

**Use of fairy tales to enhance ESL pupils' vocabulary skills:  
A Case Study**

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**Abstract**

Literacy is often said to be the foundation of all learning. One way to enhance elementary pupils' English language vocabulary is through the employment of fairy tales in the ESL classroom. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of fairy tales on pupils' vocabulary. The study was set in a public national type primary school located in Kota Damansara, Malaysia. The study employed a quasi-experimental research design which involved an intact Year 5 ESL classroom of twenty-one (21) pupils and one TESL teacher. Data were collected through a mixed-method approach which employed both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. The instruments included pre and post vocabulary tests, a feedback sheet, and semi-structured interviews. The pupils were exposed to three treatments for three months to determine if they displayed improvement after being introduced to fairy tales. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference in the pupils' pre and post vocabulary test scores indicating that fairy tales have a positive effect on pupils' vocabulary learning. The findings imply that language instructors may consider employing interesting and engaging fairy tales to enhance

ESL pupils' vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Fairy Tales, Vocabulary, Year 5 ESL classroom, Pre and Post Test, Case Study

## **1. Introduction**

Literacy among young learners is the foundation of all learning. Possessing a wide vocabulary is important in learning English as a second language (ESL) as vocabulary is the building block that helps in developing all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Nation (2001), a leading vocabulary acquisition and language teaching methodology linguist researcher, stated that rich vocabulary not only enhances a learner's four basic language skills but more importantly gives learners the confidence to express their thoughts, ideas, and information accurately.

English Language is the second main language in Malaysia and much emphasis is placed on the language by the Ministry of Education as the importance of vocabulary building and it is also articulated in the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (2012-2025). However, the blueprint also records the deteriorating standard of English language proficiency by the Malaysian students. Moreover, poor English Language proficiency has also been the top five problems Malaysian graduates face since 2006. Based on the 2021 National Average Grade Report (GPN), the Education Minister of

Malaysia stated that the Malaysian students' performance level in their 2020 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) for the English language displayed a decline from the year 2019 to 2020. This has been further supported by many researchers and educators who have claimed that students in Malaysia have limited English language proficiency at a fundamental level as most students were still unable to speak or write basic English even after thirteen (13) years of learning the English language in Malaysian schools (Ni et al., 2020; Wang & Yamat, 2019; Misbah et al, 2017).

Ghabool et al. (2012) indicated that Malaysian students were lacking primary linguistic structures such as vocabulary that help students enhance their English language proficiency. The students' lack of vocabulary knowledge is like a crumbling tower made from a deck of cards. Without a strong foundation at the bottom of the tower which is, in this case, vocabulary knowledge, the rest of the cards cannot be strategically placed on top of one another which represents the other linguistic skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. Fundamental linguistic constructs such as vocabulary should be taught first from the early ages of childhood to establish students' strong foundation.

To teach something at a basic level, the teaching materials should also cater at the basic level. Many educators around the world have employed children's literature such as fairy tales to teach basic literacy skills like vocabulary and grammar parts in English, to adult and children ESL learners. This is because fairy tales use simple and repetitive words to explain a story. This allows the

students to remember words better and faster. Fairy tales also help with motivation to learn the English language as the stories have adventurous and fantasy elements that resonate with young learners. Students have much more fun learning, are encouraged to learn more words, and are a lot quicker at learning new words through fairy tales (Smith, 2019).

However, not much research has been done on using fairy tales to teach the English language in Malaysia. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of fairy tales to enhance children's vocabulary. Besides that, the study also explored both the pupils' and teacher's perception of employing fairy tales in the ESL classroom. Finally, the study examined the main challenges faced by the teacher in implementing fairy tales in the ESL classroom.

## **2. Literature Review**

The English language is one the most important and vastly used languages in the world and as such, it is important to equip children in Malaysia with the basic language skills in English as the language is required everywhere, from the education sector to workplaces. The level of English proficiency that is required also is increasingly higher as students migrate from primary, to secondary and to tertiary education. Many academic reading materials, exams, and teaching instructions are conducted in the English language at the tertiary level. A study found that university students vocabulary is also low (Madhubala, et al., 2015). As such, ESL learners need to be prepared well with basic English literacy to be able to understand instructions and the learning materials.

Most workplaces demand a high level of English proficiency as well as most correspondence and meetings need to be attended to in the target language (Rodrigo, 2017). Thus, it is very important to develop basic English literacy in children at an early age to prepare them for the far more challenging and demanding level of English language proficiency in their future.

Vocabulary is defined as all types of words (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2021) and it is considered to be the most integral part of learning any language because words are needed first before they can be accumulated to be structured into a sentence grammatically (Misbah et al, 2017). Vocabulary knowledge is thought to be more important than grammar for ESL learners because the lexicon holds more meaning in a context than grammar (Schmitt et al, 2011). Without proper grammatical structures, a context can still be understood but without proper vocabulary knowledge, the meaning of the context will be affected. Hence, an ESL learner would not be able to convey their message properly without adequate vocabulary knowledge even if they were equipped with ample grammar knowledge (Min, 2013).

Vocabulary knowledge is central to the development of other skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Susanto, 2016). The bigger the ESL learners' knowledge in vocabulary, the faster their ability to learn to read and speak in the target language. This is because learners would try to connect words that they are familiar with to construct a sentence. It also helps ESL learners to learn more new words which would allow

them to obtain new information (Rodrigo, 2017).

There are many methods of enhancing vocabulary knowledge with learners however according to Nation (2014), the most important principles to retain vocabulary knowledge were repetition and employing interesting and comprehensible written material. He also noted that ESL learners were able to learn twice as fast when easy and engaging materials were used to teach even with a short amount of time to teach compared to increasing time of teaching but with unengaging written materials.

Written materials such as fairy tales comprise abundant simple words and engaging storylines for easy comprehension for the ESL learners. Most fairy tales are short with repeated words and have simple sentence structures which allow learners to better grasp vocabulary and grammar structures. With fairy tales, as more vocabulary and grammar parts are picked up when reading, it will at the same time help improve writing skills as learners write what they have read. Fairy tales can also be used to improve listening and speaking skills as the stories were originally created as a part of storytelling. ESL learners are able to improve their English language proficiency with just the employment of fairy tales as a learning material (Smith, 2019).

Fairy tales are used as a teaching material in most part of the world for learning English as a second or foreign language. Mikešová (2006) from Pardubice of the Czech Republic conducted an experiment with fairy tales and has found that the pupils were able to show significant improvement in their vocabulary after only one intervention with

fairy tale. Based on the findings, 80 percent of the respondents agreed they enjoyed the stories and looked forward to learning more. Many other researchers believed that fairy tales are able to captivate learners' interest and motivate them to learn the English language at the same time. Thus, this finding shows that fairy tales are excellent teaching and learning material to enhance ESL learners' vocabulary.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The following section provides a brief background of the research methodology that was employed to conduct the study. It looked into aspects such as research design, the setting, population sample, the research instruments, and how data were collected and analysed.

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

This study adopted a quasi-experimental research design. The quasi-experimental research design is an empirical interventional study employed to evaluate the effect of an intervention based on a selected population without random assignment (Thomas, 2021). The research design particularly adopts the pre-test and post-test design where the dependent variable is put to test before and after an intervention.

This study was set in a public national type of primary school located in Section 7 at Kota Damansara. The main population was a Year 5 ESL intact classroom.

### ***3.2 Population Sample***

As mentioned, this study was conducted in a Year 5 ESL classroom. This intact ESL classroom comprised a total of twenty-one (21) pupils of mixed English language proficiency. These pupils have been learning English as a Second language (ESL) since Year 1 (seven years old). The samples for this study can be identified as three main samples – i.e., Sample A, Sample B and Sample C.

Sample A comprised all the twenty-one (21) pupils in the identified Year 5 ESL classroom. The 21 pupils were aged between ten and eleven and were of mixed abilities in regards to English language proficiency. All twenty-one (21) pupils who participated in the study were involved in the Pre and the Post Vocabulary Tests. Keeping in line with ethics in research, the anonymity of all pupils was maintained, and, in this study, they were referred based on alphabets ranging from A to U. This helped maintain confidentiality and disclosure of the pupils' identity and personal information.

Sample B was a sub-set of Sample A which comprised pupils who were selected for the semi-structured interview and feedback sheet. Sample B comprised six pupils and these pupils were chosen based on their English language proficiency. Sample B comprised two pupils with High English Proficiency (HEP), two pupils possessing Average English Proficiency (AEP), and two pupils with limited English Proficiency. These pupils were referred to as follows: as HEP1 (High English Proficiency Pupil 1). A pseudonym was given to each respondent for confidentiality

purposes; HEP2, AEP1, AEP2, LEP1 and LEP2. These six pupils in Sample B were chosen to provide their perspectives of fairy tales.

Finally, Sample C, involved a TESL teacher who teaches English to the participating Year 5 pupils in this study. The teacher worked collaboratively with the researcher to use the fairy tales in her ESL classroom., The teacher is referred to as Ms. Alice. She has been teaching English in the school for seven years. She was assigned the lower primary level to teach English when she first came to the school and was later required to teach the upper primary level two years later. Since then, she has been teaching the standard four and standard five pupils the English language. The teacher was involved in the semi-structured interview to obtain her perception of the implementation of fairy tales in the ESL classroom to enhance pupils' vocabulary skills.

### ***3.3 Research Instruments***

Data in this study were collected through a mixed-method approach employing both qualitative and quantitative research instruments. A three-pronged approach was employed, namely pre-and post-vocabulary tests including an intervention, feedback sheets and a semi-structured interview with the teacher.

In the study, the effect of the fairy tales on the Year 5 pupils' vocabulary was examined through a pre-and post-vocabulary test. The vocabulary test comprised a reading passage

with six questions on vocabulary. The reading passage was based on a traditional Malay story about 'Princess Saadong'. The interventions included pre-and post-test and treatments. The first treatment was a reading material based on the fairy tale 'Jack and the Bean Stalk'. The pre-and post-vocabulary test for the first intervention was a reading comprehension test on 'King Midas and the Golden Touch' with six questions. The second treatment was on the fairy tale 'The White Snake' and this was followed by a pre- and post-vocabulary test. The reading comprehension test was based on 'Lake Chini' with six questions. The third and final treatment was the fairy tale 'Cinderella' whilst the pre-and post-vocabulary test was a reading comprehension test based on passage on 'Cik Siti Wan Kembang' with six vocabulary based questions.

The second instrument employed was a feedback sheet. The main aim of the feedback sheets was to examine pupils' perceptions of the use of fairy tales in the ESL classroom. It consisted of four questions, three questions that required the respondents to choose an emoticon to state if they agree to the question and one (1) question required the respondents to write down their perspective. The three (3) emoticons that were presented were a happy emoticon that indicates 'yes', an emotionless emoticon that indicates 'maybe', and a sad emoticon that indicates 'no'.

The third instrument was the use of the semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted with the teacher that implemented the fairy tales in the ESL classroom, namely Ms. Alice. The main aim of the interview was to obtain the teacher's

perspectives on employing fairy tales in her ESL classrooms and the challenges she faced during the three (3) months of the intervention programme. The interview was divided into three main sections. Section A explored Ms. Alice's background. Section B on her perspective on the implementation of fairy tales to teach vocabulary and Section C on the challenges that she faced.

### ***3.4 Data Collection***

The data for the study were collected through three different methods. The first was the intervention with pre-and post-vocabulary tests (phase one), the second was the feedback sheets for the respondents (phase two), and third was the semi-structured interviews with the language teacher (phase three).

The first phase involved all twenty-one (21) pupils in Sample A. The pre vocabulary test based on a passage about 'Princess Saadong' was administered to the pupils at the beginning of the three (3) months of the treatment. The teacher did not discuss the information in the test with the pupils and their test papers were collected immediately after they were done. The pupils' scores from the pre vocabulary test were recorded right after.

For the next three months, the pupils underwent three interventions. Each intervention comprised a treatment (fairy tale) and a pre and post vocabulary test (reading comprehension with six questions) based on the fairy tale discussed. The pupils' scores for the pre-and post-vocabulary tests for each intervention were recorded. At the end of the third month, the same 'pre vocabulary test based on 'Princess Saadong' was administered again as a post

vocabulary test and the scores were obtained. A paired samples *t*-test was employed to determine if a significant difference was displayed between the overall pre and post vocabulary test.

The second phase was providing the respondents with a feedback form. The six (6) pupils who were identified in Sample B of this study provided their perspectives on learning through the use of fairy tales. They circled the emoticon for the first three (3) questions and wrote their thoughts on the last questions. The form was recollected to record the data.

The third phase involved a semi-structured interview with the language teacher who implemented the fairy tales in the ESL classroom. The teacher explained her perspectives and challenges faced throughout the 3 months of intervention.

### ***3.5 Data Analysis***

The first research question employed a quantitative research method. The pre and post vocabulary tests were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The percentage score was analyzed employing descriptive statistic while the paired sampled *t*-test was conducted employing inferential statistics. The feedback sheets adopted a qualitative research design with a descriptive analysis. Thematic analysis was employed for the semi-structured interviews.

## **4. Findings**

Research question one in this study examined the effect of fairy tales on Year 5 ESL pupils' vocabulary. Data to answer this question was obtained from the pre and post vocabulary tests. The

findings were analyzed through a paired sampled *t*-test as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Overall Pre and Post Vocabulary Test (n=21)*

<b>Overall Pair</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Pre-Test	7.143	9.960	.000
Post Test	61.904	15.935	

*\*P<0.05*

Table 1 shows that the mean score for the pre vocabulary test was approximately 7% whilst the post vocabulary test scores stood at 62%. This indicates that there was a significant difference between the overall pre and post vocabulary test scores with a p value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ .

In summary, the post vocabulary test scores were significantly higher than the pre vocabulary test scores. The pupils showed improvement in their scores before and after the interventions. The data shows that the treatment was effective. This shows that the use of fairy tales do have an effect on the Year 5 ESL pupil's vocabulary.

Further analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference with the pre and post vocabulary tests for each intervention. The findings for Intervention One is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Intervention One Pre and Post Vocabulary Test (n=21)*

<b>Pair 1</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Pre Test	93.651	20.733	.329
Post Test	96.031	18.184	

*\*P<0.05*

Table 2 displays that the mean score for the pre vocabulary test was slightly lower (93.7%) than the post vocabulary test (96%). The findings indicate that there was no significant difference between the pre and the post vocabulary test for intervention one as the *p*-value was  $0.329 > 0.05$ .

In summary, the data states that the pre vocabulary test scores were not significantly different from the post vocabulary test scores.

For Intervention Two, the findings are shown in Table 3 to identify if there was a significant difference between the pre and post vocabulary test for intervention two .

Table 3

*Intervention 2 Pre and Post Vocabulary Test (n=21)*

<b>Pair 2</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Pre Test	42.8419	24.48457	.000
Post Test	91.2700	13.55867	

*\*P<0.05*

The findings in Table 3 reveals that the mean score obtained for the pre vocabulary test was 42.8% and it was lower than the post vocabulary test which stood at 91.3%. This indicates that there was a significant difference between the pre and the post vocabulary test scores for Intervention Two with a *p*-value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ . In summary, the post vocabulary test scores were significantly higher than the pre vocabulary test scores for intervention two.

A similar in-depth analysis was conducted to evaluate if there was a significant difference between the pre and the post vocabulary test scores for Intervention Three. The findings are revealed in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Intervention 3 Pre and Post Vocabulary Test (n=21)*

<b>Pair 3</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Pre Test	17.461	14.410	.000
Post Test	82.540	22.031	

\* $P < 0.05$ 

From the data displayed in Table 4 it can again be seen that the mean score for the pre vocabulary test at 17.5% was much lower compared to the post vocabulary test which stood at 82.6%. Inferential statistics employing the t-test was conducted to see if the 65 % increase was a significant improvement. The results showed that there was as significant improvement between the pre and the post vocabulary test scores for intervention three (3) with a  $p$ -value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ .

In summary, the data revealed that the post vocabulary test scores were significantly higher than the pre vocabulary test scores for Intervention Three (3).

In concluding, the overall pre and post vocabulary test scores for the three inventions illustrate that though there was no no significant difference between pre and post tests for Intervention One, a significant difference indicating a significant improvement was recorded for Interventions Two and Three.

Research Question Two in this study examined the pupils' perception of fairy tales to enhance their vocabulary skills. Data were obtained with a feedback sheet from the pupils. The pupils

were given the feedback sheets to fill at the end of the case study. Responses to this question were obtained from six pupils (Sample B).

The feedback sheet showed that all respondents (100%) agreed that they do like to read fairy tales. With further probing as to why they favour the fairy tales, respondent HEP1 stated that he liked the fairy tales because he thought the characters were funny. Another respondent LEP6 added that she liked how the characters have magical powers and were able to live in a magical world. This finding indicates that the respondents favoured the humour and magical elements in the fairy tales.

This study comprised three (3) fairy tales, Jack and the Bean Stalk, The White Snake, and Cinderella. Out of the three (3), (50%) of the respondents claimed to have favoured Jack and the Bean Stalk while the other half (50%) liked Cinderella. Respondent HEP2 said that she liked Jack and the Bean Stalk because she thought that the main character 'Jack' was smart enough to fool the giant in the story. Respondent AEP4 also stated that he favoured Jack and the Bean Stalk because he liked 'Jack's' bravery to climb the beanstalk and to face the giant. On the other hand, respondent AEP3 stated that he liked Cinderella because he admired the 'Prince Charming's characteristics which were 'strong' and 'smart'. Respondent LEP5 also favoured Cinderella because she liked fantasy stories and that she liked Cinderella's princess attire.

In summary, it can be concluded that all (100%) respondents admitted to favour reading the fairy tales as they like

the moral values, characteristics, humour, and magical elements in the stories.

The third research question determined the teacher's perspective on employing fairy tales to enhance the pupils' vocabulary. The teacher stated that she has not used fairy tales to teach the pupils before however she has gotten the pupils to read some Malaysian folk lore.

On major theme from the interview sessions that emerged was a change in pupils' attitude towards learning English after the treatment based on three inventions, Ms. Alice admitted that a positive attitude change was observable within the pupils as they were more committed and engaged towards English language lessons especially when the lesson focused the lesson when fairy tales were used to teach vocabulary. She expressed that her 'pupils were often very excited whenever I told them that we were reading a new story today. . . their faces lit up and all eyes and ears would be on me. . . they also eagerly waited for the handout for the day.'

Another aspect or theme that emerged from the interview session was that the fairy tales in some way enhanced pupils' creativity. Ms. Alice highlighted that fairy tales have a lot of fantasy elements which can capture most pupils' attention. This allowed the pupils to be involved with the story and at the same time learn the language. She pointed out that fairy tales allowed the pupils to be imaginative and creative with the story. She said that since the story comes with fantasies, wonder, thrill, and magical features, it could influence the pupils to be creative as well.

Another positive aspect emphasized by Ms. Alice was that the integration of fairy tales helped to instill positive moral values among her pupils. She elaborated that fairy tales usually incorporate main characters with good personalities and positive moral values. She pointed out that these values can influence pupils to good positive behaviours and teach them to be kind to each other and do good deeds since the pupils admire the characteristic of the characters. Ms. Alice also added that her ESL classroom had experienced some bullying and vandalism. She highlighted that by exposing her pupils to fairy tales, she believes that the pupils could learn to respect and be nice to each other.

Besides enhancing their vocabulary skills, Ms. Alice stressed that the intervention of fairy tales into her ESL classroom her pupils had the opportunity to also improve their overall English Language. She witnessed this enhancement especially in terms of grammar. She elaborated that the many dialogues in role play activities and narrative writing in the fairy tales the pupils were exposed to good language and it enhanced the use of grammar items such as the past and the present tense.

Another theme that emerged from the interview session was the employment of interesting and engaging learning materials. Ms. Alice added that she was very comfortable employing the fairy tales in her ESL classroom as she was able to get help in interesting resource materials from the Internet especially You Tube. She emphasized these resource materials helped her bring music, drams, song, and many other fun interactive online activities into her otherwise traditional 'chalk and talk' classroom. She added that with help from Internet

resources she could download colorful pictures, flash cards, videos relating to the fairy tales . This also made her teaching and learning activities less time consuming as these were easily attainable.

All the above findings that emerged from the interview session with the teacher, indicate that the teacher believed that the pupils displayed improvement with their level of concentration when fairy tales were employed, and she found the teaching materials relating to fairy tales were easily attainable which makes the teaching and learning process run smoothly.

The fourth research question investigated the challenges that the teacher faced when using fairy tales to teach vocabulary. Ms. Alice stated that since the her Year 5 ESL classroom comprised pupils with mixed ability in terms of English language performance. Therefore, she was challenged to arrange for activities to cater to the differing needs and she found it took her time to adopt and adapt the fairy tales to ensure all pupils could understand the passages / stories.

The second challenge was the cultural background. Since most fairy tales originate from the west, the cultural element was a far cry from the local Malay and Malaysian culture. Therefore, words such as ‘castle’, ‘fairy god-mother’ ‘magic wand’ and ‘bean-stalk’ were a bit confusing especially for her ESL classroom with pupils of mixed abilities. Nevertheless, after some explaining with pictures and videos, the pupils were able to understand immediately.

The last challenge that Ms. Alice highlighted was the issue of time. She felt she experienced time constraints to only concentrate on developing their vocabulary as she also had to focus on other aspects of English Language such as grammar, sound system and writing. Besides that she had to complete her language syllabus and prepare her pupils for their standardized monthly and term examinations.

From the above discussion it can be seen that the teacher Ms. Alice had overall a positive opinion of fairy tales. She also added that fairy tales do have an effect on pupils' vocabulary development. She believes that fairy tales do contribute to pupils' improvement not only in the English language but also in creativity and instilling positive moral values. Even though the teacher faced some difficulties such as time constraints and preparing pupils for standardized examinations, she felt that it was worthwhile incorporating fairy tales as she witnessed several positive effects it had on her pupils including a positive attitude towards learning English.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to determine if fairy tales had an effect on Year 5 ESL pupils' vocabulary development. The findings of the study showed that fairy tales do have a significant effect on pupils' vocabulary skills. Besides that, the findings also revealed that pupils enjoyed learning through fairy tales and a majority indicated that would like to read more fairy tales in the future. Likewise, the language teacher also explained that the pupils displayed not only a positive attitude towards learning

English and they also enhanced their vocabulary knowledge and skills. She further explained that fairy tales were also easily adaptable in the lesson with easy access to learning resources on fairy tales from the internet. These findings were also similar to Mikešoá (2006) that children found fairy tales engaging and aided with vocabulary enhancement.

The findings of this study imply that the implementation of fairy tales should be viewed as a suitable instructional programme to enhance vocabulary skills. This study is however not without its limitations. The population sample of this study only involved only one intact ESL classroom. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the total population of primary ESL pupils. Nonetheless, despite its limitation, this study has shed some light on employing fairy tales as a teaching resource to enhance pupils' vocabulary skills.

In conclusion we must keep in mind that basic literacy skills such as vocabulary should be viewed as a steppingstone towards the construction of a strong foundation of the English language within a child. The importance of vocabulary and grammar was succinctly put by Wilkins (1972) a British linguist who claimed; “without grammar, very little can be conveyed but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed”.

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