



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STORYTELLING WITH URBAN LEGENDS IN TEACHING VOCABULARY TO YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS

LA EFICACIA DE CONTAR HISTORIAS CON LEYENDAS URBANAS EN LA ENSEÑANZA DE VOCABULARIO A JÓVENES ESTUDIANTES DE INGLÉS

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition constitutes a fundamental component in learning English as a foreign language; however, traditional teaching methods do not always promote motivation or long-term lexical retention. In this context, the present study aimed to analyze the effectiveness of storytelling with urban legends in teaching vocabulary to young English learners. The re-search was developed under a quantitative approach and a quasi-experimental pretest and posttest design with a single group. The sample consisted of 48 students from the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy major at the Technical University of Cotopaxi, and for data collection, a 30-item multiple-choice vocabulary test was used, which was applied before and after a pedagogical intervention based on four storytelling sessions using urban legends, de-signed for this research and validated through the judgment of three expert professors from the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy major. The data were analyzed using descrip-tive statistics in Microsoft Excel, and the results showed an increase in the mean scores, which went from 20.27 in the pretest to 24.94 in the posttest; likewise,



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the minimum score increased from 5 to 11 points and the standard deviation decreased from 5.79 to 5.03, evidencing a more homogeneous performance after the intervention. In conclusion, the findings suggest that storytelling with urban legends constitutes a pertinent pedagogical strategy to strengthen English vocabulary learning by providing meaningful narrative contexts that favor the comprehension, retention, and use of new words.

Keywords: Storytelling. Urban legends, vocabulary, English language learning, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners

Resumen

La adquisición de vocabulario constituye un componente fundamental en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera con todo los métodos tradicionales de enseñanza no siempre favorecen la motivación ni la retención léxica a largo plazo en este contexto el presente estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la efectividad del storytelling con leyendas urbanas en la enseñanza de vocabulario a jóvenes estudiantes de inglés. La investigación se desarrolló bajo un enfoque cuantitativo y un diseño cuasi experimental de pretest y postest con un solo grupo. La muestra estuvo conformada por 48 estudiantes de la carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi y para la recolección de datos se empleó una prueba de vocabulario de 30 ítems de opción múltiple que se aplicó antes y después de una intervención pedagógica basada en cuatro sesiones de storytelling utilizando leyendas urbanas diseñada para esta investigación y validada mediante juicio de tres docentes expertos de la carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros. Los datos fueron analizados mediante estadísticas descriptivas en Microsoft Excel y los resultados mostraron un incremento en la media de las puntuaciones, que pasó de 20.27 en el pretest a 24.94 en el postest de igual manera el puntaje mínimo aumentó de 5 a 11 puntos y la desviación estándar disminuyó de 5.79 a 5.03, evidenciando un rendimiento más homogéneo tras la intervención. En conclusión, los hallazgos sugieren que el storytelling con leyendas urbanas constituye una estrategia pedagógica pertinente para fortalecer el aprendizaje de vocabulario en inglés al proporcionar contextos narrativos significativos que favorecen la comprensión, retención y uso de nuevas palabras.

Palabras clave: storytelling, leyendas urbanas, vocabulario, aprendizaje del inglés, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

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Introduction

Reading is one of the most important skills in language learning, as it provides learners with access to a wide range of information and new vocabulary. Through reading, learners not only understand the meaning of words but also acquire new expressions, grammatical structures and effective ways of communicating.



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Consequently, reading becomes a fundamental tool for expanding vocabulary and improving learners' ability to communicate with greater accuracy and fluency.

Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental to English language learning, because it lays the foundation for communication and comprehension. However, traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorization and isolated word lists, often fail to motivate learners or ensure long-term vocabulary retention (Zeng et al., 2025). This challenge is particularly evident among young learners, who require engaging and meaningful instructional approaches to sustain motivation and promote effective vocabulary development.

Storytelling has emerged as an innovative pedagogical strategy that integrates linguistic input with narrative experiences. Unlike rote memorization exercises, storytelling provides language in meaningful contexts, fosters emotional engagement, and creates opportunities for active participation, thereby enhancing vocabulary learning. Within this approach, urban legends stand out as culturally rich and intriguing narratives that capture learners' attention through suspense and mystery (Mulyani et al. (2025). These stories not only provide authentic linguistic input but also stimulate curiosity and critical thinking, thereby creating a dynamic learning environment.

Despite the well-documented benefits of storytelling, research on the use of urban legends for vocabulary acquisition remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on traditional stories or digital narratives, leaving a gap in the literature regarding culturally rooted narratives that resonate with adolescent learners (Novozhenina & Jiménez Carmona, 2024). Addressing this gap is essential to determine whether urban legends can serve as an effective tool for promoting vocabulary development and enhancing learners' motivation.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of storytelling through urban legends in teaching vocabulary to young learners of English. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the students' level of vocabulary knowledge before the implementation of storytelling through urban legends?
2. What is the students' level of vocabulary knowledge after the implementation of storytelling through urban legends?
3. What differences exist between the pre-test and post-test results following the implementation of the storytelling strategy?

Theoretical framework

The importance of vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as central component of second language development, as it directly supports comprehension and communication in both academic and everyday contexts. A broader lexical repertoire has been associated with improved reading comprehension and a greater ability to participate in social and educational interactions, thereby contributing to overall academic achievement (Yang et al., 2021). Furthermore, vocabulary learning strengthens cognitive processes such as semantic organization, categorization, and meaning-based memory, thereby facilitating the progressive development of more



complex linguistic structures (Finders et al., 2023). From a developmental perspective, early vocabulary growth may also be linked to learners' well-being and engagement in educational settings, as language proficiency enables them to navigate routines such as relationship building and meaningful participation in learning experiences (Riad et al., 2023).

Challenges in vocabulary teaching

Vocabulary teaching continues to present a challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly when instruction relies on decontextualized techniques such as word lists and rote memorization. These practices often provide limited and less meaningful exposure to vocabulary, which may reduce learners' motivation and hinder long-term retention, particularly among young learners who benefit from dynamic and context-rich learning experiences (Zeng et al., 2025). Consequently, recent pedagogical discussions have emphasized the need for contextualized and engaging approaches that foster sustained attention, emotional engagement, and repeated encounters with target lexical items (Sahin & Yavuz, 2025).

In this regard, the selection of instructional strategies is crucial not only for expanding learners' vocabulary size but also for promoting long-term retention and active classroom engagement. To design effective instruction, it is important to define what it means to know a word. Vocabulary knowledge is commonly described in terms of two complementary dimensions: receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary.

Receptive vocabulary refers to the lexical items that learners are able to recognize and understand when they encounter them in spoken or written input, even if they are not yet able to use them actively. Productive vocabulary, in contrast, refers to the words that learners can retrieve and use appropriately in speaking or writing. Although these two dimensions are closely related, they develop at different rates, as receptive vocabulary typically expands more rapidly through repeated exposure to language input, whereas productive vocabulary generally requires additional practice, feedback, and opportunities for meaningful language production (Nation, 2001).

Pedagogical Implications of Receptive and Productive Vocabulary

This distinction is particularly relevant for young learners of English, as instruction typically begins by providing comprehension-oriented, rich language input and gradually progresses toward activities that require active language use. Therefore, vocabulary instruction is generally more effective when it deliberately supports both receptive and productive vocabulary development through tasks aligned with learners' developmental needs and communicative goals. In practical terms, this involves incorporating strategies that help learners notice and understand new words in context while simultaneously creating structured opportunities to retrieve and apply those words in communication (Teng, 2022).

Receptive vocabulary can be strengthened when learners encounter words repeatedly through meaningful and comprehensible input supported by instructional scaffolding. One effective classroom practice involves teacher read-aloud accompanied by guided questioning, as these activities facilitate meaning negotiation and deeper semantic processing. Likewise, repeated exposure to target vocabulary across varied contexts, such as stories, visual aids, and structured comprehension tasks, promotes the consolidation of word recognition and semantic connections, thereby enhancing long-term retention (Chien, 2020).



In contrast, the development of productive vocabulary requires learners to move beyond recognition toward active retrieval and appropriate use. Production-oriented tasks, such as role-plays, communicative simulations, and interactive speaking activities, encourage learners to access newly acquired words under communicative demands, thereby supporting the development of both accuracy and fluency over time. Similarly, creative writing, text reformulation, and story-retelling tasks require learners to reorganize meaning and deliberately select vocabulary, strengthening productive control through contextualized language use (Albaqami, 2024).

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Strategy

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of human communication and has become a powerful pedagogical resource in language teaching because it presents language through structured narratives that integrate cultural, emotional, and linguistic elements within second language learning contexts. Storytelling provides authentic language input and meaningful contextualization, enabling learners to interpret language as part of a coherent message rather than as isolated linguistic forms.

This contextual nature is pedagogically valuable because it allows learners to connect new words with events, characters, and cause-and-effect relationships, thereby promoting deeper cognitive processing and stronger memory consolidation. Research has consistently shown that storytelling can enhance language learning outcomes, particularly vocabulary retention and oral performance, because stories provide repeated exposure to lexical items in meaningful contexts. When learners encounter target vocabulary through narrative events and thematic repetition, they are more likely to retain those words than when vocabulary is presented through decontextualized word lists. Furthermore, interactive or elaborative storytelling, in which learners contribute to the narrative, respond to questions, or reconstruct elements of the story, can increase engagement and strengthen vocabulary learning by promoting active processing and retrieval (Del et al., 2021).

Urban Legends as a Narrative Resource

Urban legends constitute a distinctive narrative genre characterized by suspense, mystery, and cultural relevance. Unlike traditional folktales, urban legends often reflect contemporary social concerns and local beliefs, which can increase learners' curiosity and emotional engagement. This relevance is pedagogically important because motivation and attention are essential conditions for learning, particularly in vocabulary instruction, where repeated exposure and sustained engagement are necessary for long-term retention. When urban legends are integrated into storytelling activities, they can provide authentic language input and contextualized vocabulary, enabling learners to infer meanings, recognize patterns of language use, and develop lexical knowledge through narrative experiences rather than through rote memorization (Mulyani et al., 2025).

Urban Legends and Their Contribution to Vocabulary Development

The use of urban legends can also be linked to both receptive and productive vocabulary learning objectives. From a receptive perspective, learners can benefit from listening to or reading urban legends supported by visual aids, gestures, and comprehension questions, which facilitate meaning inference and semantic processing (Chien, 2020). From a productive perspective, urban legends create natural opportunities for learners to retell stories, participate in dramatizations, engage in discussions, and collaboratively construct



narratives, encouraging them to retrieve and use vocabulary to describe events, express opinions, and justify interpretations. In this way, urban legends can serve as a bridge between comprehension-oriented learning and production-oriented practice, supporting learners' progression from receptive recognition to productive vocabulary use.

Vocabulary Tests

In English language teaching research, vocabulary assessment is generally organized through tests that estimate lexical size or proficiency according to levels or frequency bands. Vocabulary level tests provide insight into learners' receptive lexical knowledge across frequency-based categories, whereas vocabulary size tests offer a global estimation of learners' lexical repertoire by sampling words from broad frequency ranges. In educational contexts, these instruments are used to describe existing lexical knowledge and monitor changes in performance, for example, by comparing results across two measurement points (Li et al., 2024).

In standardized vocabulary tests, common formats include multiple-choice items, matching tasks, sentence completion activities, and meaning recognition tasks. In particular, multiple-choice formats have been widely used to assess word recognition because they allow for efficient administration, objective scoring, and quantitative analysis of results. Recent studies adapting vocabulary measures to online platforms have employed multiple-choice formats in which learners select the most appropriate definition of a target word, reporting their feasibility and psychometric properties for describing lexical knowledge. Additionally, vocabulary level tests may also use matching or guided selection formats to assess receptive vocabulary knowledge across frequency bands. This demonstrates that item types are selected according to the specific purpose of the assessment, whether describing lexical repertoire, diagnosing vocabulary knowledge levels, or monitoring learning progress (Aleml et al., 2022).

Methodology

Vocabulary teaching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts continues to represent a challenge for both teachers and learners, particularly when traditional methods focused on repetition and the memorization of isolated words are employed. These practices often limit opportunities for meaningful learning and may negatively affect the long-term retention of acquired lexical knowledge. In this context, exploring instructional strategies that promote contextualized exposure to new words and encourage more active student participation is highly relevant. Among these strategies, storytelling through urban legends stands out due to its ability to integrate linguistic, cultural, and narrative elements into meaningful learning experiences (Karimova, 2023). The present study adopted a quantitative approach, as its purpose was to collect and analyze numerical data related to participants' lexical performance before and after the implementation of a pedagogical intervention. This approach enables the description and comparison of results obtained through objective measurement instruments, facilitating the identification of variations in vocabulary knowledge (Chi et al., 2025).

A quasi-experimental pretest and posttest design with a single group was employed. This design allowed for the evaluation of the students' vocabulary knowledge level at two distinct moments, before the implementation of the strategy based on storytelling with urban legends, and after its application. The comparison of the



results obtained in both evaluations facilitated the identification of changes in the participants' performance associated with the educational intervention developed during the study (Barua, 2023). Data collection was carried out through a vocabulary test designed specifically for this research; in order to guarantee the content validity of the instrument, it was subjected to an expert judgment process, a procedure widely used to determine the relevance and representativeness of the items regarding the construct intended to be evaluated. Three expert professors from the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy major participated in this process, analyzing the correspondence between the items and the target vocabulary, the clarity of the instructions, the quality of the wording, and the suitability of the distractors. Based on the obtained results, adjustments related to semantic precision and item formulation were carried out with the purpose of strengthening the clarity and representativeness of the instrument (Li et al., 2024). The instrument was developed based on previous studies on foreign language vocabulary assessment and aimed to determine participants' level of lexical knowledge before and after the pedagogical intervention, allowing comparisons of students' performance throughout the research process. The test consisted of 30 multiple-choice questions, each containing four response options and only one correct answer. This format was selected due to its widespread use in vocabulary acquisition research, as well as its ease of administration, objective scoring, and usefulness for the quantitative analysis of the results obtained (Alemi et al., 2022).

The study population consisted of 48 students enrolled in the second semester of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at the Technical University of Cotopaxi. According to institutional records, participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, and the sample included 37 female students and 11 male students. Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling because the group was available and accessible during the research period and met the characteristics required for the development of the study. This type of selection is widely used in educational research involving intact groups, as it facilitates access to participants and data collection in authentic learning contexts. However, the results should be interpreted with caution, as the absence of random selection may affect sample representativeness and introduce potential selection bias, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader populations (Stratton, 2023).

The test lasted approximately 30 minutes and was administered without the use of dictionaries or other reference resources; each correct answer received a score of one point, so the total score ranged from 0 to 30 points. The application of the same instrument in both measurements allowed for the comparison of student performance before and after the implementation of the pedagogical strategy. The procedure was developed in three phases.

In the first phase, an initial assessment (pre-test) was administered during week 1 to identify the students' prior knowledge level regarding the vocabulary selected for the study. In the second phase, the pedagogical intervention was carried out, which consisted of the implementation of four storytelling sessions based on urban legends, during which the students were exposed to the target vocabulary in meaningful narrative contexts characterized by elements of suspense and cultural content. This strategy aimed to promote contextual comprehension, meaning inference, and semantic processing of the vocabulary addressed.

Finally, in the third phase, a final assessment (post-test) was administered during week 2 to assess the students' performance after the pedagogical intervention and to determine potential changes in English vocabulary acquisition. To guarantee the relevance of the evidenced content, the target vocabulary was selected from the



terms present in the urban legends used during the intervention; subsequently, these terms were cross-referenced with lexical resources aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). To achieve this, the Cambridge English Vocabulary Profile and the Oxford 3000 and Oxford 5000 lists were utilized—resources that allowed for verifying that the selected words were appropriate for the participants' proficiency level (Cao et al., 2024).

The research was conducted in strict compliance with the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, ensuring the protection of participants throughout the study. Therefore, measures were implemented to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the information through response coding and restricted access to the data exclusively by the research team. In addition, informed consent was obtained from participants, who were previously informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences. Finally, the research received authorization from institutional authorities and was conducted in accordance with current ethical guidelines (Alhabsi, 2024).

The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test scores were processed using Microsoft Excel. This tool enabled the organization of information, the calculation of descriptive statistics, and the graphical representation of results in order to identify performance patterns at both assessment points. The analysis focused on descriptive indicators such as the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values, as well as score distribution, with the purpose of summarizing participants' performance before and after the pedagogical intervention. The results were interpreted as observed changes in the performance of the same group of students, avoiding the establishment of definitive causal relationships due to the absence of a control group within the quasi-experimental design employed (Nakata & Suzuki, 2019).

Results and discussion

Table 1. Individual scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test.

Student	Pre-test	Post-test
E01	13	11
E02	5	18
E03	14	16
E04	17	15
E05	16	19
E06	19	26
E07	16	28
E08	21	25
E09	23	29
E10	17	26
E11	14	25
E12	23	21
E13	23	20



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E14	13	17
E15	25	27
E16	23	24
E17	16	26
E18	18	28
E19	28	21
E20	23	20
E21	22	17
E22	16	27
E23	21	24
E24	23	26
E25	19	28
E26	21	28
E27	28	26
E28	24	30
E29	26	28
E30	20	18
E31	20	28
E32	13	19
E33	11	29
E34	23	22
E35	26	28
E36	26	29
E37	27	19
E38	23	30
E39	26	18
E40	28	18
E41	14	29
E42	21	27
E43	30	29
E44	21	30
E45	11	27
E46	30	30
E47	29	29
E48	11	28

Note: Codes E01–E48 were used to preserve participant anonymity. The scores correspond to the records contained in the pre-test and post-test files used for the study's analysis.



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Table 1 presents the individual scores obtained by the participants on the pretest and posttest assessments. The results show variations in student performance between both assessment moments. In general terms, a trend toward higher scores on the posttest is evidenced, which coincides with the increase in the mean reported in table 1 and suggests an improvement in vocabulary knowledge after the implementation of the storytelling activities with urban legends.

Pre-test and Post-test Results

The results obtained by the students before and after the pedagogical intervention were compared. Therefore, the scores recorded in the pretest and the posttest were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and the minimum and maximum values.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the pre-test and post-test results.

Indicator	Pre-test	Post-test
Number of participants	48	48
Minimum score	5	11
Maximum score	30	30
Mean	20,27	24,94

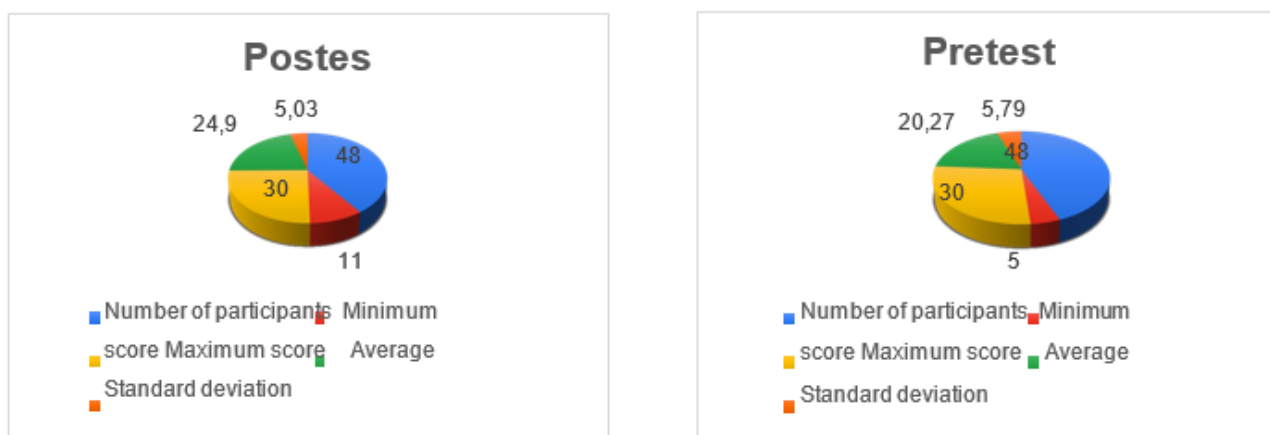


Figura 1. Descriptive statistics of the pre-test and post-test results.

Note: Prepared by the authors based on pre-test and post-test results.

As shown in Table 1, the mean scores increased from 20.27 points in the pre-test to 24.94 points in the post-test, demonstrating an improvement in students' performance after the implementation of the storytelling strategy based on urban legends. Likewise, the minimum score increased from 5 to 11 points, while the maximum score remained at 30 points in both assessments.



Regarding data dispersion, the standard deviation decreased from 5.79 to 5.03, indicating lower variability in participants' scores in the final assessment. This suggests a more homogeneous distribution of results after the pedagogical intervention. Furthermore, post-test results showed a greater concentration of scores within the higher ranges of the assessment scale, reflecting a positive trend in the vocabulary knowledge developed throughout the learning sessions.

Discussion

The results of the instruments applied to second-semester students of the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy program at the Technical University of Cotopaxi show a favorable difference in vocabulary knowledge levels before and after the pedagogical intervention. Students presented varying levels of lexical proficiency when the pretest was administered, evidenced by a mean of 20.27 points and a wide variability in the scores obtained. Therefore, a pedagogical intervention was developed based on four storytelling sessions with urban legends. The purpose was to strengthen English vocabulary learning through the proposed activities. Students had the opportunity to interact with new words within meaningful narrative contexts, allowing them to relate the vocabulary to characters, events, and situations present in the stories. After the pedagogical intervention, an improvement was observed in the results obtained by the participants, reflected in an increase in the mean to 24.94 points and in an increase in the minimum score from 5 to 11 points.

Similarly, the decrease in the standard deviation from 5.79 to 5.03 indicated less dispersion in the scores and more homogeneous performance within the group. Storytelling-based activities facilitated students' progress in vocabulary learning, which was reflected in better results on the final assessment. Despite the complexity of some terms included in the test, participants demonstrated improved comprehension and recognition of the vocabulary covered during the sessions. Overall, the results suggest that using urban legends as a storytelling resource contributed favorably to strengthening students' lexical knowledge and represented a relevant pedagogical strategy for teaching English vocabulary. However, the results should be interpreted with caution because the research was conducted using a quasi-experimental design without a control group; therefore, the observed changes correspond to the performance of the same group before and after the pedagogical intervention.

Conclusiones

The pre-test results showed that students had different levels of English vocabulary proficiency before the intervention, with a mean score of 20.27 points and considerable variability in the scores obtained. After the implementation of storytelling through urban legends, students achieved better results in the post-test, reaching a mean score of 24.94 points. Furthermore, the increase in the minimum score and the reduction in the standard deviation reflect more favorable and homogeneous performance among the evaluated group. The changes observed between the pre-test and post-test suggest that the use of urban legends as a storytelling strategy constitutes a useful pedagogical resource for strengthening English vocabulary learning. However, due to the absence of a control group, the results should be interpreted as observed improvements within the same group of students rather than as definitive causal evidence.



Recommendations

It is recommended to systematically and continuously implement storytelling strategies based on urban legends in English classes, as the results obtained showed an improvement in students' vocabulary knowledge after the pedagogical intervention. The use of contextualized narratives allowed for the presentation of new words in meaningful situations, facilitating their comprehension and retention during the learning process.

Therefore, it is advisable that teachers incorporate narrative activities that combine cultural and linguistic elements to strengthen students' lexical development.

Likewise, it is recommended to complement the use of storytelling with subsequent vocabulary practice and consolidation activities such as dramatizations, debates, retelling stories, comprehension exercises, and oral or written productions. These activities can help reinforce the contextualized use of learned words and promote more active student participation in language learning.

Furthermore, it is suggested that future research expand the number of participants and include control groups in order to obtain stronger evidence on the effectiveness of storytelling with urban legends in teaching English vocabulary. Similarly, it would be pertinent to analyze the impact of this strategy on other language skills, such as reading comprehension, speaking, and writing, to gain a broader understanding of its benefits within the process of teaching and learning a foreign language.

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