# تذكر واسترجاع القصص الانكليزية بواسطة متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية

## *Remembering and Recalling English Stories by EFL Learners*

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## الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تقديم نظرة تجريبية لقدرة الطلاب على تذكر واسترجاع القصص القصيرة وهي تتعامل نفسيا مع العوامل التي ترافق العمليات التي تحدث اثناء استرجاع القصص الانكليزية من قبل عينه من طلبة الجامعة في تخصص اللغة الانكليزية. هذه الدراسة مؤسسة على اساس ان العمليات النفسية مثل الادراك والانتباه، الذاكرة والمهارة مسؤولة عن العمليات اللغوية مثل حذف التفاصيل واضافة التفاصيل التي تطرأ على القصص القصيرة منذ لحظة دخولها الى الدماغ الى لحظة استرجاعها. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى مجموعة من النتائج فأظهرت ان عملية تذكر واسترجاع القصص القصيرة يرافقها تغييرات وتحويرات بسبب بعض العوامل النفسية والتركيبية. النتائج كذلك دعمت الفكرة القائلة بان بعض التراكيب القصصية وانماط تذكرها هي اشياء عامة، وكذلك اظهرت النتائج ان القصص القصيرة ممكن ان تكون وسيلة مهمة في مجال تعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية بسبب الدور الذي تلعبه في تطوير مهارات اللغة الانكليزية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تذكر واسترجاع القصص، العناصر التركيبية للقصص، تعلم اللغة، مهارات اللغة

## *Abstract*

This study aims at providing an empirical foundation of students' abilities to recall stories. It is a psycholinguistic manipulation of the operations that accompany the processes occurring in the recall of English stories by a sample of Iraqi university students of English. This study is based on the assumption that psychological processes as perception, attention, memory and skill are responsible for the linguistic operations of sharpening, leveling and rationalization that stories undergo from the first moment they inter the mind up to the point of retrieval. The results provide evidence that when stories are recalled, certain changes and modifications take place due to specific structural and psychological reasons. It maintains the point of view that some story structure and story recall patterns are universal. The

results prove that stories can be valuable means in the field of teaching English as a foreign language because of the role they play in the development of foreign language skills.

**Keywords**: remembering and recalling stories, structural elements of stories, language learning, language skills

## Introduction

This study is a psycholinguistic investigation of the processes that accompany the operations occurring in the recall of English stories by a sample of Iraqi University students of English.This study is based on the assumption that psychological processes as perception as perception, attention, memory and skill are responsible for the linguistic operations of sharpening, leveling and rationalization that stories undergo from the first moment they enter the mind up to the point of retrieval.

The recall of eighty students of English from the college of Education, University of Thi Qar is examined and statistically analyzed and quantitively interpreted in terms of three independent variables: sex, story difficulty and language proficiency.

The results confirm certain points proposed by certain models of story grammar. The research gives additional evidence that when stories are recalled, certain changes and modifications take place due to specific cultural and psychological reasons. It supports the view that at least some story structure and story recall patterns are universal. This is due to the finding that the changes referred to above appear even when foreign learners of English recall stories in that language.

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## *The problem*

Story recalling is one of the devices by which foreign language learning can be promoted and developed. Foreign learners of English make remarkable range of adjustments in language through the process of story recalling. Such variations (e.g. leveling out of details, adding certain information, and changing certain other elements in order to make them more reasonable) include elements in the story structure, propositions and cohesive devices.

The problem of the study is to examine the extent of the constraint and freedom when a sample of foreign learners of English reproduce English stories. The form and content of a story are subjected to such kind of limitations throughout the story recalling. This means that at certain points of the story they are listening to or reading, students are free to make the variations they like on the structure and content of English stories whereas at certain other points such variations can never be realized.

## *Hypothesis*

1- It is hypothesized that the textual structure of English stories affects the way they are understood and recalled by foreign learners of English. In other words, IUSE are expected to make (in their recall of the English stories) the changes that fall within story structure elements, propositions, and cohesion devices.

2- It is also hypothesized that male and female students although of the same level, vary in their recall of each of those stories.

3- Another hypothesis that is going to be tested in this study is the role that story difficulty plays in affecting the way through which stories are recalled.

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4- It is also assumed that language proficiency plays a role in affecting story recalling quantitively and qualitively.

## *Limitation of the study*

The study comes under the topic of " discource analysis". It is concerned with the changes that may take place when foreign learners of English listen to and recall English stories. It is, however, not concerned with the ways stories are used in learning English as a foreign language. Nor it is concerned with stories as literary genre. The present study take into account the effect of order of presentation on the students' recall due to the limitation of times.

## *The Processing of Information*

The processing of information refers to the process that information undergo from the first moment they enter the mind. These processes are referred to as " perception, attention, memory and skill ". There are different models adopted by different writers to account for the ambiguity behind speech or writing. The most common of these models is the one proposed by Sternberg (1969). This model consists of three interrelated processes. "perception, attention and memory'.

Barber (2003) argues that there are four basic stages that constitute the main components of the information processing model. These components are " encoding, comparison, response selection and response execution ". The encoding stage is responsible for the acquisition of information in terms of the elementary features such as pitch, intensity, position, etc. In other words, It is used to explain how information is picked up. The following two stages, comparison and response selection, on the other hand, specify the action that shold be done in response to the information, whereas the final

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stage is responsible for the organization of of our responses or action in an effective way.

Perception, attention, and memory are used to operate in relation to each other in the information processing model. For example, the encoding stage is responsible for acquiring the input and forming internal representations of that inputs. Such integration could be done through comparison. After making a comparison, the information is translated into a response through the third stage, The fourth stage is the place where the responses to the stimulus take a new order before they are executed. (Barber 2003).

Nation and Mclaughlin (2006) recognize two kinds of processing, as far as the present form of the model is concerned. They are " automatic" and "controlled" ones. Automatic processing occurs quickly and with little energy because time does not allow processors to make any change in the information as when we are required to write down our names. This is usually what happens in the encoding stage. on the other hand, the controlled processing occurs slowly which enables processors to make the changes they want on the information as when we are required to write with the left hand.

Attention is one of the mental processes which is responsible for reducing the flow of information into a small amount to facilitate processing. It means that, if we are presented with a text then our attention will be focused on only a small part of that text at any time. Garnham (2002,128) explains the reason behind that process of selection by saying that " language understanding makes use of psychological systems, in particular, limited capacity short term memory stores material that evolved for other purposes.

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It seems that attention which works as a filter is sensitive to all the above factors or characteristics and many other complex ones. In support of this view, Barber (2004:26) thinks that the "filter " mechanism is not tuned purely to arbitrate about the acceptability of events on physical criteria, but it is also sensitive to quite complex attributes of the input, including their meaning to the receiver. Throughout the processing of information, we make use of background knowledge which is very important for comprehending stories, we have three kinds of background knowledge, these are "linguistic knowledge, script knowledge and schematic knowledge ". This knowledge is stored in long term memory and is very important in the processing of information and recall of information. The linguistic knowledge which is also called " verbal knowledge " is essential for word meaning, associations and spelling and knowledge of grammatical rules. It helps in deciding which constructions are possible and sensible and which are not. Schematic knowledge is the mental structure base on cultural experience into which new information is fitted. For stories, schematic knowledge includes a hierarchical structure of story elements (different types of information that usually recur in most stories) and the cohesive relations (semantic relations) connecting them.

## 7. Story Recalling

The process of story recalling is a complicated one because during listening to stories, listeners incorporate a set of processes such as bringing outside knowledge, selecting the most important information that retains the gist of story through comparison with background knowledge, making inferences out of the that comparison and finally building a global structure for the memory representations including the background knowledge. In addition to that stories have a specific structure which consists of a set of elements ordered hierarchically and logical relations connecting them.The

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two main elements (setting and episode)are at the higher level of the structure, whereas the other elements (initiating event,internal response, attempt, consequence and relation) are at the lower level of that structure. (Clark and Clark, 1977).

As stories are retained in memory, they undergo certain changes, such as "sharpening " (addition of details), leveling (elimination of details) and " rationalization "(the change in the wording). These changes which are concerned with the content occur while the listener incorporates the new information with alternative ones already stored in long term memory. Moreover, the content here refers to the intended meaning the story teller used to communicate with the listener. This meaning is presented in the mind of the listener in terms of the propositions constituting the story sentences. (Golden, 1985). People can understand and recall simple stories better than complex ones. In the complex stories, the recall of the initiating event of the first episode is better than that of the other element of the episode because it marks conclusion of the whole story.

## 8.The Structure of Stories

Two main kinds of models have been proposed for the purpose of story analysis " inference – based " models (Stein and Glenn, 1989:23) and "structure – based " models (Halliday and Hasan). In the inference –based models, listeners depend in their comprehension of stories on their background knowledge and somehow on the very little information available in those stories because all the necessary information for such comprehension may not be present in them as in the following example which has been taken from Black and Bower (2005:223).

Mary heard the ice

cream van coming down

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The street, she

remembered her

birthday Money and

rushed into the house.

So the inferred elements such as " hearing the ice cream van " initiate the desire for the ice cream van initiate the desire for the ice cream. As a result, that inference will in turn contribute in the integration of our comprehension and in the analysis of such stories.It seems obvious that in the inference – based models, the listener incorporates his \ her background knowledge with the new coming information till he\ she reaches the correct and most suitable inference. To emphasize this point and consequently the importance of schematic knowledge in making inference, Stein and Glenn (2004: 260)mention that:

" …adults who

were asked to

maintain the

Exact order of

randomly ordered

stories

Could not do so.

Instead, they

recalled A

sequence of

events that

correspond More

to the canonical

(usual) order

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Described in

grammar

(structure)

The aforementioned information implies that the hearer rearranges the disordered events according to his background information and reorder them by using the appropriate semantic relations that he finds suitable for this purpose. This could be considered as an indication for the universality of story structure and consequently the selection of such structure to be a framework in this research. In the structure – based models, the listener depends in the analysis of stories on their actual structure which carries the meaning of order, predictability, form, regularity and clarity. Leech and Short (2001)argue that every story has a structure and content and that any alternation of form (structure)entails a change of content. This means that the analysis of any story in terms of its structure will tell us about the content of that story.

## Structure - based Models

Of the two kinds proposed for the analysis of stories, structure – based models have been chosen to guide us in our analysis of stories. Consequently, the analysis of stories will in turn enable us to understand the nature and characteristics of such kind of texts. The structure – based models are divided into three subcategories. These are " story – structure elements " (Stein and Glenn, 1974), "

Cohesion " (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) and " propositions " (Kintsch, 1977). There are many models presented for the analysis of stories,nevertheless, our attention will be devoted to the model provided by Stein and Glenn (2002). They argue that he structure of stories in general consists of two main units or elements which are "setting " and one or more

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" episodes ". The episode is divided into a set of five elements. Each of these elements contains one or more statements that express information of different kinds that play a role in the overall structure of stories.

The setting which is the first basic element of story structure is defined as a semantic unit of analysis which introduces the protagonist (main character) to the action. It includes information about the time and place of the following actions and it prepares the scene for the actions to take place. The following example illustrates this issue:-

> Once upon a time, there was a
> little girl named Sarah. Who
> lived in a big house with her
> parents.

The above example represents the setting in which the expression ' once upon a time ' refers to the time at which the actions took place. The rest of the example, on the other hand, introduces us to the name and physical state of the character and the place she lives in and when the actions took place.

Stein and Glenn (2002: 57). The episode is the basic higher order unit of analysis which as has been mentioned above consists of five elements that take the order: initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence and reaction. The initiating event is the first episodic element which contains an action that make certain changes in the protagonist's fate. This kind of event urges the protagonist to respond emotionally to make a plane in order to achieve that goal. All of these activities are included in the internal response which is the second episodic element. In order for the protagonist to achieve his goal, she has to incarnate the plan into an action which is referred to as an attempt. The result of the attempt is reflected throughout the consequence.

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The reaction which is the final episodic element includes either the character's emotional response to the consequence or a summary of what the character has learned from the consequence (Stein and Glenn, 1982: 27 -29)

## *The Test*

The practical application of the study sheds light on the degree at which Iraqi University students of English are able to comprehend and recall English stories. This issue can be tackled by elaborating the changes that stories can undergo in terms of their structural elements, cohesive devices and propositions. The changes and modifications will be exploited on using stories as a device for improving the process of language teaching. The material of the test consists of two English stories. Both of them handle social issues, the first is related to the theme of trust and truth while the second is related to the theme of marriage. Linguistically speaking, they are controlled for lexical and syntactic complexity as well as sentence length to ensure that they are within the linguistic capabilities of students.The telling of stories by language teachers is either followed by asking them certain comprehension questions to be answered by the students or to recall the stories by those students. The aim in both cases is to develop foreign language skills. Rinvolucri (2006:34)

The sample of the test consists of 40 students (20 males and 20 females) from the fourth year of the English department, college of Education, University of Thi – Qar, The academic year 2019 -2020.

These students have similar background knowledge of English as a foreign Language which comes as a result of three years of concentrated exposition to that language, in addition to the knowledge they had from the primary, intermediate and secondary schools. so they have the readiness to answer the test points and to comprehend and recall the two English stories

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used in the test. Another group of 40 students is chosen from the first year of the same department, college of Education for humanities, University of Thi Qar, following the same bases applied in the selection of our main sample group. such minor group is selected to be compared with the main group to reveal the effect of language proficiency on the recall of the stories. Each group is divided into two parts (20 males and 20 females).

The two stories are tape recorded by a tape recorder and the students are arranged to be listening to the tape recorder in a limited period of time. Each story will be heard twice, such process enables the listeners to understand the stories they are listening to and consequently vary their recall of them. The recall of the eighty IUSE of the simple and difficult stories is analyzed according to the subcategories of story structure. The frequency of events correct, omitted and inaccurate is also scored for each story to see the difference in the recall of the stories. such analysis is done in order to see how far the students are accurate in their recall of the simple and difficult stories.

## The Analysis of the Test Results

The analysis of the results shows the existence of a significant differences in the use of events correct, omitted and inaccurate recalled from the simple as well as the difficult stories by the sample of IUSE.

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**Table – 1 – The Frequency of Events Correct, Omitted and Inaccurate Recalled From the Simple as well as the Difficult Stories by the Sample of IUSE**

| Story Difficulty | Correct event | Omitted event | Inaccurate event | F - ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Simple | 9.5 | 5.7 | 6.1 | 20.37 |
| Difficult | 8.7 | 4.9 | 5.2 | 43.97 |

**Table -2- The Differences in the Events Correct, Omitted and Inaccurate Recalledf From the Simple Story by the Male and Female Students**

| Sex | Correct Event | Omitted Event | Inaccurate Event |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 8. 75 | 4.95 | 4.95 |
| Female | 8.7 | 4.85 | 5.5 |
| P – Value | P > o.1 | P > o.1 | P > o.1 |

The classification of the two stories is done according to the degree of difficulty which is determined by the total number of propositions included in each story and by the number of propositions included in each element of their structure. The first story is considered as simple because it includes 18 propositions with (1-4) propositions in each of its structural elements, whereas the second story is difficult because it includes (21) propositions

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with 2-7 propositions in each of its structural elements.A significant difference is found for the inaccurate events ($p > 0.01$ & $p < 0.05$) used in the recall of the difficult story by both sexes. The inaccurate events used in the recall of the male students are less than those used in the recall of the female students.

**Table -3- The Differences in the Events Correct, Omitted and Inaccurate Recalled From the Difficult Story by the Male and Female Students**.

| Sex | Correct Event | Omitted Event | Inaccurate Event |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 8.75 | 4.95 | 4.95 |
| Female | 8.7 | 4.85 | 5.5 |
| P- value | $P > 0.1$ | $P > 0.1$ | $P > 0.01$ & $p < 0.05$ |

Another application of a paired t – test,  as far as the use of the above three kinds of events is concerned,aims at showing whether difficulty affects the recall of the sample of IUSE or not. Results indicate the significant main effect for difficulty on the events correct ($p < 0.01$) and inaccurate ($p < 0.01$).

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Table -4- The Effect of Difficulty on the Recall of the Sample of IUSE In Terms of the Correct, Omitted and Inaccurate Events

| Story Difficulty | Correct Event | Omitted Event | Inaccurate Event |
|---|---|---|---|
| Simple | 9.45 | 5.67 | 6.07 |
| Difficult | 8.73 | 4.90 | 5.22 |
| P - Value | P< 0.01 | p>0.01 | P<0.01 |

A paired t-test is used to show whether or not language proficiency affects recall in terms of the correct, omitted and inaccurate events. Such effect as the results indicate is proved to be valid in terms of the correct (p > 0. 05 & p < 0.1) recalled from the simple story.

Table – 5 – The Effect of Language Proficiency on the Recall of the Simple Story in Terms Of the Correct, Omitted and Inaccurate Events

| Stage | Correct Event | Omitted Event | Inaccurate Event |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4th year | 9. 48 | 5.67 | 6.07 |
| 1st year | 8.3 | 6.65 | 6.3 |
| P. Value | P < 0.01 | P > 0.05 | P > 0.01 |

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| | | P < 0.1 | P <0.05 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

Concerning the recall of the difficult story, results of the implementation of a paired t-test prove that there are significant differences between the two groups of students on the correct and inaccurate events ($p > 0.05$ & $p > 0.1$), but such differences are insignificant in terms of the omitted events ($p > 0.1$).

## Results Discussion

The recall of IUSE includes a high percentage of correct events, yet this percentage is considered small in comparison with the original stories. Inaccuracy and omission are the two features that were recognized in the recall of those students. Inaccurate events are those that do not preserve the original meaning of the story as in the following example that was taken from the recall of the simple story by one of the students.

" one day William wanted to marry her and he went to the brother' house to ask her hand."

So the proposition " he went to the brother's house to asked her husband " is judged to be inaccurate because it does not maintain the original meaning of the story which says that William went to Elizabeth's parents' house rather than her brother's house. These features (inaccuracy and omission) in turn, gives the impression that such a recall is somehow poor.

In the analysis of story recalling,there is a wide range of changes produced by students represented by the addition of certain implied causal connectives, in addition to the changing and substitution of certain other information, This can be attributed to the variety of social issues handled by the two stories of which students have a prior knowledge that allows them to

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criticize or to elaborate on certain parts of those stories and to give their view point.

In connection to the aforementioned information, it was found that IUSE are accurate in detecting implied causal connectives in their recall of the two stories. On the other hand, it was found that very few students (three or four) succeeded in interpreting and discussing certain details throughout the accurate changes and substitutions they made to the content of the two stories beside the addition of certain implied details and connectives.

The analysis of this study have provided evidence that when stories are recalled certain changes and modifications take place due to specific structural and psychological reasons. This study indicates that the changes referred to above appear even when foreign learners of English recall stories in that language. This consequently supports the view that story structure and story recall patterns are universal.

Stories can be a valuable means in teaching English as a foreign Language. This is because they provide foreign learners of English with the freedom to modify and change (within the constraint of the gist of the story) certain linguistic and thematic parts when asked to recall them beside the role they play in the development of foreign language skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading). Stories

are also important in this respect because of the role they play in helping foreign language teachers to uncover the points of strength in the students' production to be emphasized and the points of weakness to be remedied.

The results of this study indicate that sex plays a role in story recalling. This might subsequently suggest that it plays a role in memory. The male students concerning the recall of sentence elements produced more correct

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events than the females. Male students produce more correct events constituting the consequence than the females.

The study shows the validity of the view point that story difficulty plays a role in affecting recalling. The effect of difficulty is salient only in terms of the correct event recall, but such an effect is not clear in terms of the inaccurate events recalled by the same students.In other words, the correct and inaccurate events decreased with the increase in difficulty.

It appears also that language proficiency greatly influence the recall of stories in a foreign language. The fourth year students used more correct events and less inaccurate ones than the first year students in their recall of the two stories.

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