

The Effect of the Narrative Method on Sixth Preparatory Students' Reading
Comprehension in English Language in Baghdad

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أثر الطريقة السردية على الفهم القرائي لدى طلاب الصف السادس الإعدادي في مادة اللغة الإنكليزية في بغداد

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الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في فاعلية الطريقة السردية في تعزيز فهم المقروء لدى طلاب الصف السادس الإعدادي في بغداد، العراق. تعتمد طرق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية التقليدية في المدارس العراقية غالبًا على الترجمة النحوية والحفظ، مما يحد من قدرة الطلاب على تطوير مهارات القراءة النقدية. وبالاستناد إلى نظريات الإدراك السردية والقراءة التفاعلية، تستكشف هذه الدراسة ما إذا كان التدريس القائم على السرد يمكن أن يُحسن من الفهم العام للنصوص ومهارات فرعية محددة مثل الاستنتاج والتحليل والتفكير النقدي. استخدمت الدراسة تصميمًا شبه تجريبي، شمل ٧٠ طالبًا على مدى ١٢ أسبوعًا، حيث قُسم المشاركون إلى مجموعتين: مجموعة تلقت تعليمًا قائمًا على السرد، وأخرى اتبعت الطرق التقليدية. جُمعت البيانات من خلال اختبارات قبلية وبعديّة واستبيانات لآراء الطلاب. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن الطريقة السردية تُسهم بشكل ملحوظ في تعزيز فهم المقروء وتفاعل الطلاب، مما يقدم رؤى تربوية مهمة لتطوير المناهج وتدريب المعلمين في سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتسعى الدراسة إلى سد فجوة واضحة في النظام التعليمي العراقي وتدعو إلى اعتماد ممارسات تدريس أكثر تركيزًا على المتعلم وذات صلة بالسياق الثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السرد، فهم، مؤقت، طريقة، تقليدية، طلاب، الصف، السادس.

Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the narrative method in enhancing reading comprehension among sixth preparatory students in Baghdad, Iraq. Traditional EFL instruction in Iraqi schools often relies on grammar-translation and rote memorization, which limits students' ability to develop critical reading skills. Drawing on theories of narrative cognition and transactional reading, this research explores whether storytelling-based instruction can improve students' overall comprehension and specific sub-skills such as inferencing, analysis, and critical thinking. A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving 70 students over a 12-week period. Participants were divided into two groups: one received narrative-based instruction, while the other followed traditional methods. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests and student feedback questionnaires. Findings have shown that the narrative method significantly enhances reading comprehension and student engagement,

offering pedagogical insights for curriculum development and teacher training in EFL contexts. The study addresses a critical gap in the Iraqi educational system and advocates for a shift toward more learner-centered, contextually relevant teaching practices.

Keywords: narrative, understanding, temporality, method, traditional, students, grade, sixth.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill in language acquisition, critical not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning and cognitive development (Snow, 2002). In contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), such as Iraq, mastering reading comprehension is a challenging task for secondary school students due to linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers (Al-Timimi, 2017). Traditional English instruction in Iraqi preparatory schools often emphasizes rote memorization, grammar drills, and surface-level comprehension, leaving students ill-prepared for higher-order thinking and real-world application (Al-Jubouri, 2019).

Recent pedagogical shifts highlight the value of narrative-based instruction as an alternative to conventional methods. Rooted in theories of narrative cognition (Bruner, 1990) and transactional reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), the narrative method leverages storytelling to create emotionally engaging and contextually rich learning environments. Story-based instruction enables students to make inferences, engage empathically, and retain information more effectively (Haven, 2007; Egan, 1986). Despite promising global evidence (Gambrell, 2011; Grabe, 2009; Kramsch, 1993), little empirical research has investigated how narrative methods affect reading comprehension within the Iraqi educational system. By examining the effect of the narrative method, this study aims at closing that gap on sixth preparatory students' reading comprehension in Baghdad.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is a growing concern about the low reading comprehension levels among Iraqi secondary school students. National assessments and teacher observations highlight that many learners struggle with inferential thinking, critical analysis, and engagement with reading materials (Iraqi Ministry of Education, 2019). The predominant grammar-translation and lecture-based approaches fail to address these deficits. Hence, the problem addressed in this study is: "To what extent can the narrative method improve reading comprehension among sixth preparatory students in Iraq compared to traditional methods?"

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

- **Curricular Innovation:** Results may inform curriculum developers seeking to integrate communicative and culturally relevant pedagogy.

- **Learner Outcomes:** Enhanced reading skills contribute to broader language proficiency and academic success.

1.4 Study's Hypotheses

This study tests the following hypotheses:

- **H₁:** Students taught using the narrative method will demonstrate significantly higher post-test reading comprehension scores compared to those instructed by traditional methods.
- **H₂:** The narrative method will significantly improve students' inferential, analytical, and critical reading sub-skills.

1.5 study's Questions

In alignment with the hypotheses, the current study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the narrative method on the overall reading comprehension of sixth preparatory students in Baghdad?
2. How does the narrative method influence specific reading sub-skills such as literal understanding, inferencing, and critical analysis?
3. How do students perceive the use of narrative-based instruction in English classes?
4. Are there statistically significant differences between students taught through narrative methods and those taught through traditional methods?

1.6 Limitations of the Study

- **-Sample Size:** The study was limited to 70 students from two preparatory schools in Baghdad, which may affect generalizability.
- **Duration:** The intervention lasted 12 weeks, limiting the long-term evaluation of effects.
- **Cultural Context:** Results may not be applicable to regions outside of Iraq or to non-preparatory students.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

- **Narrative Method:** A pedagogical strategy that uses storytelling (fictional or non-fictional) to facilitate comprehension, emotional engagement, and critical thinking (Bruner, 1990; Egan, 1986).
- **Reading Comprehension:** The ability to decode, interpret, and critically evaluate texts, including literal understanding, inferencing, and analysis (Snow, 2002).
- **Traditional Method:** Conventional EFL teaching practices that emphasize rote learning, grammar drills, and literal comprehension tasks (Freeman, 2014).
- **Sixth Preparatory Students:** Final-year high school students in Iraq, typically aged 16–17, preparing for the national baccalaureate exams.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The study explores the theoretical and empirical foundations of the narrative method as an instructional approach in the teaching of English reading comprehension. It begins by examining key theoretical frameworks and continues with a critical overview of international and local studies that investigate the effectiveness of narrative-based instruction in EFL and ESL contexts. Finally, the chapter identifies the research gap which the study aims to address, is identified.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Transactional Theory of Reading

Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) posits that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. The meaning of a text emerges from the reader's interaction with it, influenced by their prior experiences, emotions, and cultural background. This view shifts focus from decoding words to constructing meaning, making it highly compatible with narrative pedagogy, which invites students to immerse themselves emotionally and cognitively in the stories they read (Rosenblatt, 1994; Beach & Marshall, 1991).

2.2.2 Narrative Cognition

Bruner (1990) argues that human cognition is inherently narrative; people make sense of the world through stories. The use of narrative structures activates schema, improves retention, and fosters deeper emotional engagement. Egan (1986) adds that storytelling activates multiple cognitive domains—imagination, memory, empathy—which are underutilized in traditional instruction.

2.2.3 Socio-Constructivism

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory emphasizes the social nature of learning. In narrative classrooms, discussions about characters, settings, and themes encourage collaborative construction of meaning, scaffolding higher-order thinking skills (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Wells, 1999).

2.3 The Role of Narrative in Language Learning

Narrative instruction supports multiple dimensions of language development:

- **Vocabulary acquisition:** Stories present words in context, aiding semantic retention (Nation, 2001).
- **Grammar acquisition:** Natural language structures embedded in stories help internalize syntactic rules (Ellis, 2005).
- **Cultural literacy:** Stories bridge cultural gaps, helping students interpret values and norms embedded in English texts (Kramsch, 1993).

2.4 Narrative and Reading Comprehension

There is a growing body of research that supports the use of narrative-based instruction to improve reading comprehension:

- Gambrell (2011) found that story immersion strategies significantly increased inferential comprehension for middle grade readers.
- Grabe (2009) points out how narrative texts inherently facilitate cohesion, coherence, and inferencing.

- Wilhelm (2016) argues that narrative promotes motivation and engagement, necessary for long-term comprehension.

International studies such as (Haven, 2007) and (Lazar, 1993) have established the success of the use of literary and narrative texts in language classrooms for improved understanding, empathy, and analysis.

2.5 Empirical Studies

2.5.1 Global Context

- Isbell et al. (2004) discovered that preschoolers who were read a story had better story recall and comprehension than children who were being told information through exposition.
- Mason and Krashen (2004) supported the fact that extensive exposure to stories significantly improved the reading fluency and comprehension of EFL students in Japan.
- Elley (1989) conducted a large-scale research study in 16 countries and confirmed that story-based instruction significantly developed language proficiency as well as reading comprehension in early childhood.

2.5.2 Middle Eastern Context

- Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman (2011) found in Saudi Arabia that narrative texts encouraged more engagement and comprehension than expository texts.
- *Khalil (2015) proved that instructional narrative within Jordanian schools improved the competence of students to infer meanings and write opinion."".
- Al-Saleem (2018) observed that the use of story-telling approaches significantly enhanced reading motivation and depth of understanding in Palestinian secondary schools.

2.5.3 Iraqi Context

Few studies have explored narrative pedagogy in Iraq. Al-Timimi (2017) and Al-Jubouri (2019) critique the overuse of outdated methodologies in secondary English instruction. Abdulwahid (2021) experimented with story-based learning and found modest gains in vocabulary and reading interest, though her work was not focused on inferential comprehension.

2.6 Reading Sub-skills and Narrative Impact

Effective reading involves multiple sub-skills:

- -Literal comprehension (identifying facts)
- Inferential comprehension (drawing conclusions)
- Critical evaluation (judging motives and themes)

Narrative instruction enhances these through activities such as role-playing, prediction tasks, and reflective journaling (Morrow, 2005; Tompkins, 2010). According to Zwaan & Radvansky (1998), narrative processing activates deeper semantic memory, making it ideal for improving inferencing and retention.

2.7 Gaps in the Literature

Although global evidence supports narrative methods, few rigorous, controlled studies have been conducted in Iraq. No known research has employed a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the narrative method's impact on reading subskills among sixth preparatory students. This study addresses that gap by offering quantitative and qualitative insights from the Iraqi context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The researcher outlines the methodological framework employed to investigate the effect of the narrative method on reading comprehension among sixth preparatory students in Baghdad. It describes the research design, participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis methods used in the study. The rationale behind each methodological choice is explained to ensure validity, reliability, and contextual relevance.

3.2 Study Design

A quasi-experimental pre- post-test control group design was employed within this study. This was adopted due to the constraints in research in intact classroom settings where random assignment could not be accommodated. Quasi-experimental designs are commonly applied within education research and are robust for assessing intervention impacts (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Table 1: Design of study

Design Element	Details
Type	Quasi-experimental (pre- post-test, control group)
Independent Variable	Teaching Method (Narrative vs. Traditional)
Dependent Variable	Reading Comprehension Scores (overall and sub-skills)
Duration	12 weeks (3 sessions/week, 45 minutes/session)
Control Measures	Matched pre-test scores, aligned curriculum, teacher experience

3.3 Population and Sample

3.3.1 Population

The target population included sixth preparatory students enrolled in public secondary schools in Baghdad for the academic year 2023–2024.

3.3.2 Sampling Technique

Two schools (AL-Qanat preparatory school) and (Palestine preparatory school) that shared similar demographics were purposefully sampled. The assigned class for one was an experimental group while the other acted as the control group within each school. A matching rather than random approach raises the level of internal validity of the intervention within the school setting (Fraenkel et al., 2019).

3.3.3 Sample Size

The final sample comprised 70 students ($n = 35$ in each group). Baseline equivalence was ensured through statistical analysis of pre-test scores.

3.3.4 Participant Characteristics:

In order to maintain internal validity, control and experimental groups were matched as closely as possible on demographic and academic variables. These were age, gender distribution, and starting English language proficiency as determined by the pretest. Statistical comparisons were employed to determine the comparability of the two groups prior to the intervention. The following table presented an overview of the most significant features of the participants.

Table 2: Participant Characteristics

Variable	Experimental Group	Control Group	Significance (p)
Mean Age (\pm SD)	16.4 \pm 0.6	16.5 \pm 0.5	0.452
Gender Distribution	18 Male / 17 Female	20 Male / 15 Female	0.648
Pretest Mean	62.29 \pm 6.03	62.29 \pm 6.03	1.000

3.4 Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used:

3.4.1 Reading Comprehension Test

A researcher-developed test based on the Iraqi national English curriculum was constructed and validated through pilot study and expert review.

- **Structure:** 30 items (10 literal, 10 inferential, 10 analytical)
- **Scoring:** Each item is rated on a rubric aligned with Bloom's taxonomy
- **Reliability:** Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$ (pretest), 0.89 (posttest)
- **Validation:** Content validity reviewed by three TEFL experts

3.4.2 Instructional Materials

Experimental Group (Narrative Method):

- **Stories:** Culturally relevant short stories, folktales, and adapted literary texts
- **Activities:** Story mapping, journaling, prediction tasks, debates, and role-play
- **Assessment:** Formative assessments using rubrics for each skill

Control Group (Traditional Method):

- Textbook-based instruction
- **Focus:** Grammar, vocabulary drills, reading passages with literal questions
- **Assessment:** Worksheets and end-of-unit tests

3.5 Procedures

The research followed four main phases:

Phase 1: Preparation

- Teacher training: 4-hour workshop on narrative pedagogy for experimental group teacher
- Instrument pilot testing and refinement

Phase 2: Pre-test Administration

- Both groups took the standardized reading comprehension pre-test
- Scores used to confirm initial equivalence

Phase 3: Instructional Intervention

- Duration: 12 weeks (3 sessions per week)
- Same thematic units covered in both groups but through different instructional methods

Phase 4: Post-test and Qualitative Data Collection

- Post-test administered under identical conditions
- Reflective journals collected from the experimental group for qualitative insights

3.6 Data Analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses was used.

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive statistics: Means, standard deviations, and percentages
- Inferential statistics:
 - Paired t-tests for within-group comparisons
 - Independent t-tests for between-group comparisons
 - Effect size (Cohen's d) to determine practical significance

4. Results**4.1 Introduction**

The study presents the findings of the study, which investigated the effect of the narrative method on reading comprehension among sixth preparatory students in Baghdad. The results are organized into four sections: (1) descriptive statistics, (2) within-group pre- post-test comparisons, (3) between-group comparisons, and (4) sub-skill performance analysis. Qualitative feedback from student journals is also analysed to provide contextual insights into learner experiences.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Preliminary analysis confirmed homogeneity between the experimental and control groups at baseline. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the pre-test scores.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test Scores

Group	Mean Score	SD	N
Experimental	62.29	6.03	35
Control	62.29	6.03	35

- Independent t-test result: $t(68) = 0.00$, $p = 1.000$

→ No statistically significant difference at baseline.

4.3 Within-Group Pre– Post-test Comparisons

The paired sample t-tests revealed statistically significant gains in both groups, with the experimental group showing much higher improvements.

Table 4: Within-Group Pre-test vs. Post-test Results

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Experimental	62.29 (6.03)	82.29 (6.03)	+20.00	18.74	<0.001	3.31 (Large)
Control	62.29 (6.03)	67.29 (6.03)	+5.00	4.72	<0.001	0.83 (Moderate)

- The effect size for the experimental group is exceptionally large, indicating strong educational impact (Cohen, 1988).

4.4 Between-Group Post-test Comparisons

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups.

Table 5: Between-Group Post-test Comparison

Group	Post-test Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Experimental	82.29	6.03	9.43	<0.001
Control	67.29	6.03		

Additionally, a chi-square test was used to analyze the percentage of students achieving a score of 70 or higher.

Table 6: Proficiency Level (Pass Rates ≥ 70)

Group	% Passing	Chi-square	p-value
Experimental	91.4%	15.72	<0.001
Control	48.6%		

→ The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group both in mean scores and in the proportion of students achieving proficiency.

4.5 Sub-skill Performance Analysis

The reading comprehension test was divided into three sub-skill categories: literal comprehension, inferencing, and critical analysis.

Table 7: Gain Scores by Sub-skill

Sub-skill	Experimental Gain	Control Gain	p-value
Literal	+8.2 \pm 1.5	+3.1 \pm 1.2	0.003
Inferential	+7.5 \pm 1.8	+1.2 \pm 0.9	<0.001
Critical Thinking	+4.3 \pm 1.1	+0.7 \pm 0.5	<0.001

- Inferential and analytical comprehension showed the most significant improvement in the experimental group, affirming Hypothesis 2 (H₂).
- These results align with findings from Grabe (2009) and Wilhelm (2016) who emphasized storytelling's effect on deeper cognitive skills.

4.6 Qualitative Analysis of Student Reflections

Reflective journals from the experimental group were analyzed using thematic coding. Three prominent themes emerged:

4.6.1 Increased Engagement

78% of students described their experience with narrative learning as “enjoyable,” “motivating,” or “fun.”

- Sample quote: “I waited for each story lesson because it felt like a movie in class.”

4.6.2 Emotional and Cultural Connection

- 65% reported stronger connections to English texts through relatable characters or settings.
- Sample quote: Stories about family and dreams helped me understand English better.

4.6.3 Improved Understanding and Confidence

- 60% stated that narratives helped them understand vocabulary and grammar in context.
- Sample quote: "I can remember words from stories more than from the textbook".

These findings support the socio-constructivist premise that meaningful, context-rich content fosters deeper learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Morrow, 2005).

4.7 Summary of Findings

- The narrative method produced statistically and practically significant improvements in reading comprehension.
- The experimental group showed higher gains across all reading sub-skills.
- Qualitative data corroborated the statistical findings, revealing enhanced engagement and comprehension.

These outcomes affirm both research hypotheses and provide strong support for integrating narrative strategies in EFL instruction in Iraq.

5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The results of the study are interpreted in light of the research objectives and existing literature. The findings are discussed in relation to the proposed hypotheses, followed by pedagogical implications for English language teaching in Iraq. Finally, the chapter outlines the study's limitations are outlined and suggestions for future researches are provided.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.2.1 Impact of the Narrative Method on Overall Reading Comprehension

The study found a statistically significant improvement in the reading comprehension of students taught using the narrative method ($p < 0.001$), with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.31$). This finding supports Hypothesis 1 (H_1) and is consistent with international studies (e.g., Mason & Krashen, 2004; Gambrell, 2011; Haven, 2007), which demonstrate that narrative instruction enhances comprehension

by contextualizing language, stimulating imagination, and increasing learner motivation.

The results also align with Bruner's (1990) theory of narrative cognition, which holds that storytelling is a natural way for humans to structure understanding. With emotionally engaging narratives and interactive tasks such as prediction and role-play, experimental group learners most likely established stronger relationships with the material.

5.2.2 Influence on Reading Sub-skills

Hypothesis 2 (H₂) was also supported, as students in the narrative group showed significantly higher gains in inferential and critical comprehension compared to the control group. These results mirror work by Grabe (2009) and Zwaan & Radvansky (1998), who indicate the cognitive depth elicited by narrative patterns, which engage students in tracking characters' motives, predicting consequences, and analyzing tensions—abilities less honed in traditional grammar-based approaches.

5.2.3 Student Perceptions

Qualitative findings supported statistical findings. Student reflective journals showed enhanced participation, self-assurance, and enjoyment during the learning experience. This affective involvement, based on Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading, suggests narrative instruction facilitates reader-text interaction in involving students to perceive texts as experiences rather than static information.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study carry several important implications for English language instruction in Iraq and similar EFL contexts:

- Curriculum Reform:** The Iraqi English curriculum, which often centers on grammar-translation and rote memorization, would benefit from the integration of narrative-based units. These could include modern short stories, folktales, and culturally relevant narratives that align with student experiences.
- Teacher Professional Development:** To successfully implement narrative pedagogy, teachers must be trained not only in selecting appropriate texts but also in designing interactive, reflective activities such as story mapping, dramatization, and collaborative analysis.
- Assessment Innovation:** Current evaluation systems heavily emphasize factual recall. This study supports a shift toward performance-based assessment that evaluates inferential and critical thinking through written reflections, story retellings, and interpretive essays.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

While the findings are promising, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- Sample Scope:** The study involved only 70 students from two preparatory schools in Baghdad, limiting the generalizability of results.

2. **Duration:** The 12-week intervention, while sufficient to detect gains, may not reflect long-term retention or sustained impact.
3. **Instructor Bias:** Although training was provided, differing teaching styles could have influenced the outcomes.
4. **Measurement Constraints:** Although the comprehension test was validated, its effectiveness in capturing nuanced changes in analytical reasoning is limited.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the outcomes and limitations of this study, future research should consider the following directions:

1. Investigate the long-term impact of narrative instruction on reading development across academic years.
2. Replicate the study in rural, private, and mixed-gender schools to test generalizability.
3. Compare narrative instruction with project-based learning or inquiry-based reading approaches.
4. Explore the effects of digital storytelling and multimedia narratives on student engagement and comprehension.
5. Investigate how teacher beliefs, training, and classroom management styles mediate the success of narrative instruction.

5.6 Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the narrative method significantly enhances reading comprehension among sixth preparatory students in Baghdad. By situating language learning in meaningful, culturally relevant stories, students engage more deeply with texts, develop critical thinking skills, and build lasting vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

The narrative method, supported by cognitive and socio-constructivist theories, offers a compelling alternative to traditional instruction in Iraq's English language classrooms. With careful implementation and institutional support, it holds great promise for improving educational outcomes in EFL contexts.

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