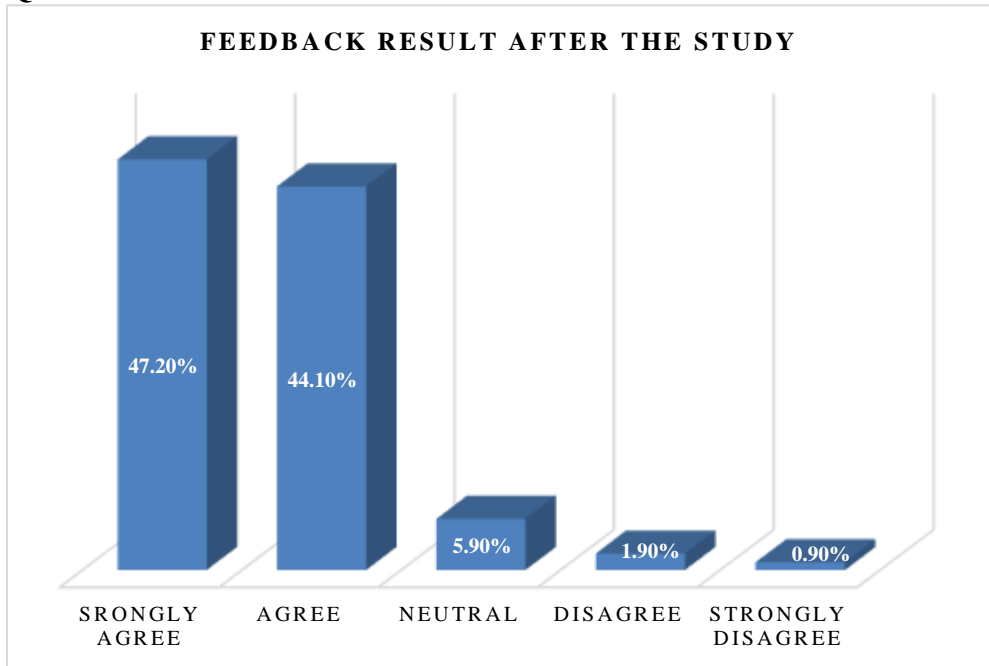


Figure 3.1

Questionnaire Feedback





The result of the feedback in figure 3.1 shows that 91.30% of participants agree with the idea of learning vocabulary in short stories through lexical categorization. However, 5% of students could not make a choice and 2.8% did not agree with the idea of learning vocabulary through this method. The reason behind this disagreement indicates that these students need more practice and exposure to the language and its vocabulary in comparison to other participants.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to find out the reason of low vocabulary amongst Arab female EFL learners. While it was observed that repetition of newly learnt words promoted retention, guessing from the context still has scope for improvement.

The results of this study contribute to three main findings. First, while reading short stories lexical categorization enhances the process of vocabulary development. Second, exercises such as pre-test and post-test helps the target learners understand the importance of knowing a word, its various forms and its use in different contexts. Third, as expected, it was observed that through repeated exposure to particular words there were less chances of attrition. The current study has contributed to the EFL teaching field of research by analyzing the use of the technique of lexical categorization in vocabulary acquisition through the use of short stories.

To elaborate on the pedagogical inferences of this study, it can be noticed that applying Lexical categorization does not simply contain to foster students in the development of linguistic features, but helps them learn realistic features and build the vocabulary size of language for effective social interaction. It focuses on the strategies of vocabulary training like word formation, antonyms and synonyms, word definition, and guessing the word's meaning through context. These findings indicated that Lexical categorization helps learners to become better, confident, and self-determining learners. It also motivated learners to increase their vocabulary bank to perform better.

The conclusive results of this research promote the idea that a similar exercise can be done with other EFL students around the word and later be compared with the results of this study. Moreover, this study opens avenues to use Lexical Categorization in other genres, particularly targeting vocabulary development.

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