

Enhancing Vocabulary Learning by Using the Story-based Instruction

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Abstract

Vocabulary has been long believed to be one of the important elements in English learning. If students lack vocabulary, their language skills will suffer. However, it was found that many students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms had problems in mastering vocabularies. This study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of the story-based instruction in enhancing vocabulary learning. The participants were eighty sixth-grade EFL students. They were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was taught vocabulary by using the story-based instruction while the control group was taught by using school-based instruction. The research instruments used in this study included an English vocabulary test, lesson plans, and questionnaires to study students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based Instruction. Mean scores, standard deviations, and t-test analyses were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that using the story-based instruction had a positive effect on students' vocabulary learning. The English vocabulary learning of the students in the experimental group taught by the story-based instruction was significantly higher than that of the control group taught by school-based instruction. In addition, the students responded favorably toward the story-based instruction. This study confirmed the potential in applying the story-based instruction in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: *Story-based instruction, Vocabulary learning, Vocabulary teaching, English as a foreign language, EFL Classroom*

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Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is important for students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL). According to Alhaysony (2012), vocabulary items play a vital role in all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); an adequate vocabulary is essential for success for EFL students. Linse (2006) also suggests that EFL students' language skills will improve as their vocabularies improve. Knowledge of vocabularies also supports the development of language comprehension and plays a key role in English communication (Krashen & Terrel, 1985). Wilkins (1972) states that, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 34). According to Soureshjani (2011), words are extremely important in language learning because they are the basic building blocks of language, and they are the units of meaning from which the larger structures of language such as sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts are formed. He also comments that language learning can be obstructed when learners lack vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in language learning.

A lack of good vocabulary knowledge can cause EFL student's problems. Ahmadi, Ismail and Abdullah (2012) confirmed that the deficiency of good vocabulary knowledge is a major barrier when attempting to communicate in a foreign language and can cause misunderstandings in speaking and writing as well as losing interest in reading. Furthermore, Tunchalearnpanih (2013) claimed that Thai EFL students had limited English vocabulary knowledge, and this problem affected their spoken and written communication.

Although vocabulary is a key factor contributing to effective English language using, vocabulary learning is not easy for EFL students. According to Mccarthy and O'Dell (2002), vocabulary learning of foreign language learners is considered as a difficult task for them. Al-Ghazo and Alsobh (2015), in their study, found that EFL students faced difficulties in vocabulary learning. Learning new vocabulary items is EFL learners' difficult task and they always complain about forgetting vocabularies they have learned (Rahimy & Shams, 2012). In Thailand, Saengpakdeejit (2014) stated that Thai students generally see the limitation of vocabulary knowledge as their first problem to overcome. Ahmadi et al. (2012) confirmed that the lack of good vocabulary learning is a major barrier when attempting to communicate in a foreign language. During the process of English language learning, EFL students encounter vocabulary-related obstacles, as insufficient vocabulary knowledge causes misunderstandings in communication. Furthermore, the obvious issue in vocabulary learning is not only learning English words, but also remembering those words. The main problem for students is that they already know some words, but cannot retrieve the words when they want to use them because they cannot retain them. According to Kusumayati (2010), learners cannot understand academic concepts with abstract method. Students cannot remember the vocabulary through memorization alone. Consequently, EFL students need support to overcome their difficulties in vocabulary learning.

Methods of teaching play a crucial role in EFL students' vocabulary learning. Kapukaya (2006) declares that the success of students' vocabulary learning depends on how they are taught. In other words, the ways in which teachers teach affect

students' learning. Richards and Schmidt (2002) propose that vocabulary learning depends on the quality of teaching, the interest of the learners, or the meaningfulness of the materials. Therefore, to enhance students' vocabulary learning and to solve vocabulary-learning problems, teaching methods should be considered.

Many scholars insist that the story-based instruction can assist EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. According to Ellis and Brewster (2014), the story-based instruction involves using illustrations to convey words to students and offers a comprehensible form of input. It makes easiness and fun for students to learn new English words. The use of the story-based instruction can also affect the learners' long-term retention of vocabulary. Kosior (2014) said that the story-based instruction increases students' willingness to express their thoughts and feelings; this teaching method helps raise and promote positive attitudes, culture awareness issues, and social values. The story-based instruction is a means of providing successful learning, and it is a good technique for transmitting information because it is an appealing way to open the window of the imagination (Pinto & Soares, 2012). The story-based instruction also results in successful learning, as confirmed by Martinez (2007), who found that this method of teaching linked students' experiences and interests to English language learning.

Many scholars claimed several benefits of the story-based instruction as discussed above; however, the story-based instruction has not been put into practice fully in English vocabulary teaching. As a result, this study had objectives to investigate the effects of the story-based instruction on EFL students' English vocabulary learning, to compare the effects of the story-based instruction on EFL students' vocabulary learning to school-based instruction, and to investigate EFL students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the effects of teaching English words using the story-based instruction on EFL students' vocabulary learning?
- 2) Is there any significant difference between the English vocabulary learning of the students in the experimental group taught by the story-based instruction and the control group taught by school-based instruction?
- 3) What level are EFL students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction?

The story-based instruction

The story-based instruction refers to a teaching method where the instructor, while telling stories, encourages students to participate in classroom activities based on stories in order to teach English words. It is a good method to apply in an EFL classroom for many reasons. First, it reinforces language-learning skills. Storytelling is a means of providing successful learning, and a good technique for transmitting information (Pinto & Soares, 2012). According to Ellis and Brewster (2014), the story-based instruction introduces new words and new sentence structures to students. They also explained that words and sentence structures in the stories are presented in vivid contexts and accompanied with illustrations. Pinto and Soares (2012) believed that the story-based instruction enables students to understand and experience the meaning of words and the function of grammar by integrating the discourse in the

form of a story. Loukia (2006) stated that because repetition and recycling of words are repeated, this causes students to acquire and retain language items. Second, the story-based instruction activates students' imagination. It benefits the mental and social aspects of learning. Kosior (2014) insisted that students' curiosities are aroused and motivated because the activities related to the story draw their attention and increase students' willingness to express their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, according to Martinez (2007), students enjoy listening to stories. Activities related to storytelling make students relaxed and comfortable in the class. This kind of atmosphere increases the acquisition of the foreign languages.

Teaching vocabulary through the story-based instruction

The story-based instruction should be divided into three stages—pre-, while-, and post- stages (Pinto & Soares, 2012; Gomez, 2010; Martinez, 2007)

The pre-stage is an introduction and an orientation to the story, with the task of generating students' interest, facilitating comprehension, and building confidence. According to Gomez (2010), in this stage, instructors should activate students' knowledge by asking questions designed to have them relate the story to their previous experiences or provide some key items of vocabulary and grammar by using objects, miming, and images.; consequently, students' understanding of story is easier because it is a useful and meaningful way to engage students with the content and ultimately achieve the learning outcomes. Overall, providing such a knowledge input will build the students' confidence and prepare them for dealing with listening.

There are various activities available to teachers at the pre-stage. According to Gomez (2010), teachers could lead students in discussing a story or the characters in the stories, brainstorm vocabularies, or draw semantic mapping related to the stories. The students are allowed to reply to questions in their first language, while teachers should scaffold students to visualize the connections between the words. They should let students relate the stories to their own knowledge, guess the words, and predict what will happen in the stories, with any required revisions made by the teacher. Moreover, the teacher may explain to students what they have to do after the listening, because this will motivate students to pay attention to the story.

The while-stage requires students to participate in activities as they listen to the story, and aims at drawing and maintaining students' attention as well as helping them to learn some items of vocabulary and sentence structures. Gomez (2010) suggested that examples of activities in while-stage include practicing numbers by numbering the characters, showing the pictures of characters in the story, asking students to express what their favorite part is, repeating a famous rhyme in order to join the narration, or singing a song related to the story. Teachers can illustrate, mime and make sound to help students guess words or even the events in the stories, pause and ask students to predict words by showing only some letters, and check students' comprehension of the story by asking students to correct wrong information. These activities not only help students to concentrate on the story, but also aid their memorization of words and sentences (Pinto & Soares, 2012).

The post-stage allows students to use what they have learned from the story, and integrates language learning with interesting and meaningful content. According to

Pinto and Soares (2012), the objective is to consolidate the vocabulary or grammar introduced in the story. Students will be given assignments after the while-stage, allowing them to present the vocabulary and grammar they learned from the story. In this stage, students merge language learning with content and can consolidate multiple skills in completing their tasks. According to Gomez (2010), the examples are checking their previous prediction with information they learned, creating new story by using their own imagination, formulating questions and exchanging their question with others to reply them, creating picture dictionary of the stories to enhance vocabularies and grammar learning, doing role-play and puppet show, doing art activities, and predicting the scene teachers draw on blackboard.

The post-stage activities have various benefits. These activities give students the chance to integrate what they have learned with other subjects such as arts. This will benefit them in terms of seeing the importance of English, creating positive attitudes toward learning English, and developing self-esteem as well as self-confidence because the integration provides them with a broader viewpoint, reinforces the concepts learned, and gives them more time to practice and revise their English learning (Gomez, 2010).

Research methodology

The participants in this study were 80 sixth-grade students who studied English as a foreign language (EFL) in the second semester of the academic year 2016 at Wat Rattanaram School in Suratthani Province, Thailand. They were divided into 2 groups including an experimental group (40 students) and a control group (40 students).

The instruments used in this study consisted of an English vocabulary test, lesson plans based on English vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction, lesson plans based on English vocabulary teaching through school instruction, questionnaires to study students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction, and a semi-structured Interview. The details of research instruments are described as follows:

An English vocabulary test was for pretest and posttest to measure students' vocabulary learning in the experimental group and the control group. Pretest was used to evaluate students' background of vocabulary knowledge, while the posttest was used to check if students improve vocabulary learning after the experiment. The test comprised of 30 multiple choice items divided into three parts: vocabulary meaning, vocabulary spelling, and vocabulary in context. Each part of the test consisted of ten items.

Lesson plans based on English vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction were designed by the researcher to teach students in the experimental group. There were six units of lesson plan and worksheet. The process of teaching was divided into three stages. In the first stage, pre-stage, the instructor introduced the story (e.g. bedtime stories, fairy tales and fables) and activated students' knowledge by asking the questions to enhance them to relate their experiences to the story. The instructor also provided the students some key items of vocabulary and grammar by using objects, miming and images. In the second stage, while-stage,

students were asked to do activities during the time they are listening to stories from teacher, CD, video. For example, the instructor asked the students to predict words by showing only some letters. This stage aimed at drawing and maintaining student's attention, learning the meaning of English words, practice spelling and using the words in context. In the third stage, post-stage, students were assigned to do post-stage activities such as art activities and language activities in multiple modes. These activities were created for students to present vocabulary learned in the story.

The control group was taught through school-based instruction. It was a method of teaching where the instructor teaches English words following a textbook and a teacher manual chosen by a school.

The questionnaires were designed by the researcher to explore students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction. The questionnaires contained 15 items (nine positive and six negative items). It was designed as a 5-point Likert Scale. Three experts checked content validity.

A semi-structured interview was employed to investigate students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction and to assure the accurate results from the questionnaires. This method of interview was chosen because it allowed informants the freedom to express their opinions by using their own words. It also provided reliable and comparable qualitative data (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). The researcher had five open-ended questions for the interview. After the experiment, the researcher asked students to volunteer to be interviewed.

The researcher asked three experts to determine content validity of instruments and comment on the appropriateness of language use. The experts were two English teachers and one English native speaker. The experts reviewed an English vocabulary test together with lesson plans based on English vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction. After the researcher received feedbacks from the experts, the test was revised.

To determine the reliability, the researcher did the pilot test by administering the vocabulary test with twenty-one students (seventh-grade). The questionnaire was tried out with thirty-five students (sixth-grade). All students were not the participants in this study. The instruments were analyzed using the reliability co-efficient Cronbach's alpha. The reliability of the test and the questionnaire were 0.72 and 0.87 respectively. Since Cronbach's alpha value was higher than 0.7, the research instruments of this study were strong enough to evaluate students' English vocabulary learning and opinions on the story-based instruction.

Students in the experimental and control groups were asked to do the pretest in the first week in order to determine their English vocabulary learning ability before the experiment. Both groups were taught by using the different methods for six sessions per group. Each session lasted 90 minutes. The experimental group was taught through the story-based instruction, while the control group was taught by school-based instruction. After the instruction, students were asked to do the posttest. The students in the experimental group were asked to complete the questionnaires to study students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction. Then,

the researcher asked five students in the experimental group to volunteer in the interview.

Data from students' scores of the pretest and posttest were analyzed using mean scores (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and t-test analysis. Independent t-test analysis was used to determine whether there were any differences between vocabulary learning of students in the experimental group and that of the control group. The data from questionnaires were scored as positive statements and negative statements. For the positive statement, it was scored as 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. However, the scores of the negative statement were reversed in order to evaluate values in the same direction with five positive statements as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. They were analyzed by using mean scores and standard deviations. The level of students' opinions was determined by using the criteria as 0-0.99 = highly negative, 1.00-1.99 = negative, 2.00-2.99 = average, 3.00-3.99 = positive, 4.00-4.99 = highly positive. The data from the interview were analyzed by content analysis.

Findings

It was found that both the story-based instruction and school-based instruction improved students' English vocabulary learning. The analysis is presented in Table 1.

Group	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Experimental	12.325	5.484	22.000	4.461	-8.302	0.000*
Control	12.550	5.184	17.725	7.172	-4.382	0.000*

* <0.05)

Table 1: The Comparison of Pretest Mean Score to Posttest Mean Score

Table 1 demonstrates that there were statistically significant differences between the pretest mean scores and the posttest mean scores of students in both groups ($p \leq .05$). In the experimental group, the posttest mean score ($M = 22.000$, $SD = 4.461$) was significantly different from the pretest mean score ($M = 12.325$, $SD = 5.484$). In the control group, the posttest mean score ($M = 17.725$, $SD = 7.172$) was also significantly different from the pretest mean score ($M = 12.550$, $SD = 5.184$). This means that students in both the experimental group and the control group improved their English vocabulary learning. These results indicate that after the experiment, the vocabulary learning of the students in the experimental group and the control group was significantly higher than before the experiment. The graphical mean scores of an English vocabulary test of both groups are presented in Figure 1.

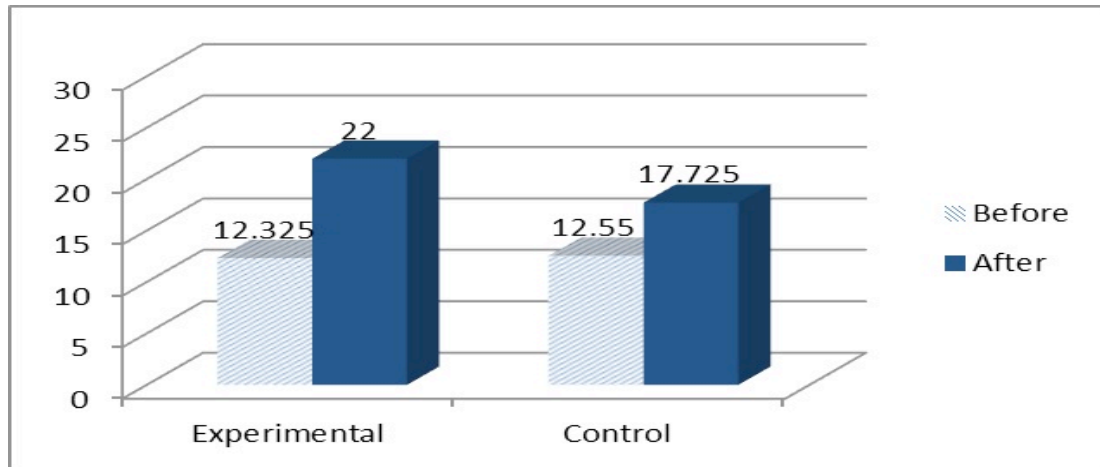


Figure 1: The Mean Scores of the Experimental Group and the Control Group

To compare the effectiveness of the story-based instruction to school-based instruction, an independent t-test analysis was used. The vocabulary learning scores after instruction of the experimental group to that of the control group were compared. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

	Groups	n	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	p-value
Pretest	Experimental	40	12.325	5.484	0.182	0.856
	Control	40	12.550	5.184		
Posttest	Experimental	40	22.000	4.461	-5.711*	0.000*
	Control	40	17.725	7.172		

* <0.05)

Table 2: The Comparison of the Vocabulary Learning Scores of the Experimental Group to those of the Control Group

Table 2 shows that there was no statistically significant difference between the pretest mean score of students in the experimental group ($M = 12.325$, $SD = 5.484$) and that of the control group ($M = 12.550$, $SD = 5.184$). This suggests that before the experiment, students in the experimental group had vocabulary learning at the same level as students in the control group. However, the posttest was found to be statistically significant ($p \leq .05$). These results indicate that the vocabulary learning of the students in the experimental group ($M = 22.000$, $SD = 4.461$) was significantly higher than that of the control group ($M = 17.725$, $SD = 7.172$).

To study students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction after the instruction of the experimental group, the data were collected and merged from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The result from the questionnaire is revealed in Table 3.

Item	Statements	n	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level
1	Activities in class allowed me to understand more meaning of vocabularies.	40	4.83	.385	Highly Positive
2	Activities in class did not help me to spell English vocabularies studied in class.*	40	4.65*	.579	Highly Positive
3	Activities in class allowed me to correctly use English vocabularies in sentences.	40	4.53	.599	Highly Positive
4	Activities in class allowed me to learn more English vocabularies.	40	4.60	.545	Highly Positive
5	Activities in class were not useful for improving my English skills.*	40	4.65*	.483	Highly Positive
6	I think activities in class were interesting.	40	4.70	.516	Highly Positive
7	I did not want to study English subject because I was unhappy when I had to do activities in class.*	40	4.75*	.494	Highly Positive
8	I had a lot of fun from activities in class.	40	4.70	.464	Highly Positive
9	Activities in class were too difficult.*	40	4.45*	.639	Highly Positive
10	I was happy with learning.	40	4.83	.501	Highly Positive
11	Activities in class encouraged me to have more confidence in using English.	40	4.43	.675	Highly Positive
12	I could not apply English vocabularies I learned in class to my daily life.*	40	4.65*	.622	Highly Positive
13	I can use English vocabularies more correctly from doing activities in class.	40	4.53	.816	Highly Positive
14	Activities in class could not encourage me to speak English.*	40	4.35*	.769	Highly Positive
15	Activities in class allowed me to write English vocabularies more correctly.	40	4.70	.516	Highly Positive
Average		40	4.62	.314	Highly Positive

Table 3: Opinions on Vocabulary Teaching through the Story-based Instruction

Table 3 demonstrates that the value of students' opinions on vocabulary teaching through the story-based instruction were highly positive ($M = 4.62$, $SD = .314$). Students favored the teaching method and enjoyed class activities. In addition, the results from the interview also supported this finding. All interviewees (100%) said that they have more confidence to use English. One student commented, "I am more confident to use and speak English because I was encouraged to speak English in class. The activities we did in class helped me to practice English." Three students (60%) said that classroom activities were not too difficult. One student said, "I like activities we did in class, because they were not too hard to do. Another student declared, "I was comfortable to do activities. Group activities not only supported us to be unity or learn social skills from doing activities, but they were also easy and fun." All students (100%) said that activities in class helped them to use English vocabulary more correctly in both writing and speaking. One student said that he can

use English vocabularies in sentences. When he wanted to use the words he learned in class, he would think of stories and activities. It was easy for him to recognize how to use the words correctly. All students also confirmed that they would use the story-based instruction if they were English teachers.

Discussion

Teaching English vocabulary by using the story-based instruction was effective to enhance sixth-grade students' vocabulary learning compared to school-based instruction. After the experiment, students who were taught through the story-based instruction gained a significantly higher mean score on the posttest than students taught using school-based instruction. In addition, students in the experimental group had highly positive opinions on the story-based instruction.

The teaching method designed in this study was an effective method to improve EFL learners' vocabulary learning by using stories, activities, and multiple materials. It showed that the story-based instruction offered students advantages for many reasons. First, language skills were incorporated in stories. Students were encouraged to practically use words in context. According to Abdolmanafi-Rokni and Qarajeh (2014), stories had powerful impact and could be applied to extend vocabularies. They also improved speaking because students' reaction and emotion were invoked.

Second, a wide range of activities based on stories presented multiple aspects of language to students and created a productive environment in which the students learned the language. Appropriate activities also introduced new words to students. In this study, students really enjoyed playing games. They showed what they knew through games. These activities aroused students to think and worked together with their classmates. They learned English language subconsciously. Students in the experimental group who were taught by using games achieved in vocabulary learning. In line with the thinking of Mehregan (2014) who investigated the impacts of game-based tasks for foreign language instruction on young learners' vocabulary acquisition. The result was found that the game based experimental group performed better than the comparison group in vocabulary learning.

Third, words were presented in context and repeated several times. Both the repeated situation and context made words easy to comprehend. The story-based instruction was a memory aid for learning the language; students easily stored and retrieved new knowledge because of the various repetition techniques involved. For example, they aid students' retention by associating new vocabulary with words they already knew. The recycling patterns encouraged students to concentrate on words. Like the ideas proposed by Loukia (2006), the language was repeated, it caused the stories to be memorable. The repetition helped students to focus on the stories. Moreover, students were encouraged to participate in the activities; they took part in stories, guessed what events would come next, and activated their imagination. This guessing helped the students to acquire, retain language items, and focused on lessons.

Finally, the story-based instruction benefits mental and social aspects of learning. Students' curiosities were aroused and motivated because the activities related to the story drew their attention, and hence improved students' self-awareness and raised the feeling of responsibility to their learning.

The findings of this study were consistent with previous studies conducted by researchers in the field of language teaching and learning. Zabala, Cano, and Roldan (2009) investigated teaching vocabulary to third-grade students in Colombia using illustrated stories. The researchers were observers and took note of students' behavior during the class, and the results showed that the students were able to connect new vocabulary knowledge with images. In short, the images supported students' vocabulary learning. The researchers suggested that using flashcards, posters, and illustrated stories would help students to identify specific situations in the story. In addition, the results of this study were in line with Kunnu, Uiphanit, and Sukwises (2016) who studied the improvement of vocabulary memorization by using games. The participants were upper primary students in Thailand. The teaching lasted seven weeks. These students were asked to play games such as word spelling, word matching and pictures. Pretests and posttests were administered to compare the students' achievements, and the results showed that using games had a positive effect on vocabulary learning. The observation in learners' behaviors was also found that activities in class enhanced students to be interested in English learning.

The implications and limitations

It is evident that teaching English vocabulary through the story-based instruction is an effective way to improve students' vocabulary learning. For this reason, the story-based instruction can be an alternative way for language educators and teachers to develop their English vocabulary teaching method and language instruction. The findings suggest that creating good atmosphere in classroom enhances students' achievement. It is another good way to develop students' learning. The result also found that repetition improves learners' memory and helps them to be more confident. Teachers can apply this technique to their instruction. In addition, guessing before explanation is helpful. It can be applied to presentation because it increases audiences' participation and motivation.

This study was concerned and conducted with sixth-grade EFL students in a public school. It was a particular group of the participants. The findings of this study might not generalize to other groups of students in different levels and contexts. A potential impact of learner involvement might have inadvertent. Different schools might have different techniques to teach English words. Therefore, the results of this study might not give contribution to teaching English words to students with other aspects.

Further studies can be conducted to apply the story-based instruction with other language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening. It will be interesting to prolong the experiment. Periods of teaching students through the story-based instruction should be longer so that students can learn more words and do more activities. Also, it would be more logical to observe whether students continue to use words throughout the school year, or they forget the words without continued emphasis on vocabulary learning. A longitudinal study is required to examine sustained vocabulary knowledge. In addition, different levels of students with multiple stories and activities will be interesting to investigate the effects of the story-based instruction.

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