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THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL SCHEMA AND STORYTELLING IN ENHANCING EFL YOUNG LEARNERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

أثر المفاهيم الثقافية والسرد القصصي على تحسين مهارات الاصغاء
والفهم عند الاستماع لدى صغار متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effect of cultural schema and storytelling in improving EFL learners' listening comprehension skills. Two groups participated in this study by having a pre-test on their listening skills. The control group was taught traditionally while the storytelling technique was implemented with the experimental group. They had some training sessions in listening comprehension using storytelling techniques to activate their cultural schema. A post-test was administered with both groups later. An interview was conducted to nine teachers. Results revealed that activating cultural schema using storytelling has a positive effect in improving EFL young learners' listening comprehension skills.

Keywords: listening, listening skills, teaching listening comprehension, storytelling techniques, cultural schema.

المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إبراز أثر المفاهيم الثقافية والسردي القصصي على تحسين مهارات الاصغاء و الفهم عند الاستماع لدى صغار متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. شارك في هذه الدراسة مجموعتين من تلاميذ السنة الأولى متوسط (ضابطة وتجريبية). أجرى المشاركون في كلا المجموعتين اختبارًا تمهيدياً لمهاراتهم في الفهم لدى الاستماع إلى اللغة الانجليزية. تم استخدام أسلوب سرد القصص مع المجموعة التجريبية بينما تم استخدام الطريقة التقليدية مع المجموعة الضابطة. ثم خضعت المجموعة التجريبية لعدد من الحصص التدريبية في الفهم السمعي باستخدام تقنيات السرد القصصي لتفعيل المفاهيم الثقافية. وفي الأخير، تم إجراء اختبار لاحق لكلا المجموعتين للتحقق من مستوى فهم الاستماع بعد تطبيق التقنيات الجديدة. كما تم إجراء مقابلة مع تسعة من اساتذة التعليم المتوسط. أظهرت النتائج أن تفعيل المفاهيم الثقافية ورواية القصص لهما تأثير إيجابي في تحسين مهارات الفهم عند الاستماع لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستماع، مهارات الاستماع، تدريس الاستماع من اجل الفهم، تقنيات سرد القصصي، المفاهيم الثقافية.

1. INTRODUCTION

“We all need stories for our minds as much as we need food for our bodies”¹

Listening comprehension is a complex process that requires an active engagement to extract and contrast meaning. Thus, EFL young learners face understanding issues in listening comprehension due to the great cultural differences. EFL learners are not very familiar with the target language culture. Listening comprehension is a cognitive process which requires an active schema to help them understand what they are listening to using both bottom-up and top-down models at the same time. “Once upon a time” is a simple idea that had significantly affected every child’s thinking and imagination. Storytelling is a very old technique that was used for communicating, entertaining, and practicing religion. Early civilizations survived thanks to oral literature. One may refer to stories in the Holy Quran that taught us great lessons. All these cultures, customs, traditions, and life styles were transmitted to generations through stories. Nowadays, Teachers have the opportunity to use storytelling in education to develop students’ abilities and skills, activate their cultural schema and provide an

enjoyable and entertaining atmosphere in class. That is why, there is an urgent need to develop storytelling and cultural schema in listening classes and explore its effect on teaching listening to Algerian EFL young learners to improve their aural comprehension skills. This article will highlight some related literature to this issue and describe the practical study to provide useful methods and techniques to solve the problem.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teaching Listening can be challenging for both teachers and learners. Thus, as an effective way of teaching, storytelling may develop listening skills and keep students engaged in the process. According to Wright², storytelling develops listening fluency which can be built up through practice. Storytelling can be a beneficial technique in teaching listening comprehension.

2.1. Listening Comprehension

Listening Comprehension has always been defined differently by many scholars. For instance, many of them believe that listening comprehension is a complex activity³. This means that it does not involve hearing what is being said but also understanding and decoding the meaning it holds. According to

Vandergrift, cited in ⁴ adds: "Listening comprehension is an interactive, interpretive process where listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages". In other words, listeners need to establish a link between what they hear and what they previously know in order to comprehend the message.

2.2. Listening Comprehension Models

Since listening comprehension is a complex process in interpreting meaning out of an acoustic input, it requires two overlapping models: bottom-up and top-down processes. Processing in the bottom-up model focuses on individual components of the oral message to understand meaning. Top-down processing on the other hand, relies on prior knowledge which goes from meaning to language in order to understand the message. However, Hedge and Helgensen confirm that over-reliance on the use of one type processing is detrimental⁵. Scholars have suggested that listening comprehension can result from the combination of both models to make the process of listening comprehension more successful. O'Malley and other researchers believe that effective

listeners listen for larger chunks and use individual words only when comprehension is broken down ⁶. Therefore, a successful listener is the one who uses both processes, bottom-up and top-down interactively.

2.3. Listening Comprehension Skills

Listening comprehension skills facilitate learning, make it effective, and develop other language skills. They help students understand the reason behind listening and know which skill to use for a better listening. First, Wu Zhengfu believes that identifying the main idea entails selecting and analysing meaning from what they hear and grasp the main idea, this means that they acquire basic discrimination ability ⁷. The learner listens to get an overall idea of what is being said disregarding detailed information. Second, guessing meaning is another important skill of listening. It is also known as inferring meaning which is the ability to deduce the meaning of words from the context. The last skill is prediction that is built based on knowledge about context.

2.4. Cultural Schema and Listening Comprehension

Researchers in the field of education have always tried to make

listening comprehension less difficult and challenging for EFL learners and provide solutions to their problems. They have proposed different techniques and strategies such as activating cultural schema. People's prior knowledge has an effect on their cognition ⁸. He adds: "Prior knowledge is organized in **schemata** (the plural form of schema): abstract, generalized mental representations of our experience that are available to help us understand new experiences". A schema is an individual's collection of prior knowledge that provides a context for meaningful interpretation of new information. In order to acquire meaning, listeners need to analyse words and sentences on the basis of their own personal background knowledge and culture. This makes learners able to get a better comprehension of what they are listening to.

2.4.1. Cultural Schema Activation

Listening is not only hearing what is said. As it is mentioned before, it a complex process for foreign learners. Thus, to facilitate the teaching and learning of listening, learners (listeners) need to activate their schemata. Many researchers endorse that activating students' existing knowledge enhances their

listening comprehension ability ⁹. Activating schema plays a major role in learning. According to Nunan, in the process of schemata activation, learners rely on their prior knowledge about the text and link new information to that background knowledge ¹⁰. In other words, to activate schema, learners need to link between their cultural previous knowledge and new information they are listening to reach a successful activation of their background knowledge, which leads to successful listening comprehension.

2.5. Storytelling

Storytelling is narrating a story to people who are ready to listen and learn. King, Ippolito and Wright point out that storytelling can be considered as an influential integrative strategy for acquiring all reading, writing, speaking and listening skills as well as sub-skills¹¹. Storytelling is defined as a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey words and aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit ¹². This means that telling stories does not require only the teller's efforts but also the listener's engagement. It is a traditional way practiced for generations to deliver their culture, knowledge and wisdom.

2.6. Effects of Storytelling on Listening Comprehension

Teaching listening in Algeria depend on the use of textbooks and listening scripts rather than using other creative ways. Many researchers argue that storytelling improves the listening skills of children¹³. Listening to stories is an activity that young learners enjoy while observing the storyteller's body language, gestures and voice. This means that the listener interacts with the teller through engaging, participation and imagination using a variety of activities suggested for storytelling. Thus, storytelling displays a crucial role in enhancing listening comprehension skills of young learners.

2.7. Major Related Studies

Many empirical studies investigated the effects of storytelling in teaching listening comprehension. In 2014, Oduolowu and Eileen Oluwakemi carried out a quasi-experimental study entitled: "Effects of Storytelling on Listening Skills of Primary One Pupil in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria"¹⁴. The researchers used a pre-test and a post-test with the experimental group who was exposed to storytelling with illustrations while in the control groups storytelling was

made without illustrations. Findings show that there was a significant main effect of storytelling on the listening skills since the experimental group had higher listening scores than the control group. Also, girls scored highly than boys in both groups. Results display that Yoruba pupils performed better than non-Yoruba pupils. This means that there was a positive effect of gender and cultural background on listening skills.

A study by Isbell, Sobol et Lindauer in 2004 has been carried out to determine the influence of storytelling and story reading on language development and story comprehension of young children from three (03) to five (05) years of age¹⁵. It is entitled: "The Effects of Storytelling and Story Reading on the Oral Language Complexity and Story Comprehension of Young Children". Thirty eight (38) participants received the same twenty four (24) stories. They were divided into two groups: group A heard stories told and group B heard stories read. Major findings show that group A performed better in story comprehension while group B performed better in language comprehension. Moreover, results show that both storytelling and story reading are beneficial to develop oral language complexity.

Another study by Mahmoudi in 2017 investigated the Effect of Cultural Schemata Activation on EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension¹⁶. The study tried to find the possible relationship between listeners' cultural schemata and its activation and their performance in EFL listening comprehension. The participants were two groups of 37 Muslim Iranian students divided into two groups of high and low proficiency. Then, they were exposed to two audio files, one about mosques and the other about cathedrals. The null hypothesis of the study was whether listening to a culturally unfamiliar topic (cathedrals) can activate low-level learners' schema of the culturally familiar topic (mosques). Results show that an unfamiliar text, even if it is conceptually similar, cannot activate a culturally familiar schema in the low-level students.

3. METHODS

The previous section introduced relevant related literature. This part presents the participants, research design, instruments and findings.

3.1. Participants

In the current study, forty (40) middle school pupils aged between 10 and 12 years old have been randomly selected to take part in the study. They are from the same class and school in Blida, Algeria. The sample consisted of both boys and girls (16 males and 24 females). The participants are non-native speakers of English and Arabic is their mother language. In addition to that, ten (10) middle school teachers from different middle school in Blida and Medea were interviewed in this study. The teaching experience of the interviewees ranges between two (02) and fifteen (15) years of service.

3.2 Research design

The study took 8 weeks of quasi-experimental research covering the administration of the pre- and post-tests and the training sessions with the experimental group. It started at the end of the second semester to the end of the third semester. Following this approach, the study has included two groups (the control group and the experimental group). Both control and experimental groups consisted of twenty (20) participants. The experimental group received a special training on storytelling techniques while the control group received listening lessons as usually

practised in the classroom. The last step of the study was the teachers' interviews that took place in their schools.

3.3. Instruments

Pre- and post-listening comprehension tests were administered to the sample of the study before and after the training sessions that introduced storytelling and cultural schema activation techniques in improving listening comprehension skills (predicting, guessing, and summarizing the meaning of the story). Tests' were designed and adapted according to Wright's storytelling activities (pre-

during, and after storytelling). All listening tests (pre-test, storytelling activities, and post-test) had the same level of difficulty to ensure results' validity and reliability. Moreover, pupils were informed beforehand that these tests were not part of the regular classroom assessment to establish a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. A semi-structured interview was conducted with nine (09) middle school teachers from different middle schools. They reviewed their teaching experience with young learners, teaching methods, difficulties and solutions to suggest

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Pre-test results

	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Scores	Frequency	Percentages	Scores	Frequency	Percentages
Pre-Test	1.00/10	1	5%	2.25/10	1	5%
	2.75/10	1	5%	3.00/10	2	10%
	3.25/10	1	5%	4.25/10	2	10%
	3.50/10	1	5%	4.75/10	2	10%
	4.00/10	2	10%	5.00/10	4	20%
	5.00/10	1	5%	5.25/10	2	10%
	5.25/10	1	5%	5.75/10	1	5%
	6.00/10	2	10%	6.00/10	2	10%

7.00/10	4	20%	6.25/10	2	10%
7.25/10	2	10%	6.75/10	1	5%
7.75/10	1	5%	8.00/10	1	5%
8.50/10	3	15%			
Average: 5.82/10	Total: 20	Percentage: 100%	Average: 5.08/10	Total: 20	Percentage: 100%

Table (01): The Pre-test Results of the Experimental and the Control Groups.

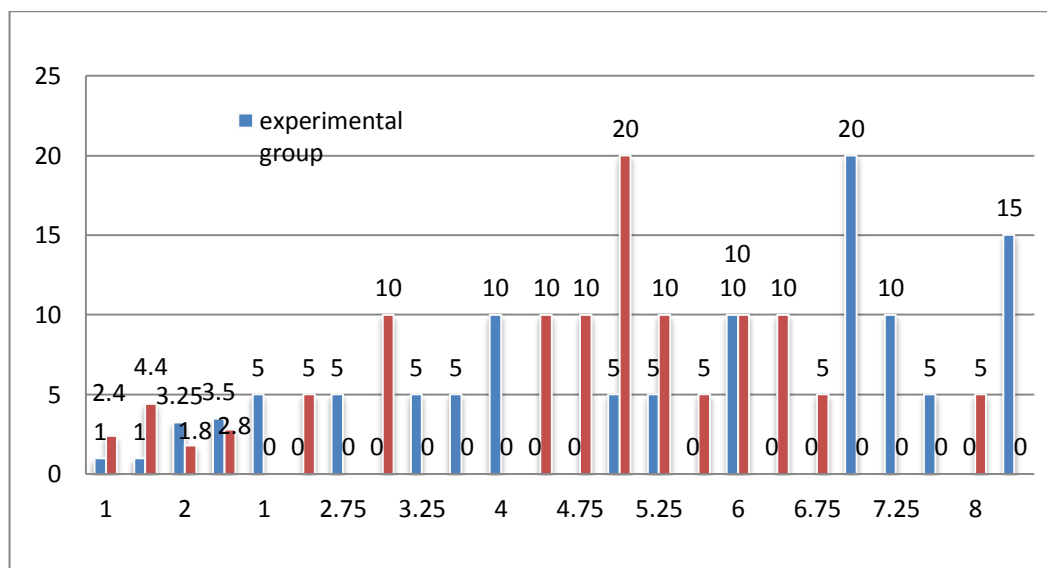


Figure (01): Pre-test Marks and their Frequency.

4.1.1. Analysis of the pre-test results

Table (01) shows that the experimental group has scored (5.82) out of (10) whereas the control group has scored (5.08) out of (10). It is clear that both groups have nearly the same level and no significant difference is shown in their performance. In the experimental group, the lowest mark is (1) out of (10) which represents one participant (5%) while the highest mark is (8.50) out of (10) and it is obtained by three participants that is (15%). In to the

control group, the results obtained seem close to the experimental group's results. The lowest mark in the control group is (2.25) out of (10) and it is obtained by one participant (5%). Whereas the highest mark is (8) out of (10) and it is obtained by one participant (5%).

Pre-Test	Experimental Group		Control Group		
	Scores	Less than 10	More than 10	Less than 10	More than 10
Percentage%		30%	70%	35%	65%
Total		100%		100%	

Table (02): The Percentage of Marks less and more than 10 in the Pre-test.

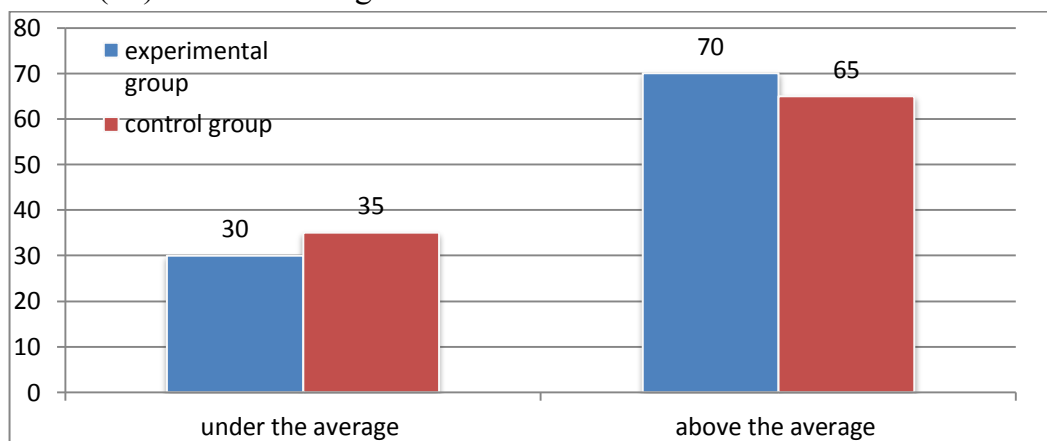


Figure (02): Marks less and more than 10 in the Pre-test.

4.2. The Post-test results

At the end of the quasi-experimental study, both groups have been tested again. A noticeable improvement in pupils' marks is noticed after the analysis of the results. The table (03) below represents pupils' scores out of (10) in the experimental group and the control group.

Post-Test	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Scores	Frequency	Percentages	Scores	Frequency	Percentages
	4.00/10	1	5%	2.50/10	1	5%
	5.75/10	1	5%	3.25/10	2	10%

6.00/10	1	5%	3.75/10	2	10%
6.50/10	2	10%	4.00/10	1	5%
6.75/10	1	5%	4.50/10	1	5%
7.50/10	5	25%	5.00/10	5	25%
7.75/10	1	5%	5.25/10	1	5%
8.50/10	3	15%	5.50/10	1	5%
8.75/10	2	10%	5.75/10	1	5%
9.00/10	3	15%	6.25/10	2	10%
			6.75/10	1	5%
			7.00/10	2	10%
Average: 7.53/10	Total: 20	Percentage: 100%	Average: 5.25/10	Total: 20	Percentage: 100%

Table (03): The Post-test Results of the Experimental and the Control Groups.

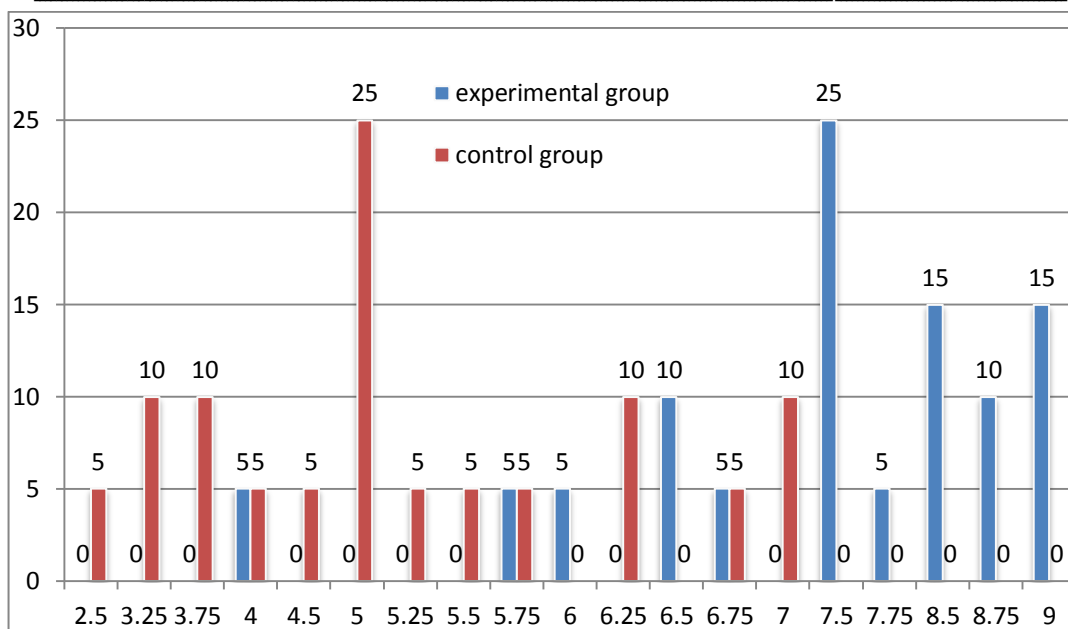


Figure (03): Post-test Marks and their Frequency.

4.2.1. Analysis of the post-test results:

As mentioned in table (03) above, the experimental group's average of marks is (7.53) whereas the control group's average is (5.25). Comparing the averages of the both groups, a significant difference appears in their performance in the post-test. In the experimental group, (5%) of the participants scored a mark of (4) out of (10) Which is considered as the lowest mark in the post-test while the highest mark is (9) out of (10) which represents (15%) of the participants. The results of the control group show that their marks in the post-test are less than those of the experimental group. Only one participant representing (5%) of the control group, scored (2.50) out of (10) which is the lowest mark while two pupils (10%) scored (7) out of (10).

Post-Test	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	Less than 10	More than 10	Less than 10	More than 10
Scores				
Percentage%	5%	95%	35%	65%
Total	100%		100%	

Table (04): The Percentage of Marks less and more than 10 in the Post-test.

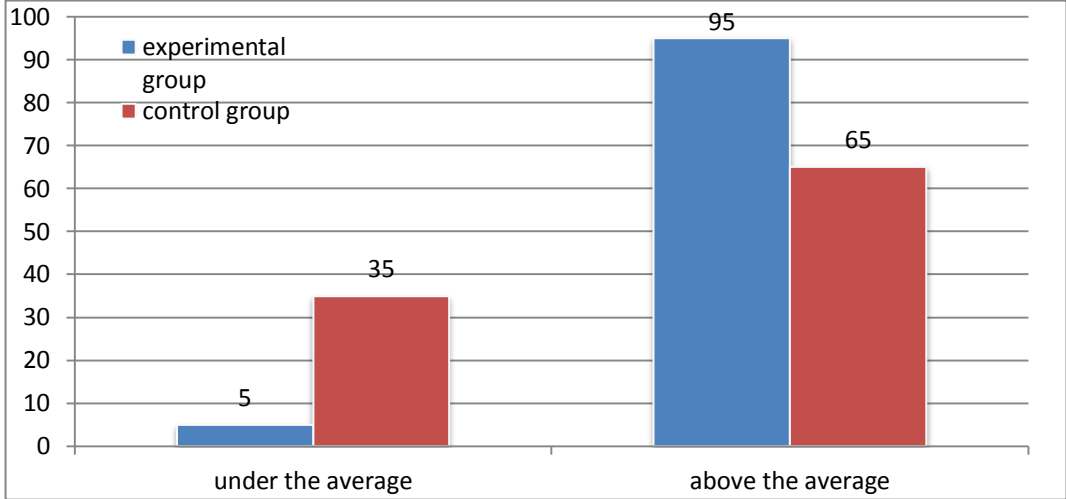


Figure (04): Marks less and more than 10 in the Post-test.

Data presented in the table above, show that the marks in the experimental group differ considerably from the marks of the control group. Percentages under averages are: (5%) which represent one pupil in the experimental group and (35%) representing seven (07) pupils in the control group. Also, percentages above averages are: 95% which represent nineteen (19) pupils in the experimental group and 65% representing thirteen (13) pupils in the control group. We can notice that marks under the average are less than marks above in the experimental group while marks under and above the average in the control group are still the same as in the pre-test's results. This means that the

participants' listening comprehension performance in the experimental group has improved whereas in the control group is still the same. The reason behind this is that the control group has received no treatment in listening comprehension before taking the post-test. That is why, participants in the experimental group performed better than participants in the control group because they had storytelling training sessions to improve their listening comprehension skills.

4.3. The Teachers' interview results and analysis

Nine (09) middle school teachers were interviewed to elicit their answers on the following points: the study, difficulties in teaching

listening comprehension, students' participation in listening comprehension classes, using stories as a listening material, improving listening comprehension through storytelling and cultural schema activation, the difference between traditional techniques and storytelling in teaching listening comprehension skills, and the benefits of storytelling in the language classroom. They argue that the study is an interesting, attractive and motivating technique which is a good idea to include in language classes and establish a relaxed atmosphere. Yet, they assume that it requires time, efforts, and energy. Teachers assume that teaching listening is challenging and most of the time traditional depending on the number of learners and due to the lack of materials. Teachers face many difficulties in teaching listening comprehension skills. They argue that many pupils are slow learners. Thus, more time is needed to repeat tasks again and try to help them understand. Another difficulty for them is the lack of listening equipment, listening scripts and pupils' interest. In addition to that, pupils cannot understand what they are listening to. They lack the necessary background, socio-cultural and contextual

knowledge of the target language as well as the needed vocabulary to understand the script". Teachers claim that only few pupils participate actively in the listening lesson while others do not. Teachers try to motivate their pupils using different strategies like: ICTs, visual aids, restating difficult tasks and pre-teaching new vocabulary to activate their prior knowledge. Some teachers assume that using stories as a listening technique is something they couldn't think about before as a listening material. They argue that they don't even have enough time to use stories in class. Other teachers said that they generally use stories to teach tenses like the past simple tense carefully selecting suitable stories according to pupils' level, interests, individual differences and needs. Eight (08) teachers out of the interviewees think that there is a difference between using traditional techniques and the use of storytelling in teaching listening comprehension while the others do not. In addition to that, activating cultural schema (learners' prior knowledge) enriches their knowledge and develops their comprehension. They also claim that storytelling can be beneficial in listening classes and it can develop

other language skills such as reading, speaking and writing.

5. DISCUSSION

In the pre-test that was administered to test pupils' level in listening comprehension, both groups (experimental and control) obtained similar scores. When the researcher introduced the training sessions, participants in the experimental group achieved much better results than participants in the control group. The participants' average has increased from (5.82) to (7.53) in the experimental group while in the control group the average didn't show a big difference (5.08) to (5.25). This means that the performance of the experimental group is better than the one of the control group in terms of listening comprehension skills. In other words, the participants in the experimental group who had storytelling training sessions have scored better results than the control group who received traditional listening classes and haven't shown any markable improvement. Consequently, their level in listening comprehension skills did not really improve. These results confirm the results of previous related studies by Isbell et al¹⁷ in 2004, Oduolowu and Oluwakemi¹⁸ in 2014 and Mahmoudi¹⁹ in 2017 who agreed on

the fact that storytelling and activating cultural schema have a positive effect in improving young learners' listening comprehension skills.

The results of the study answered the research questions and showed that there is a significant and positive effect of storytelling and cultural schema in improving young learners' listening comprehension skills. The results of the pre-test, the post-test, and the interviews show that there is a significant difference in teaching listening comprehension skills using storytelling technique and using traditional technique. Finally, the results of the pre-test, the post-test, and the interviews highlight the role of storytelling in EFL listening comprehension and other language skills such as reading, writing, and speaking since pupils made a significant improvement in this study with the one of the most difficult language skill (listening).

6. IMPLICATIONS

📌 Teachers' roles

- Teachers should receive trainings in using storytelling techniques and activities as a pedagogical practice selecting appropriate stories

according to their pupils' level, needs, and interests.

- Teachers should move from using traditional techniques in teaching listening comprehension skills into modern techniques such as storytelling to overcome difficulties they generally encounter.
- Teachers should master storytelling skills and techniques in order to create a friendly and enjoyable atmosphere for their pupils.
- Teachers should tell and act stories for pupils in the English classrooms so as to encourage them to tell and act stories by themselves and improve their academic achievements.
- Teachers should teach pupils listening comprehension skills, activate their cultural schema and make them aware about their use.

✚ Storytelling activities

Using storytelling to teach listening comprehension skills differs from traditional techniques in

teaching listening comprehension. (Wright, 1995) argues that storytelling should consist of three phases: before storytelling, during storytelling, and after storytelling. The researcher in turn, and to serve the purpose of the study, has divided a lesson based on storytelling into three main phases:

✚ First phase: Predicting meaning

During this phase, pupils were trained in developing predicting skills. The following activities could be used: word puzzle, picture puzzle, ordering letters, matching words with pictures, matching words with pictures and coloring them, and brainstorming characters and drawing them. Pupils can predict the meaning before listening to the story. In addition, this phase prepares pupils before listening to the story and teaches them vocabulary they need to understand the story.

✚ Second phase: Guessing meaning

In the second phase, pupils are trained in guessing meaning. The following activities could be used: multiple choice questions and true/false statements. These activities aim at developing pupils' guessing skill. Using these activities gives pupils the

chance to acquire the skill of guessing during listening to a story. In addition to that, these activities show the pupils how to understand and infer meaning.

Third phase: Summarizing the main idea

The final phase teaches pupils to summarize the main idea. The following activities could be used: summarizing briefly the main idea, ordering characters in the story, and ordering Events in the story. When the teacher asks his/her pupils to do these activities, pupils will be able to make a summary of the meaning content in the story. These activities help pupils to understand the sequence of events and characters in the story as well as their crucial role in the whole message that is delivered in the story.

7. LIMITATIONS

The results of the study reveal a significant positive effect of storytelling and cultural schema in improving EFL young learner's listening comprehension skills. Reasonably, these results cannot be considered and applied in other contexts where research conditions are different. In fact, the participants of the study consisted of one class (Forty participants) and only nine teachers who were interviewed. This

means that the number of the participants was small and a larger number would have revealed more reliable and accurate findings. Moreover, the current study did not start at the beginning of the year and that participants are beginners in learning the English language.

Apart from the above mentioned limitations, the results of the current research may help both teachers and pupils to be aware of the effectiveness of storytelling in improving listening comprehension skills and provide a useful basis for more pedagogical and educational achievements.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improving the content of the Algerian curricula on the basis of using storytelling as teaching technique to develop different language skills.
- Providing the Algerian textbooks with stories and relate them to different instructional objectives.
- Suggesting techniques to activate learners' cultural schema.
- Increasing teachers' awareness of the significance of Storytelling in teaching.

- Motivating teachers and encouraging them to use storytelling in teaching English language to beginners instead of traditional methods.
- Training teachers in using storytelling in English language teaching.
- Promoting the use of storytelling technique in teaching different language skills.
- Organizing storytelling workshops for English language teachers for the purpose of making them familiar with different storytelling skills, activities, and their practical use.
- Conducting further studies to investigate the use of storytelling at different educational levels in Algeria such as exploring other comprehension skill: reading, speaking, and writing.

9. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that the storytelling technique has a positive role in teaching young learners' listening comprehension skills. Moreover, activating learners' cultural schema improves their listening

comprehension. It suggests some practical implications for teaching listening comprehension skill. The most important pedagogical implication is the integration of storytelling in the teaching of listening comprehension skills. In order to reach this goal, it is important to use stories as listening materials to develop young learners listening comprehension skills and strategies. This in turn will make them develop other language skills and improve their academic achievements. Teachers could implement this technique to help pupils improve their listening comprehension skills using a variety of storytelling tasks and activities.

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