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Culturally Responsive Listening Pedagogy: Using Pakistani Folk Tales to Enhance ESL Vocabulary



Muhammad Tayyab Mumtaz

Mphil Scholar in English Linguistics, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad
tayyabmumtaz75@gmail.com

Dr. Zahra Rubab

Assistant Prof, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus Faisalabad
zahra.rubab@riphahfsd.edu.pk

Abstract

This study examined whether culturally familiar Pakistani folk tales improve vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension among ESL learners. A quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test design was used with 60 FSc- and BS-level learners at Government Graduate College Jhang. Thirty learners formed the experimental group and received listening instruction through the folk tales Heer Ranjha and Saif-ul-Malook, while 30 learners in the control group used traditional listening materials. Each group completed pre-tests and post-tests containing multiple-choice, vocabulary, and short-answer items. The experimental group's composite listening score increased from $M = 16.05$ ($SD = 1.97$) to $M = 20.97$ ($SD = 1.60$), $t(29) = 21.85$, $p < .001$. Its vocabulary score increased from $M = 5.17$ ($SD = 0.95$) to $M = 7.37$ ($SD = 0.83$), $t(29) = 11.60$, $p < .001$. The control group showed no statistically significant improvement in either outcome. The findings indicate that culturally familiar narratives can provide meaningful context for vocabulary and support listening comprehension. Because the supplied dataset did not contain coded questionnaire or observation results, classroom engagement could not be tested statistically.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, Pakistani folk tales, ESL listening, vocabulary acquisition, schema theory

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that listening comprehension is a basic skill in the acquisition of L2. Frequent problems that ESL learners encounter when dealing with traditional listening tasks are their difficulty in understanding what they are hearing when unfamiliar words are used, accents and cultural phrases are present. Students often have trouble when listening to a text because the content of the listening activity is disconnected from the listener's culture and Community of Learning.

Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes on the basis of learners' culture experiences/identities for effective teaching. Folk tales play a significant role in the context of the Pakistani ESL in terms of cultural knowledge, moral values and linguistic richness. The story content is known to many learners, and can assist in natural understandings of vocabulary and meaning while listening to these stories.

The narratives of folk tales in Pakistan can be used as good reading resources, giving learners authentic and attractive listening/literary texts for

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engaging in active learning process. Listening to stories which are linked to their own culture could boost learners' confidence and motivation, which in turn would positively affect their vocabulary acquisition, and listening comprehension.

The present study examines the effectiveness of folk tales to use culturally responsive listening instructional materials for ESL learners as compared to traditional-text based listening instruction.

2. Purpose of the Research

This study aims at investigating the contribution of Pakistani folk tales in improving vocabulary learning and listening ability of ESL students. The object of the research is to find out if culturally familiar listening materials can improve language learning outcome as compared to traditional listening materials in learning language.

3. Research Questions

Which is the most beneficial in the activities of acquiring words: Pakistani folk stories or the traditional listening activity for acquiring words in English language teaching for ESL learners?

How does the use of the culturally familiar folk tales influence the listening comprehension and engagement of ESL learners in the classroom?

4. Importance of the Research

This research is significant, as it put into focus the significance of culturally responsive teaching in ESL experience. The result may assist teachers in their knowledge of how local materials for teaching might enhance vocabulary and listening comprehension.

The research is also relevant to curriculum developers and policymakers who want to learn how to create learner-centred and culturally-relevant more ESL content. The use of Pakistani folklore in ESL classes can be helpful in creating a more inclusive classroom in which students feel they are a part of classes.

Moreover, the research also helps in the conservation and teaching of Pakistani folk culture and literature as it is utilized in learning the language. It also might spur further research into pedagogies of cultural responsiveness in other educational settings.

5. Literature Review

In second-language listening cultural relevance, background knowledge and narrative structure go beyond a certain degree. Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that a learner's identity or previous experiences, without being a barrier to achieving learning, are a resource helpful for tackling that learning. In terms of effectiveness of teaching, Gay (2018) posits

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that it will be more effective if content, examples, communication, and classroom relationships are related to learners' cultural knowledge. It can allow students in a language classroom to devote more mental energy to the new context and less to understanding the situation, so that they are able to concentrate more on the focus of language learning. Roessingh (2020) used the culturally responsive pedagogy approach to academic vocabulary instruction and demonstrated how target words can be clustered into conducive, thematic context for teaching. The study is relevant in this study as it also looks into the folk tales giving a coherent theme, characters, actions and repeated ideas which can infer and retain new words in the story. Pairs of words are not taught alone, but are embedded in stories that are socially and/or emotionally familiar. In listening comprehension, it is particularly significant to be familiar with the topic. Ovilia and Addinna (2020) have reported that familiarity with a topic resulted in a greater discourse influence on listening comprehension than familiarity with the genre of a text. They conclude that listeners predict and identify information/content ideas, and link the verbal information to prior knowledge. Pakistani folk tales can thus aid understanding as learners are familiar with many folk-related themes, relationships, time and place setting and morals. Lee (2022) conducted a wide study on 277 samples from a number of research stories involving storytelling in ELL. Overall, the effect of storytelling was moderate and positive, and the highest amongst the outcomes areas was in vocabulary and attitude of learners. There is evidence to support the use of stories beyond enjoyment. Repeating texts, sequencing them, identifying text characters and emotions in the text can aid language processing and recall.

The result is in accordance with the findings of the research carried out in Pakistan. They conducted an experimental pre-test-post test study on 60 elementary school students from Pakistan, used short stories to enhance vocabulary learning, and enhanced learner interest, according to Bhatti et al. (2022). The results are similar both across the present study and across their comparative study, in that they show that incorporating vocabulary in the context of the narrative may benefit local ESL learners, even though the participants in their study were younger than those of the present study. Ginting et al. (2023) conducted a research on storytelling in EFL. They found that storytelling can reinforce receptive skills (listening, reading), as well as vocabulary, grammar, speaking, imagination, and creativity abilities in writing. In their review, they also observed the possibility for varying effectiveness for different learners and contexts. This point is backing the purpose of context-specific studies to be conducted such as with Pakistani learners, or even

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dealing with Pakistani stories. The application of stories for improving VOCABULARY FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (EELLs) in Higher Education was explored by Marino 2024. The focus is on the importance of stories providing memorable human context for learning vocabulary and opening up a variety of ways for different learners to experience learning. This is connected directly to culturally responsive listening as the significance of a story is related to the language as well as the personal and cultural connections it evokes. In 2024, Singh and Alshammari reviewed the pedagogical use of Hakawati – the storytelling tradition in the Palestinian context. They found that culturally relevant storytelling helps to improve listening, speaking, fluency, retention, critical thinking and empathy, as well as culturally awareness. Their work is even more interesting because it is an example of how one can make use of the local tradition of stories for language instruction without altering its culture. This is also in line with recent experiments done in Pakistan. Akram et al. (2025) investigated the effectiveness of storytelling approach with the traditional approach with ESL secondary level learners. Significantly greater vocabulary achievement and vocabulary recall was observed by their experimental group and slight change in vocabulary recall was observed by their control group. Similarly, Farooq et al. (2025) investigated digital stories in ELT multilingual classrooms in Pakistan through an experimental-contingent design and reported that providing the context of a story in the digital format would help students maintain their attained vocabulary and to engage in classroom learning. Reid and Clark (2026) researched application of storytelling to the bilingual learners learning English as a third language. Within 16 lessons, the learners underwent interactive story activities including: vocabulary preparation, dramatisation, drawing and character description. The authors found that there was an improvement in vocabulary recall, pronunciation, participation and motivation. While the context of the setting is different from Pakistan, the results reveal that the greatest usefulness of storytelling is that of active processing and appropriation of the story by learners. Most studies have confirmed three tenets that can be summarized as follow: First, culturally-relevant content engages previous knowledge. Vocabulary and spoken language are introduced and reinforced in a context of the story, which is the second of the two points. Third, with regard to the stories, interactions might lead to increased attention and willingness to use English. But, there is little quantitative studies related to Pakistani folk tales as listening topics at the lower levels (Fsc & BS). The present research investigates this lacuna by conducting a controlled study that involves comparison of two. The present

study aims to fill this gap by a controlled research with Heer Ranjha and Saif-ul-Malook.

6. Theoretical Framework

Our research is grounded in three interrelated perspectives – culturally responsive pedagogy, schema theory, and sociocultural theory. An explanation of culturally responsive pedagogy and why the learner's knowledge of his or her culture should be incorporated into teaching. Schema theory provides an understanding of how helpful prior knowledge is to comprehending new texts. In this theory, the interaction between people and between the teacher and the learner, their guidance, and meaning making together is a key way a language develops for the learner.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, according to author Gay (2018) urges that education integrate to the classroom the academic content with that of their learners' culture. In this study folk tales from Pakistan are used in a culturally relevant way. Help learners to associate the English language input to the concepts that they already have in their minds is expected of their characters, values, setting, and social relationships.

In schema theory comprehension is an active process and the creation of new schemas in terms of their organized background knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980). Learners can predict events and draw out meanings when listening to familiar stories, even when there are unfamiliar English vocabulary. This lightens the load of having to see the whole picture and increases the space for word and vocal parts.

According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, learning happens when people interact and are given assistance. Retelling, discussing with peers, studying words in a folk-tale lesson may contain teacher's prompting, words previewing and questions. These activities transition listening from passively listening to being a partner participant. The framework thus suggests that culturally familiar stories should help develop vocabulary and listening skills automatically, due to the prior knowledge developed already in readers, the meaningful context created by the stories themselves, and the social interaction that resides between them and their reader.

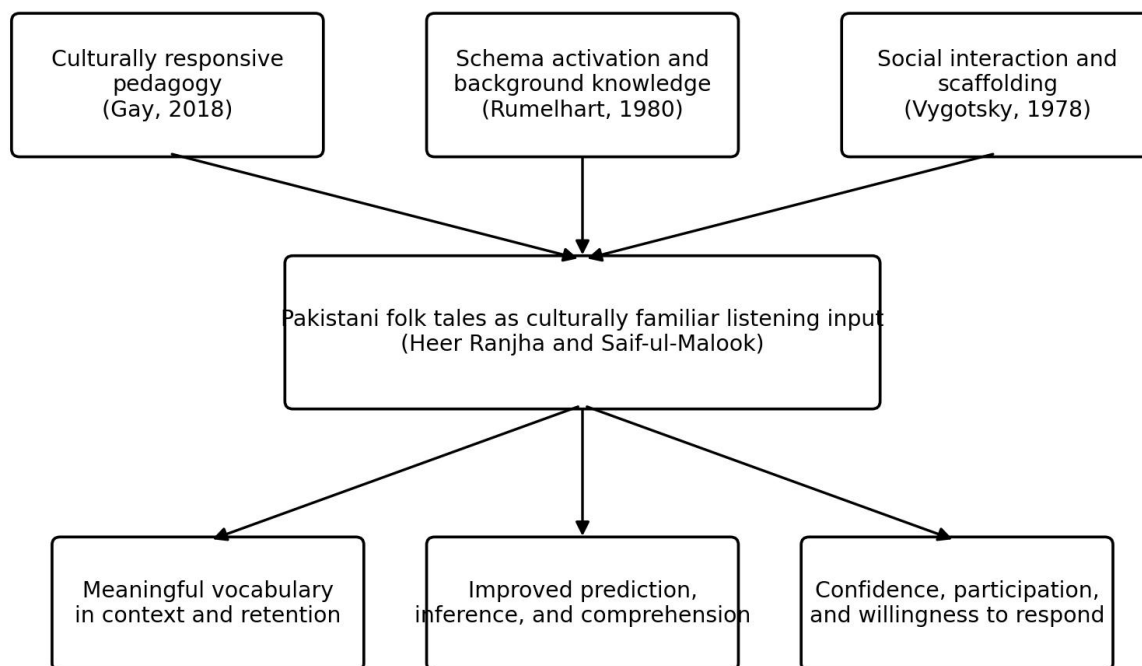


Figure 1. Theoretical framework connecting culturally familiar stories with vocabulary, listening comprehension, and engagement.

7. Research Methodology

The research design of this study was quantitative quasi-experimental of pre test – post test control group. A quasi-experimental design seemed called for because of the comparison of intact groups of learners in an educational context. Pre-test and post-test before and after the four week teaching period was conducted for both groups. This major dependent variable was listening material, for the experimental group, it was listening of Pakistani folk tales and for the control group, it was listening of traditional ESL listening materials.

Table 1. Summary of the Research Design

Group	n	Pre-test	Instruction	Post-test
Experimental	30	Vocabulary and listening	Pakistani folk tales	Vocabulary and listening
Control	30	Vocabulary and listening	Traditional listening materials	Vocabulary and listening

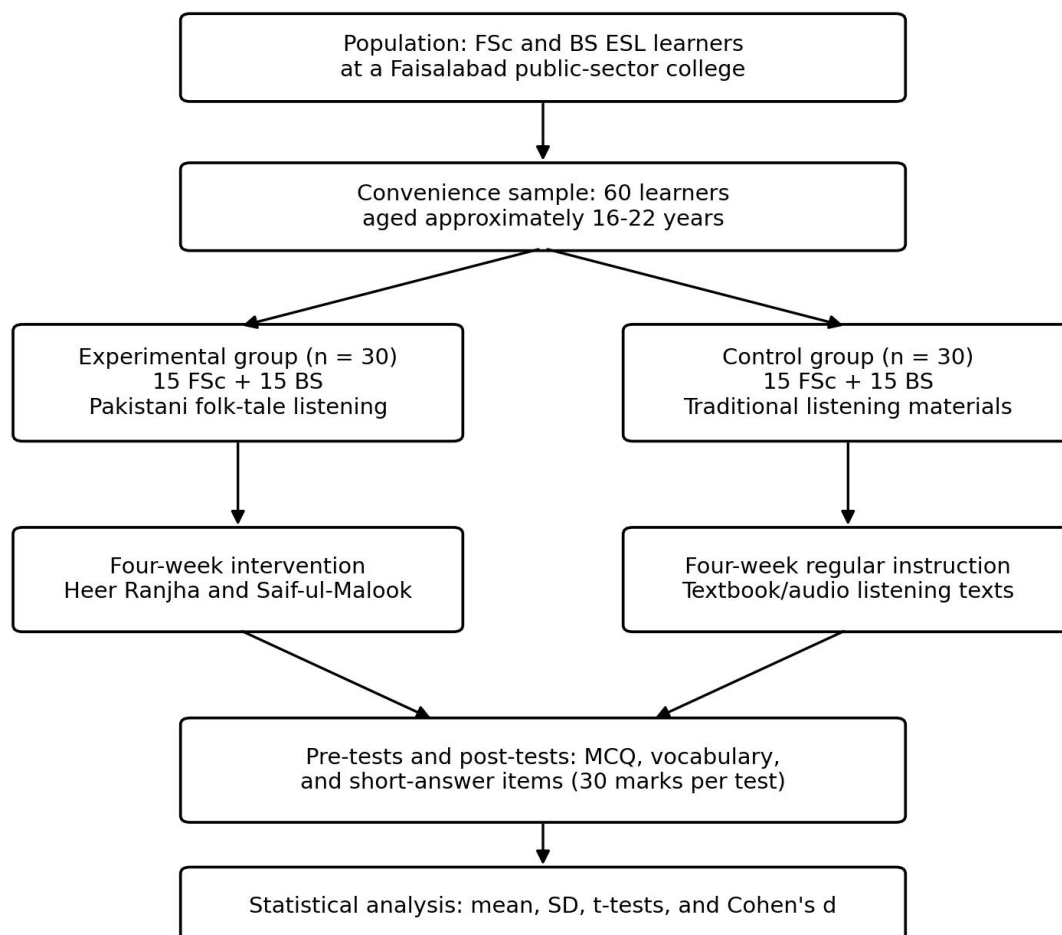


Figure 2. Quantitative quasi-experimental procedure used in the study.

8. Research Site and Population

The entire study has been carried out on the Government Graduate College Jhang. The target audience were the second language learners of English from FSc and BS courses. Approximate age of participants were around 16-22 years old, late secondary and undergraduate.

9. Sample Size and Sampling

The number of learners included is a convenience sample of 60 learners. The number of 30 learners were placed in the experimental group and 30 in control group. There were 15 learners in each group: 15 FSc and 15 BS learners. This even distribution enabled the intervention to be evaluated between the two education levels.

Table 2. Participant Distribution

Educational level	Experimental group	Control group	Total
FSc	15	15	30
BS	15	15	30
Total	30	30	60

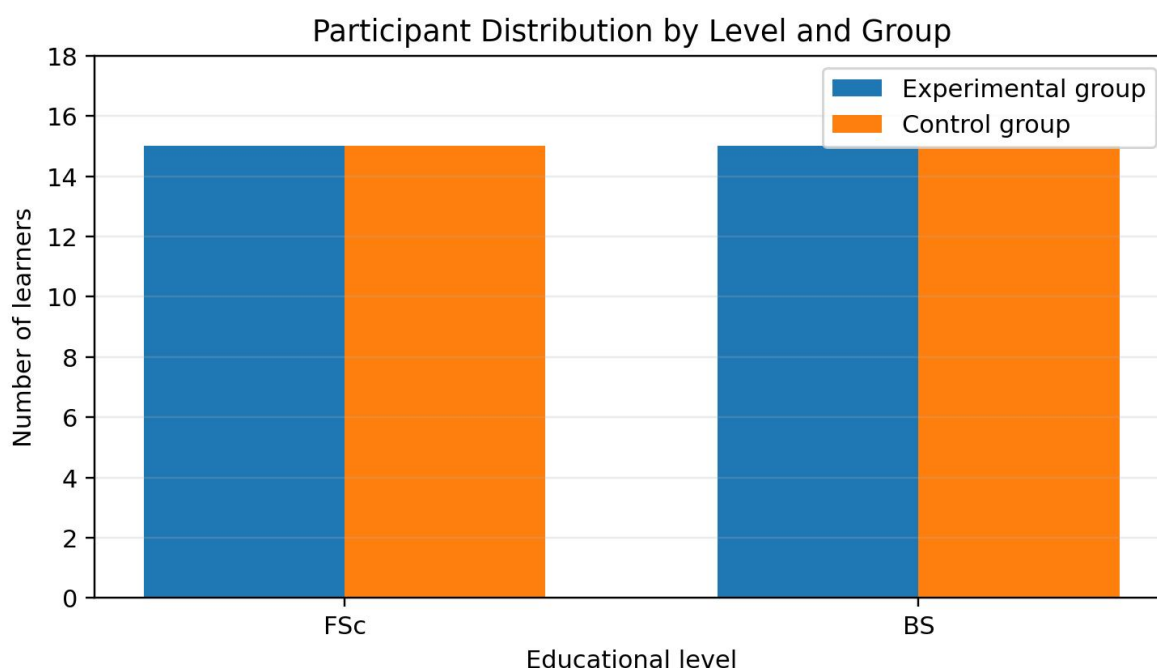


Figure 3. Distribution of FSc and BS learners across the experimental and control groups.

10. Instructional Materials

The experimental group listened English translation of two popular folk stories in Pakistan 'Heer Ranjha' and 'Saif-ul-Malook'. The stories were used as the focal point for listening input and the lessons were centered around vocabulary in context, prediction, comprehension questions and discussion of what was happening. The control group was put into the control group and received ordinary listening instruction by relying on textbook and audio instructions. A group and B group studied for four weeks.

11. Data-Collection Instrument

There were pre-test and post-test scores given for each of the folk-tale units in the quantitative data. The tests required 30 marks each and consisted of three 3 part questions worth 10 marks; multiple choice questions (Q1), vocabulary questions (Q2) and comprehension questions (Q3) questioning short answers. The total score out of 30, obtained by recording what the

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students say, was considered as the total outcome of listening-comprehension. Specific vocabulary outcome was taken as the Q2 (out of 10) score. To carry out overall analysis, every learner's scores were taken as an average of his/her score obtained at Heer Ranjha and Saif-ul-Malook.

There were also observation sheets and questionnaires for student feedback in the original research plan. But the provided data input were not coded observation and questionnaires. It was therefore not investigated statistically or numerical engagement results made.

12. Research Procedure

- The pre-test was given prior to the instructional period to both groups.
- Experimental group members had listening lessons regarding Heer Ranjha and Saif-ul-Malook.
- Conventional listening instruction was given to the students who were assigned to the control group, who were taught through listening exercises from textbooks and listening tapes.
- All groups took the same post test four weeks later.
- Educational level, story, group and testing time were entered as score variables.

13. Data Analysis

Ancillary software like Microsoft Excel, SPSS was used for analysis of the data; descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used. Means and standard deviations are summarized by pre test and gain scores, and post test scores. "Change" within each group was analyzed by paired-samples t-tests. Due to the non-same variances of each group, Welch independent-samples t-tests were used to compare the gain scores for each group. The size of the between group difference was computed using Cohen's d. The significance level for the statistical analyses was .05. The interpretation was based on the gain score since the groups were not completely matched at baseline on the composite listening measure.

14. Results and Interpretation

The scores are reported for the composite listening-comprehension and vocabulary scores, both with a maximum of 30 points possible. The composite score was the mean of each learner's scores for both the two story units. In addition, the vocabulary score was also the average of the Q2 component in both units.

Table 3. Pre-test and Post-test Results by Group

Outcome	Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post- test M (SD)	Gain M (SD)	Paired t	p
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Outcome	Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Gain M (SD)	Paired t	p
Composite listening /30	Experimental	16.05 (1.97)	20.97 (1.60)	4.92 (1.23)	21.85	< .001
Composite listening /30	Control	14.50 (1.62)	13.68 (2.10)	-0.82 (2.71)	-1.65	.109
Vocabulary /10	Experimental	5.17 (0.95)	7.37 (0.83)	2.20 (1.04)	11.60	< .001
Vocabulary /10	Control	4.67 (1.09)	4.65 (1.31)	-0.02 (1.34)	-0.07	.946

The experimental group's composite listening mean increased by 4.92 points, from 16.05 to 20.97. This increase was statistically significant, $t(29) = 21.85$, $p < .001$. In contrast, the control group's mean changed from 14.50 to 13.68, and this change was not statistically significant, $t(29) = -1.65$, $p = .109$. Figure 4 shows the clear pre-test-post-test difference between the groups.

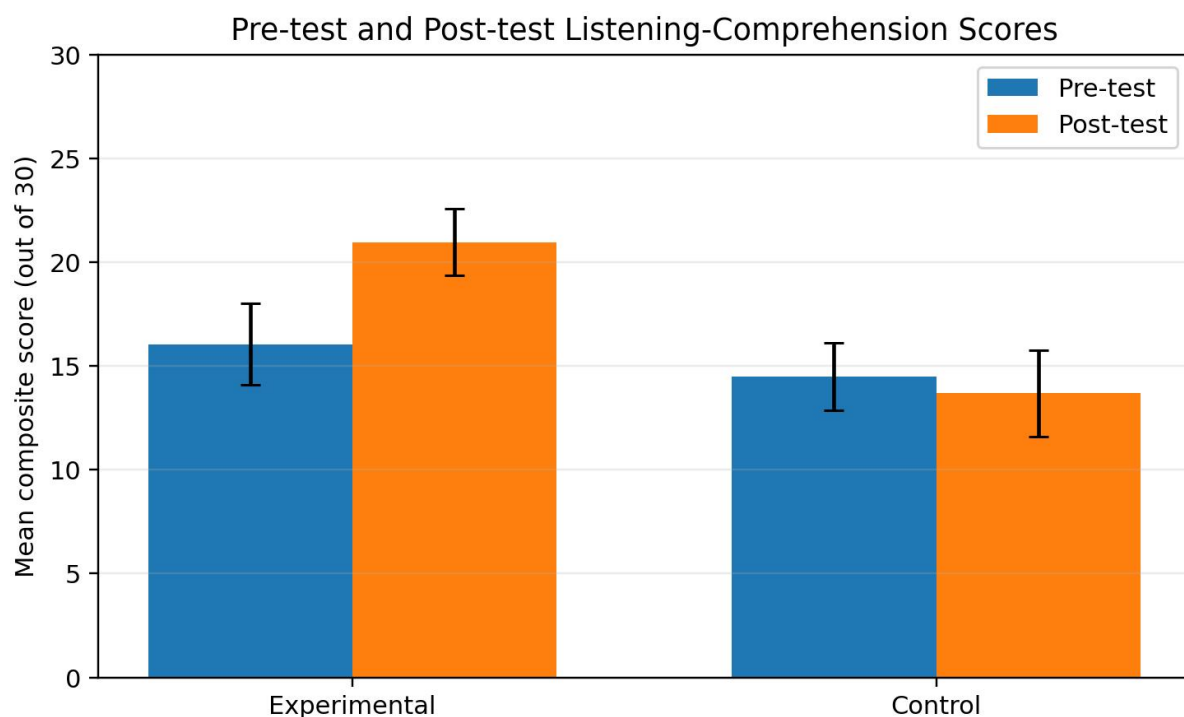


Figure 4. Mean composite listening-comprehension scores. Error bars represent one standard deviation.

Vocabulary showed the same general pattern. The experimental group's mean increased by 2.20 points, from 5.17 to 7.37, $t(29) = 11.60$, $p < .001$. The control group's vocabulary mean remained almost unchanged, moving from

4.67 to 4.65, $t(29) = -0.07$, $p = .946$. Figure 5 illustrates this result.

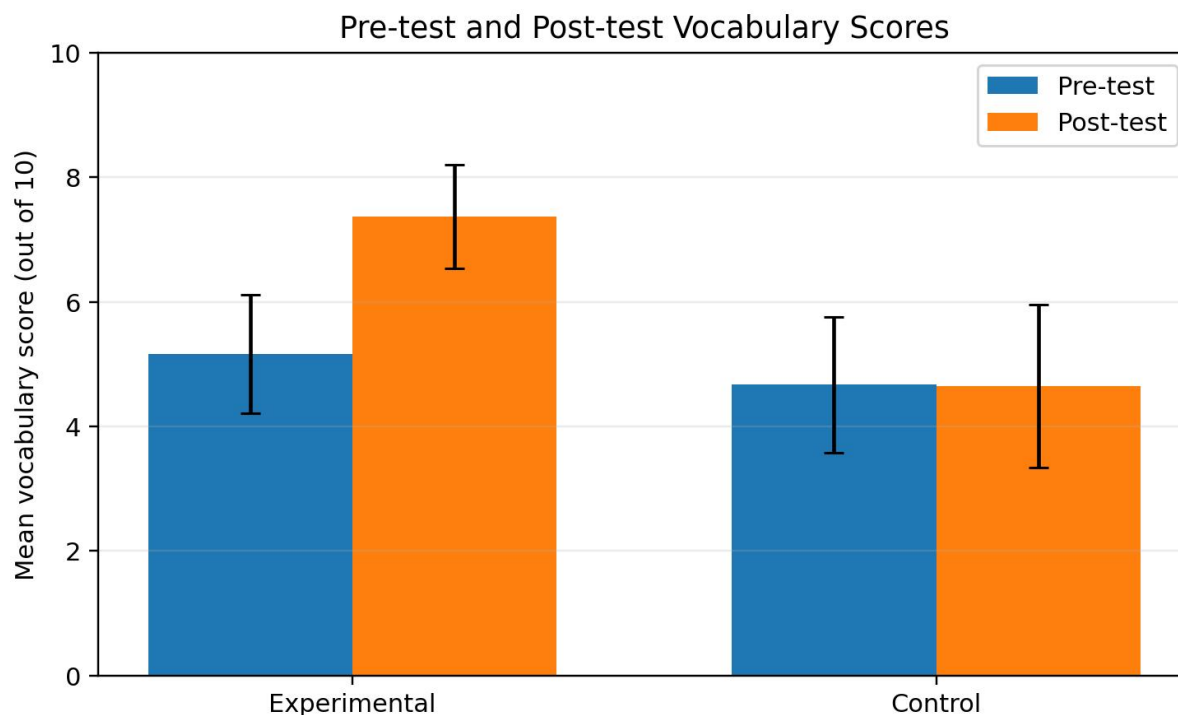


Figure 5. Mean vocabulary scores. Error bars represent one standard deviation.

Table 4. Between-Group Comparison of Gain Scores

Outcome	Experimental gain M (SD)	Control gain M (SD)	Welch t (df)	p	Cohen's d
Composite listening /30	4.92 (1.23)	-0.82 (2.71)	10.56 (40.54)	< .001	2.73
Vocabulary /10	2.20 (1.04)	-0.02 (1.34)	7.17 (54.69)	< .001	1.85

The gain-score comparison confirmed that the experimental group improved more than the control group. The difference in composite listening gains was statistically significant, $t(40.54) = 10.56$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size ($d = 2.73$). The vocabulary gain difference was also significant, $t(54.69) = 7.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.85$.

Table 5. Story-Specific Composite Listening Scores

Story	Group	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Mean gain
Heer Ranjha	Experimental	17.77	21.57	3.80
Heer Ranjha	Control	14.73	13.10	-1.63
Saif-ul-Malook	Experimental	14.33	20.37	6.03

Story	Group	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Mean gain
Saif-ul-Malook	Control	14.27	14.27	0.00

Experimental patient-group showed increased improvement in both stories. Both Heer Ranjha and Saif-ul-Malook had an average increase of 3.80 points and 6.03 points respectively. This is also being attributed to the smaller pre-test mark for the unit which was attained by Saif-ul-Malook, thus giving the student the opportunity for a larger post-test mark. There was a drop of 1.63 point in the control group on Heer Ranjha and no change in the overall score in Saif-ul-Malook.

The differences between the experimental groups and the control group scores on the composite listening mean was significantly larger at the baseline compare with after the treatment, $t(55.93) = 3.33$, $p = .002$. There was no statistically significant difference between the vocabulary baseline difference; $t(56.89) = 1.89$, $p = .064$. Therefore, the gains scores, which are markedly different because of the substantially different pre and post tests, are the best evidence.

The numerical data that are available provide the answers to the vocabulary and listening-comprehension parts of the research questions. They don't offer coded observation and questionnaire scores, therefore the study cannot make a statistically supported statement regarding the engagement in classroom. Future research is needed to explore engagement by using an adequately reported scale, observation checklist and/or interviews or focus groups.

15. Discussion

This was the first research question which was how the Pakistani's folk tales help in expanding the vocabulary of the learners in relation to traditional listening material. The experimental group made an average of 2.20 points more on the 10 point vocabulary item, whereas the control group has made very little improvement. Vocabulary gains statistically significantly differed by between 4 and 10 points from which was very large. This finding indicates that the context and memory of new words was increased with the folk-tale lessons.

The outcome is in line with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy. Words are not given to learners as single units but within familiar contexts, settings, feelings and events. When no one is singled out to be a "new" character, then the general situation can be used to determine the meaning of a word. Lots of recycling of words also happens naturally due to frequent

recitations of characters and actions. This interpretation resonates well with that of Roessingh (2020), in which he spoke for the importance of vocabulary teaching for the sake of context, and also with that of Marino (2024), who stated that stories should be personally meaningful in vocabulary instruction.

The result also agrees very well with the recent experimental studies. The authors, Bhatti et al., (2022) discovered that short stories were effective in terms of vocabulary learning for the Pakistani learners. The students who were writing stories had language achievement and language recall that was better than in the traditional-instruction group, according to Akram, et al (2025). In line with this, vocabulary was one of the most robust findings of a story presentation, as found by Lee (2022) in his meta-analysis. The present study contributes to this evidence by having used the folk narratives of the Pakistani society with both FSc and BS learners.

The second research question was related to listening comprehension and class participation. The composite listening scores indicate good gains for experimental group. Students showed better knowledge on multiple-choice, the vocabulary and short-answers sections when combined together which shows better understanding of the vocabulary and overall story meaning. This wasn't replicated in the control group as well.

The meaning of it is easy to understand according to schema theory. If the learners are familiar with the pattern of a story, they will be able to anticipate what is going to happen in the story, identify roles of characters and complete incomplete information by adding appropriate words from the existing information in the story. This frees up time and energies to attend to the english language, sentences and points. According to Owlia and Addina (2020), familiarity with topics predicted the amount of listening comprehension, and Singh and Alshammari (2024) explained the importance of using culturally-based storytelling to encourage listening and speaking.

The increase in the gain was more for Saif-ul-Malook than Heer Ranjha. It is not always a sign of the superiority of the story that appears to have two differing versions. The mean of the Saif-ul-Malook experimental pre-test was lower which allowed the learners ample scope for improvement. However, another factor that might affect performance is the variation in length of story, vocabulary difficulty, narration or prior familiarity with the story. Future studies should require more careful recording and standardization of the test forms, eliminating the effect of cultural familiarity from that of the test item difficulty.

The study also sought to explore students' engagement in the classroom. This is echoed by many studies on storytelling, such as those by Ginting et al. (2023), Farooq et al. (2025), and Reid and Clark (2026), which have indicated

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high levels of participation and motivation in learning. However, this data set did not provide any engagement responses that were coded. As such there is a theoretical basis for using engagement, though not directly provided by the numerical evidence given, which would indicate that it is theoretically possible to use it to achieve academic success; however, it has been found in practice in the previous studies.

16. Educational Implications

Results are applicable to the ESL teacher. English Listening for Local Stories include repeated listening, short answer questions, retelling, stories can be recorded or read aloud, sequencing, pre-listening vocabulary, and discussion. The cultural component(s) should enhance and not be the curriculum in its place. The teachers should choose target words, vary the difficulty and rate of tape recording, and ensure that the skills assessed in pre-test and post test are the same.

Local stories can be integrated into the programme, with international content. This does NOT mean that learners should listen to only familiar material. Before learners start listening to less familiar topics from around the world, familiar tales might be helpful to prepare their listening confidence and strategies. In this way, culturally relevant texts can be a scaffold that can facilitate broader English.

17. Limitations

As the sample with limited population of 60 Fishermen's children belonging to one institution of Faisalabad can not be extended or generalized to all Pakistani ESL learners. The convenience sampling and intact groups decreased experimental control. There was a high mean composite listening score for the experimental group that did not alter the gain score comparison between the groups, which inclined even more for the experimental group. The intervention time was limited to 4 weeks and two folk tales were used. However, classroom engagement could not be statistically analyzed due to the lack of classroom observation and/or questionnaire data. The spreadsheet recorded sections of total and percentage of the test and these were analyzed as the final score on the test.

18. Conclusion

Based on this study, the author is convinced that folk tales are suitable culturally responsible teaching and learning materials for ESL vocabulary and listening classes in Pakistan. The vocabulary and composite listening-comprehension scores were increased in substantial quantities and there was statistically significant growth in both the vocabulary and composite listening-comprehension scores for the learners taught through Heer Ranjha and Saif-

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ul-Malook. There was not enough difference between those taught by listening to the traditional materials and their peers.

The results point towards the viability of using cultural familiarity as a learning tool. Learners make connections between new English vocabulary and their preexisting knowledge, comprehend the meaning of events being expressed orally and extract meaning from context by using familiar stories. The findings are consistent with those of culturally responsive pedagogy, schema theory, and previous studies on storytelling.

Because the data supplied did not include coded engagement data, the study does not have enough numbers to draw conclusions regarding the improvement of classroom engagement. More research in the future should employ measures of validated engagement questionnaires, more than one institution, a longer treatment window, and investigate the delayed retention of the vocabulary. It should also make comparisons between stories of familiar and unfamiliar ones of comparable language difficulty. Despite the drawbacks, the present results in great confidence support the use of selected Pakistani folk tales in ESL listening and vocabulary classes.

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