

# **Assessing storytelling as a tool for improving reading comprehension in the EFL primary classroom**

## **Abstract**

This article explores the effect of teacher storytelling as a method of instruction in helping children read and comprehend English in primary schools. The study includes 44 eight-year-old students, being divided into two equal groups. They are Catalan/ Spanish native speakers, and their English level is pre-A1 (CEFR). The two groups studied the same topic with similar vocabulary and grammatical structures; however, only the experimental group learnt with storytelling. A pre-test, a post-test, and exercises were implemented and analyzed by using the Mann Whitney test, the Wilcoxon signed rank test and the General Linear Model to verify the effect of storytelling, the impact of time and the interaction between time and storytelling. The findings show that storytelling helps children remember, understand and use the vocabulary of a certain topic and a specific grammatical structure which are compatible with the vocabulary and the structure in a given story. It also supports students in forming the habit of using particular pairs of words correctly, such as ‘snake-hiss’, ‘zebra-bray’. Storytelling proved to be as effective as other teaching methods, such as games and exercises to make a contribution in helping students improve their reading-comprehending of separate sentences. However, time and continued language exposure played a pivotal role in students’ progress of decoding a gapped paragraph and filling in the gaps with appropriate words, no matter what teaching methods were used (storytelling or others).

**Keywords:** storytelling; reading-comprehension; teaching English for young learners; teaching English as a foreign language; primary education.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper assesses the role of teacher storytelling as a method of instruction in helping children to read and comprehend English texts in primary schools. Stories can be defined as ‘one of the most natural ways to share information, and it is as old as the human race’ (Quesenbery and Brooks, 2010, p. 2). Ellis and Brewster discuss that ‘the telling of stories has been a vital mechanism ever since humans developed language – perhaps the most vital in transferring knowledge of all sorts’ (2014, p. 2). Researchers agree that storytelling is a natural and effective way to communicate, to share information and knowledge (Ellis and Brewster, 1991, 2002, 2014; Cameron, 2001; Davies, 2005, 2007). Many educators have proposed several benefits for the use of storytelling in teaching English for children, such as Ellis and Brewster (1991, 2002, 2014), Wright (1995), Cameron (2001), Ghosn (2002, 2013), Davies (2005, 2007), and Bland (2013), to name but a few. For example, Ellis and Brewster argue that ‘listening to stories allows the teacher to introduce or revise

new vocabulary and sentence structures by exposing the children to language in varied, memorable and familiar contexts, which will enrich their thinking and gradually enter their own speech' (2014, p. 7).

Young children usually face several difficulties when reading a text for the first time because they are not familiar with written words and continuous discourse. Stories provide students with a great deal of continuous discourse, a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Therefore, listening to or reading stories can expose students to a great amount of both oral and written language input and can help students improve their reading comprehension, as well as broaden their vocabulary and grammar.

While there is a general agreement on the general benefits of storytelling, there is still a lack of academic research assessing the effect of using storytelling in fostering children's reading comprehension. This is the reason why this project was carried out, so as to verify the effect of storytelling in helping children improve their reading comprehension in primary education.

The research questions of the project are the following:

+ RQ1: "Does storytelling help children remember and understand the vocabulary of a certain topic and a specific grammatical form which match the structure and the vocabulary in a given story?"

+ RQ2: "Does storytelling improve children's abilities of both reading-comprehending separate sentences and decoding as well as completing a gapped paragraph?"

The hypothesis for the first research question is that storytelling helps children remember the vocabulary of certain topics as well as certain grammatical forms which are compatible with the structures and the vocabulary in a given story. And the second hypothesis is that storytelling helps children improve their abilities of reading and comprehending both separate sentences and connected paragraphs with gaps as well as filling in the blanks with appropriate words.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

### ***Storytelling***

Storytelling is first and foremost an art whose initial aim is to entertain. According to Lipman (1999), telling stories does not merely require the physical presence of the storytellers, but also the intellect, the emotions and the imagination of the ones who perform the story. It is beyond reading a story, it is to tell a story in a lively and attractive way to be able to engage the listeners.

Pellowski (1991, p. 15) defines storytelling as:

The art or craft of narration of stories in verse/and or prose, as performed or led by one person before a live audience; the stories narrated may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other accompaniment and may be learned from oral, printed or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes may be that of entertainment.

Bryant (2009, p. 19) also shares the same opinion about the form and the purpose of storytelling: ‘story-telling is first of all an art of entertainment; like the stage, its immediate purpose is the pleasure of the hearer, his pleasure, not his instruction, first’. Davies (2007, p. 5) highlights the creative process that storytelling involves: ‘a way of lifting words from a page and breathing life into them [...] Storytelling allows me to escape the confines of the page. I can add colour and texture to my words and make them flexible’.

Storytelling has had a pivotal role in the history of humanity. Pellowski (1991) traces its evolution from a primitive stage until the present. Following her ideas, storytelling followed the following stages: first it appeared to satisfy human’s need for entertainment, it grew from the playful characters of human nature. It was used to explain the physical world surrounding humans and the supernatural forces. Then it evolved through the intrinsic motivation for communicating and sharing experiences. It fulfilled an aesthetic desire for beauty through expressive language and music. It was born from an urge to record history.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned characteristics, storytelling encompasses not only information but also experience, emotions, opinions and knowledge. Through a story, we express our personality and values. Davies (2007, p. 3) contents about storytelling that:

In some cases, it is a means of passing on necessary information; but we also use stories as a way of sharing, of explaining who we are to others and forming bonds within society. We use stories to educate, to offer wisdom and knowledge to those less experienced.

Storytelling also possesses the quality of shaping and sharing self and others’ identity. McDrury and Alterio (2003, p. 31) discuss storytelling as ‘a human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit’.

From all what storytelling encompasses, it is not only an art form, but also a professional tool in several jobs (e.g., therapists, business managers, teachers). In teaching, storytelling is an educational tool vastly used in classrooms, especially in the language class. Davies (2007, p. 5) argues that ‘storytelling is essential for educational development and can be used to complement the curriculum’. He provides the following reasons: (i) storytelling encourages children’s ability to interpret and understand events beyond their current experience, (ii) storytelling

aids language development because it provides language exposure to help children fully understand its implications, (iii) storytelling supports listening and speaking skills, (iv) storytelling develops children's imagination, (v) storytelling helps children entertain and excite, which facilitates learning, (vi) storytelling helps children respect different cultures, also helps them discover and value their own personal heritage, (vi) and storytelling is the natural way to take children to the world of books and reading.

To assess all the aforementioned benefits of storytelling in educational practices would be too ambitious and beyond the aims and scope of this particular study, which is limited in time, space and resources. This research focuses on the benefits that storytelling as a teaching method can bring to children's reading comprehension in a foreign language.

Reading comprehension involves understanding written words and making sense of the text. And in order to create a link between storytelling which is orally told and written text, we apply the story based work proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014), which is presented in the part 'application of storytelling in ESL/EFL classrooms', and we exploit the use of flashcards to facilitate students' recognition of written words.

Storytelling is taken as an educational tool to help students improve their foreign language reading comprehension. Storytelling mentioned in this paper is a teaching method in the foreign language class. The story we use is orally told by the teacher with the support of visual aids and physical movement (such as pictures and total physical response - TPR) as well as the inspiring and expressive voice of the storyteller and animals' sounds, which makes the story become lively and attractive. The storyteller (who happens to be the instructor in this particular case) encourages the students to participate by guessing the characters and the plot of the story. Comprehension and reading are aided by providing visual aids such as flashcards to read. Students' word recognition is consolidated not only by flashcards but also by exercises, such as ordering the cards, gapped story. The teacher does not look at the text to read. Instead, she tells the story, using pictures, TPR and her voice. The students have the pictures with words, phrases or sentences describing the pictures to respond to the teacher, to guess the plot of the story, and to participate in the story.

Storytelling is also exploited as an entertainment tool. The expressive voice of the teacher, the sounds of the wild animals, the activities of guessing the story's plot and characters, and the use of flashcards make storytelling become entertaining in which students can hear the sound and play with the characters and the plot of the story.

### ***Benefits of storytelling in ESL/ EFL teaching***

In ESL/ EFL teaching, there has been research on the benefits of using stories with children in terms of developing not only their language knowledge (the understanding of vocabulary and grammar) but also their language skills including reading, listening, speaking and writing (Wright, 1995; Davies, 2007; Ellis and Brewster, 2014). It has also been pointed out by a number of investigators that storytelling can develop children's pragmatic knowledge and build up their social skills (Pellowski, 1991; Davies, 2007).

In terms of developing children's language knowledge, stories expose children to a foreign language environment to help them be aware of sound and the general 'feel' of this foreign language and introduce or revise lexical items and sentence formation. Ellis and Brewster (2014, p. 7) contend that 'listening to stories allows the teacher to introduce or revise new vocabulary and sentence structures by exposing the children to language in varied, memorable and familiar contexts, which will enrich their thinking and gradually enter their own speech'. Wright (1995, p. 8) also acknowledges the benefits of storytelling concerning the acquisition of active and passive language:

Stories help children become aware of the general 'feel' and sound of the foreign language. Stories also introduce children to language items and sentence constructions without their necessarily having to use them productively. They can build up a reservoir of language in this way.

Regarding language skills, Wright (1995, p. 6) discusses that 'stories offer a perfect diet for the build-up of fluency in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing'. The same opinion is shared by Davies (2007, p. 6) when he states that:

Storytelling helps with listening and speaking skills. Children will learn the importance of listening, of how to communicate ideas and interact with others. They will develop their vocabulary and learn when and where to use words and phrases.

The listening and speaking skills that Davies (2007) highlights involve both the language skills and the communicative skills which include the ability of being patient and willing to listen to others' opinions, sharing and being sympathetic.

As for pragmatics, Davies (2007, p. 6) raised an important point which is the following: 'storytelling aids language development. Children need to be exposed to language to fully understand its implications'. To fully understand language's implications means that children not only understand the meaning of words or sentences, but also know how the words or the sentences are used in a specific situation, in other words, the relationship between words and context. Therefore, storytelling can help children build their pragmatic knowledge as well.

Donato and Adair-Hauck (2010) emphasizes the benefits of storytelling in helping learners create the Zone of Proximal Development which is defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). They argue that:

A story-based approach invites the learner to comprehend and experience the meaning and function of grammar through integrated discourse in the form of a story. The process of understanding a story in a foreign language also creates a Zone of Proximal Development where responsive assistance is provided and target language development occurs. (Donato and Adair-Hauck, 2010, p. 221)

There is a general agreement regarding the benefits of storytelling in children’s foreign language development. The agreement is primarily based on theoretical research of storytelling. However, we believe there is still a shortage of experimental research studying and assessing its effects, especially on children’s reading comprehension, and that is the gap that this study seeks to cover.

### ***Storytelling and children’s reading comprehension development***

In this paper, we assess the effect of storytelling on children’s reading comprehension. Therefore, we deem it necessary to briefly discuss hereafter the process of reading comprehension so as to discuss the effect of storytelling on the development of children’s reading comprehension.

Researchers have put forward that reading is a complex process involving the combination of both top-down and bottom-up processing (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977, 1980; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Eskey 1986, 1988; Grabe 1988). A ‘Bottom-up’ approximation to reading means that students learn from the smallest units of language first, such as phonics before coming to bigger units such as words, sentences and paragraphs while ‘top-down’ reading model involves the process of getting contextual meaning from the printed text as a whole. With top-down model, language parts such as sounds, new words, and phrases are learnt and comprehended in the context which provides students with a natural setting to learn to read and guess the meaning of text, like the natural environment they have been exposed to learn to talk. The combination of both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ suggests that what the brain knows affects the perception of what is being read. Reading is then not merely decoding a series of written symbols into their corresponding sounds for making sense of the text.

Goodman (1967) discusses the role of storytelling in nurturing reading-comprehension. In a story, the fully formed language and context help students to guess new words, therefore, supplement them with the semantic information to understand the text - decode, and to predict what comes next (what has not been seen) - recode. Goodman says: 'The more advanced story, with its stronger syntax, more fully formed language and increased load of meaning makes it possible for the child to use her graphic cues more effectively and supplement them with semantic and syntactic information' (Goodman, 1967, p. 134).

Thogmartin (1997) argues that stories can benefit learners' reading comprehension by giving them the whole passage and context which plays as the natural environment to help them learn to read and comprehend. Language parts such as sounds, new words, and phrases are learnt and comprehended in the context which provides students with a natural setting to learn to read, like the natural environment they have been exposed to learn to talk. As the natural language acquisition when children learn to use and comprehend a language, 'we do not isolate sounds or words for the purposes of memorizing them or perfecting as the prerequisite to use by the child. Drills like this would be meaningless to the child because they would be out of context' (Thogmartin, 1997, p. 29).

From the above-mentioned theories about the reading process and natural language acquisition, storytelling is reckoned to benefit children's reading comprehension by giving them context to decode, to guess the unfamiliar words. This motivated this study to be carried out in order to help students who struggle with reading and to verify the effect of storytelling on children's reading development.

### ***Application of storytelling in ESL/ EFL classrooms***

These previous paragraphs discuss the benefits of storytelling in the language class, especially ESL/ EFL classrooms. The following paragraphs will present some ways of applying storytelling and telling stories in the language class.

According to Ellis and Brewster (2014), it is possible to introduce a methodology for story-based work that can be used in most classroom contexts by applying a three-stage model (figure A.1) which is similar to the pre-, while- and post-storytelling activities. With this model, children can plan by thinking about the activity that they are going to carry out, and find in their schematic knowledge what they already know about the story and the theme, then they do by listening to the story and participating in the story and finally review with further reflection, consolidation, and assessing what they have learnt and have done. Wright (1995) suggests the use of stories or storytelling in the classroom by applying activities used for pre-storytelling (focusing on eliciting students' background and available language relevant to the content of the story), during storytelling (concentrating on guessing what's coming by ordering the events of the story or filling in the blanks)

and post-storytelling (with review activities). Wright's approximation equals the three-stage model 'plan-do-review' proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014).

In our opinion, the three-stage model provides students with concrete steps to explore a story. Logically, students need to plan before doing and reviewing. Reviewing after doing helps students not only to revise the story, but also to recognize what they have achieved and what they need to improve.

In addition, this model of applying a story in the classroom proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014) can support students' reading comprehension due to the fact that it follows the reading process which puts forward the idea that reading is not only decoding written symbols into their corresponding sounds to make sense of them, but also actively using what the brain already knows to guess meaning of new words and understand the text. The agreement between the model proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014) and the reading process is explained hereafter.

First, before storytelling, some language units are taught to students to assist their understanding and lower their anxiety when they come to the story for the first time. This first step follows the 'bottom-up' model – a way to teach reading in which students learn from the smallest units of language, such as phonics before coming to bigger ones such as words, sentences and paragraphs. With the 'bottom-up' model, students can decode the written symbols into their corresponding sounds (phonics) and then make sense of them (from words to sentences and paragraphs) as they have already learnt written words with flashcards before storytelling.

Second, during the story, students are exposed to the language in context which can help them understand some language units that can be explained more clearly via context. The context helps students to guess the meaning of words that they might forget after the first step so as to actively decode the text. It is worth noticing that written symbols are given to students in the form of flashcards (including both written words and their meaning) and exercises (with the support of visual aids) during the story. When students listen to the story, they can make connections among sounds, meaning and written symbols. This second step follows the 'top-down' model which involves the process of getting contextual meaning from the printed text as a whole. Language parts such as sounds, new words, phrases are learnt and comprehended in the context which provides students with a natural setting to learn to read. Therefore, the three-stage model proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014) is a combination of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down', which is called the 'Interactive Model' (Rumelhart, 1977), a way of teaching reading that is followed by many teachers (Thogmartin, 1997) because it follows the notion of the aforementioned reading process and emphasizes the interactive process between readers and texts.

In view of the above-mentioned reasons, the story-based lessons applied in this project follow the three-stage model proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014) and the

activities suggested by Wright (1995) in order to attract students to the lessons, help them focus on both meaning and forms, and increase their intake (VanPatten, 1996).

### 3. Methods

This study employs a quasi-experimental method based on the results obtained from two groups – the experimental group and the control group. Carrying out this kind of quasi-experimental research with two groups has proved extremely useful to explore the differences and/or similarities between the two groups so as to verify if storytelling can be considered more effective than other foreign language teaching methods in improving students' reading comprehension.

The two groups of students learnt the same topic – 'Wild animals', which focuses on the following three aspects:

- (i) ten animals names: *lion, hippo, snake (boa-constrictor), flamingo, zebra, peacock, polar-bear, elephant, walrus, leopard;*
- (ii) nine action verbs for animals' activities: *snort, roar, trumpet, bray, flute, yelp, hiss, bellow, snarl;*
- (iii) one grammatical structure: the modal verb *can*.

The topic lasted for six lessons. Only the experimental group was instructed through storytelling. The story "Polar-bear, polar-bear, what do you hear?" created by Bill Martin. Jr (1991) was chosen to design the six story-based lessons for the following reasons. The first one is that the topic of the story coincided with the topic of the lessons - 'Wild animals'. This story provides students with different animals as well as different activities that these animals can do. The second reason is that the language of the story was suitable for the students' English level. The grammar used in the story is the present simple tense (e.g. Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear? I hear a lion roaring in my ear), and the vocabulary includes words naming wild animals and their actions. A further reason for choosing this particular story is that it has rhymes and repetition of simple language chunks, it is then catchy and thus easy to memorize. In addition, the repetitive events in this story can support students in guessing the plot and understanding new words. Moreover, the story's musicality allows the instructor to chant the story, making it lively, entertaining and motivational for the students. We also believe that it possesses the basic narrative elements to be regarded as a story. Although its plot is simple, the story contains characters (the animals) and events which are created by the activities performed by the animals and the interaction among themselves.

Before the lessons were carried out, students of the two groups had to do a pretest to check their reading comprehension ability. The vocabulary used in the pre-test includes the following topics: farm animals (such as dog, cat) and everyday activities (such as run, walk). The students had learnt this vocabulary in their first

grade. The grammar used in the pre-test includes the modal verb *can* and the *present simple* (such as I can run, I am a horse).

The objectives of the six lessons are the following:

- (i) students are expected to match the words naming different wild animals with the pictures of the animals correctly;
- (ii) students are expected to make sentences with the vocabulary taught in the six lessons and the modal verb *can* (both the positive form and the negative form of the modal verb *can*);
- (iii) students should be able to read separate sentences constructed by the modal verb *can* and the simple present tense and answer some ‘yes’, ‘no’ questions;
- (iv) students can complete a short paragraph including some gaps with some given words.

Once the six lessons were over, the two groups had to do a post-test one week after the lessons and an exercise which was carried out five weeks after the post-test. The instruments used to collect data in this experiment are tests, scores (tests and scores are instruments utilized to collect quantitative data), and observations and diary (observations and diary are used to collect qualitative data). The design of this experiment is described in detail in two sub-sections that follow: *Subjects* and *Procedures and Materials*.

### **3.1. Subjects**

This study included 44 eight-year-old students who were in grade two at *Santa Teresa de Jesús* primary school, which is a semi private school in Tarragona, Spain. The students are Catalan/ Spanish native speakers, and their English level was pre-A1 (CEFR – The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) at the time the experiment was carried out. At school, the students had three English lessons per week (50 minutes per lesson) with the same teacher. For these groups, English was a foreign language taught in their bilingual environment (Catalan/Spanish). The fact that learning and acquiring English as the third/foreign language after being required to master both Catalan and Spanish can be considered a difference of this particular setting of the project in which storytelling is applied.

The 44 students were divided into two groups (the experimental group and the control group) with the same number of students (22 students per group). These students were chosen for this experiment due to the homogeneity of the group in terms of age, language proficiency and overall academic performance.

### **3.2. Procedures and Materials**

The instructional steps in the usual lessons that students used to have before the realization of this project followed these stages: introduction of vocabulary and

grammatical structures, revision of language by games and songs to practice speaking and listening, then finally the completion of exercises to practice reading and writing.

The story-based lessons for the experimental group includes three stages: pre-storytelling, storytelling and post-storytelling, following the story-based work proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014). Before storytelling, some activities were organized for introducing or revising vocabulary and grammar in order to give students enough language support so that they can follow and understand the story (such as introducing the name of animals and the actions done by the animals through games like ‘guess the animals basing on their sounds or their actions’).

In the storytelling stage, the experimental students have to do small exercises while listening to the story. These exercises are relevant to the content of the story aiming at providing students with images and language support in order to help them guess the plot of the story, listen more clearly, and focus on the story. Exercises used during storytelling are: (i) guess the order that the animals appear in the story then arrange them in the correct order while listening to the story, (ii) guess the activities that the animals can do by matching pictures of animals with words describing their activities which are attached with pictures, (iii) arrange the available sentences attached with some pictures in the order they appeared in the story, (iv) gapped story. The images and sounds are used to support students with the exercises and lower their anxiety caused by the text.

After storytelling, students do post-exercises to review the content of the story, such as: (i) guess the animal, basing on the clues of each animal appearing in the story, (ii) match words naming animals with words naming their activities in the story and make sentences with these words, using the modal verb *can*, (iii) role play based on the animals that appeared in the story and tell/ read the story.

The experimental group listens to the story once or twice (maximum) per each lesson in order to avoid excessive repetition which may lead to boredom. The number of times students listen to the story per lesson is decided based on what the teacher observes in the class, the responses of the students to the story and to the pre-exercise. The structure of a story-based lesson for the experimental group is presented in the figure A.2.

The performative techniques employed by the instructor when telling the story are: (i) the use of visual support, sound and music in order to attract the students to the story, (ii) miming of the actions of the animals that appear in the story (TPR) so as to reinforce the students’ memory and their understanding of the story.

The students in the control group learnt the same topic as the experimental group but without storytelling. They learnt this topic in the way they often learn other topics in English. First, they are introduced with vocabulary and grammatical structures with pictures and TPR, then they play some familiar games, such as:

what's the missing animal, what's the missing word, Simon says, guessing animals (basing on their actions), etc. Finally, they do exercises to learn how to read and write the new words.

The tests for checking reading comprehension are based on the Cambridge English Young Learners' tests (YLE) – Starter level. The test includes three parts. The first part is used to check students' ability to remember vocabulary for naming animals by asking students to look at a picture and decide if a statement is true or false ('This is a/an + X'). The second part asks students to look at a picture, read sentences describing the picture and decide if they are appropriate to the picture or not. The sentences are constructed by the modal verb *can* (e.g. 'The horse can walk') and vocabulary for naming different animals and their activities. The last part checks students' ability of decoding a text containing some blanks by asking students to fill in the blanks of a paragraph with appropriate words which are available for them to choose. The grammatical structures used in the text include the modal verb *can* and the *present simple tense* (e.g I can run, I am a horse).

The final step in the experiment involves the completion of a five-minute-exercise that the students did five weeks after the post-test. This exercise requires students to fill in the gaps of a paragraph, using given words. Due to the limited time of the experiment, the time chosen is five-week. Once the data of the pre-test, the post-test and the exercise have been collected, the Mann Whitney test, the Wilcoxon signed rank test and the General Linear Model (GLM) are applied to analyze the results in depth.

#### **4. Results**

The results of the pre-test, the post-test and the five-week-later exercise will be decoded hereafter, using the Mann Whitney test, the Wilcoxon signed rank test and the General Linear Model.

The two groups were homogenous, which is shown by statistical tests of homogeneity (table B.1 and B.3). The results of the pre-test (table B.2) show that although the two groups got similar results for identifying vocabulary for farm animals, students of the control group were significantly better ( $p$  value  $< 0.05$ ) than students of the experimental group in terms of reading and understanding separate sentences containing vocabulary for several farm animals, animals' activities, and the modal verb *can*.

Regarding the results of the post-test, the data (table B.4) show that there was not a notable difference between the two groups in comprehending separate sentences made up by the modal verb *can* and the vocabulary for wild animals and their activities ( $p$  value  $> 0.05$ ). The data collected and analyzed also point out that the two groups' results of the post-test were remarkably higher than the results of the pre-test ( $p$  value  $< 0.05$ ).

The fact that the experimental group with lower starting point reached the same position as the control group in the post-test can affirm the effect of storytelling in helping the experimental group improve their ability of processing the whole meaning of sentences built up with the modal verb *can* and the vocabulary of the topic wild animals, as well as reach the same level of reading-comprehending separate sentences as the control group.

When the students overcome the level being tested in the test, they can achieve the result of 90% to 100%. And at an exact time when the two groups could reach the level being tested in the post-test (remembering and understanding – two basic levels of the Bloom's taxonomy), they could get the result of 90% to 100%, which is also the highest point that they can get in the test. At that moment the test does not provide valuable data because its level of difficulty cannot differentiate the level of reading comprehension of students. Therefore, it is crucially necessary to test not only the effect of storytelling but also the influence of time and the impact of interaction between time and methods in order to see the real effect of storytelling in improving students' ability of reading separate sentences constructed by the modal verb *can* and the vocabulary of the topic wild animals.

The General Linear Model (GLM) was applied to analyze the data of part 2 of the pre-test and the post-test to see the real effect of storytelling, the impact of time and the influence of interaction between time and methods in improving students' ability of reading-comprehending separate sentences. Students' progress in their reading and comprehending separate sentences from the pre-test to the post-test is presented in the figure A.3. The results (table B.6) show that there are three factors contributing fundamentally to the improvement of the two groups in reading-comprehending separate sentences. They are: (i) treatment (p value = 0.028), (ii) time (p value = 0.000), and (iii) the interaction between time and treatment (p value = 0.02). From the results of the GLM, it can be seen that the role of treatment - storytelling is significant in helping experimental students improve their reading-comprehension (p value < 0.05). As can be seen from the figure A.3, at the beginning (the pre-test), the two groups started at two different points with a long distance between them. And after an exact time studying with different treatments, they came nearly to the same position. This proves the contribution of storytelling in helping the experimental group improve their level of reading-comprehending separate sentences constructed by the modal verb-*can* and the vocabulary of wild animals and their actions.

From the GLM results, as can be seen that time and continued language exposure played a pivotal role in helping students become mature in understanding separate sentences. Day by day, with more time of studying under explicit instruction, being exposed to English input, students of the two groups became more mature in their language understanding and grammar competence. Therefore, time is necessary to see the maturity and progress of students. As can be seen from the figure A.3 that,

from the pre-test to the post-test, the results show a significant improvement in students' ability of reading-comprehending separate sentences. In addition, the GLM also shows that there is a significant interaction between time and treatment ( $p$  value = 0.02) in students' progress in reading-understanding separate sentences.

Although being proved to help the experimental group both improve and reach the same level as the control group in reading-comprehending separate sentences, storytelling has not proved to be more effective than other activities providing students with written input (such as games and exercises) in improving students' ability of decoding a gapped paragraph and filling in the blanks with some available words. In the pre-test, the two groups were similar and very modest in understanding a text including connected sentences and some gaps, and filling in the gaps with appropriate words that are already given for them to choose (the mean of the experimental group is 1.27, and the mean of the control group is 1.4 while the max point is 5). Thus they started at the same position which was low. After the same amount of time, under different treatments, the two groups got similar results ( $p$  value > 0.05), which were considerably higher than their previous results in the pre-test ( $p$  value < 0.05).

There are some reasons that would explain why the two groups were similar and very modest in reading-comprehending a text including some gaps, which is shown in their results of the last part of the pre-test. The main reason is that decoding a gapped paragraph requires a higher level of understanding and remembering both vocabulary and grammatical structures. This is the level of applying grammatical structures and vocabulary internalized, analysing the text containing some blanks to fill in the blanks with correct words. Therefore, it requires both logical thinking and a feeling of grammar or deep understanding of grammatical structures in terms of which part of speech is required (for example, the gap in the sentence *I am a...* requires a noun naming an animal, not a verb) in order to fill in the blanks with appropriate words and to know which word cannot be filled in a specific gap. And the students need time, instruction, language exposure and practice to build the feeling of grammar and reach the grammatical competence. The grammatical competence cannot be taught, but the teacher can help the students develop it by providing them with language exposure, raising their awareness of forms - meaning, and teaching sentences instead of words.

The second reason is that understanding a text requires a higher level of reading comprehension, it demands an extra effort from the students as well as advanced cognitive ability, because students had to decode more than one sentence and connect the sentences together, in order to see the relationship between them and to comprehend the whole meaning of the text.

Thirdly, when the pre-test was carried out, we observed that the students found it difficult to read the text; consequently, they were unable to understand the text or fill in the gaps. The words that the students could not read were contrastively very

familiar to them. They are the words used to communicate in the class (for example: I, am, you, are, one, two, three) or to connect sentences (e.g.: with, and), and they were often produced by the teacher. However, the teacher rarely wrote these words on the blackboard, and as a result, the students were not familiar with their written form. There were other lexical items that the students had learnt in previous years (such as tree, farm), hindering students' understanding. When looking at the text, the students were required to read it, and instead of pronouncing English words, they read the English text in the way they read a Spanish text. For example, the students produced /ɪ/ for the word 'I' instead of /aɪ/, and then they had [/ɪ/ /am/ /a/ and a blank] instead of [/aɪ/ /am/ /ə/ and a blank]. Because the students could not read the words correctly, they could not identify familiar sounds or even recognise whether they had learnt these English words before. This lack of understanding made the students nervous, and they could not do the exercise. This could explain the low marks in the last part of the pre-test.

The story-based lessons in this project were designed aiming to supply children with more written text. The purposes of giving children more written text are: (i) to help children be familiar with text, in order to remember how to read words and form the ability of decoding connected sentences so as to find the meaning of a text; (ii) to support children in discovering the rules themselves so that the children can gradually build their feeling of grammar and form some grammatical habits, such as the habit of putting a verb after the modal verb *can*. More activities (in the form of exercises and games providing written words or sentences and requiring students to spell and read aloud) were designed in order to help children improve their pronunciation and make a connection between sounds and words. These activities were developed in both groups – the experimental and the control.

The GLM with repeated measures was applied to analyze the scores students achieved in the part 3 of the pre-test, the post-test, and the 5-week-later exercise, so as to assess the influence of different treatments, the effect of time and the impact of the interaction between time and treatments. The results of GLM (table B.7 and figure A.4) show that, time played a pivotal role in students' progress of decoding a gapped paragraph and filling in the gaps with appropriate words. As can be seen from table B.7 and figure A.4, students had considerably higher results in part 3 of the post-test in comparison with the pre-test. And five weeks later, their results of part 3 of the post-test still slightly increased.

Five weeks after the post-test, the experimental group's students were asked to answer some questions like 'What can the elephant do?', they answered immediately 'The elephant can trumpet' instead of 'walk' or 'run', and they also understood that the elephant can walk and run by saying yes to the question 'Can the elephant run and walk?'. On the other hand, the students of the control group gave the answer 'run' instead of 'trumpet', although during the project, they were given exercises, games requiring to match a word naming an animal to a word

naming an activity done by this animal, such as elephant - trumpet, zebra - bray. The difference between the two groups is that the experimental group had formed the habit of using specific couples of words accurately (such as zebra - bray, lion - roar, with the modal verb can), while the control group had not formed this habit.

From an extensive analysis of the results, it can be seen that the first hypothesis of this article proves right while the second one is rejected. Storytelling helps children remember, understand and use the vocabulary of a certain topic and a specific grammatical structure. When children are exposed to stories as a vehicle for learning, there is a greater impact on retaining new words and understanding sentences. Storytelling is as effective as other approaches that have been used in teaching English as a foreign language, such as games and exercises to help students understand separate sentences. However, to help students apply their understanding of vocabulary and grammar to decode a gapped text (an exercise that requires not only understanding but also analysing and applying), time, practice and continuous language exposure played a fundamental part.

## **5. Discussion**

In this section, the findings of the paper will be discussed, under the viewpoints of some following theories. They are the 'Input processing model' proposed by VanPatten (1993, 2004), the 'automaticity' teaching principle put forward by Brown (2001), and the role of stories in developing students' language knowledge and reading comprehension.

The first finding which states that when children are exposed to stories as a vehicle for learning, there is a greater impact on retaining new words and understanding sentences contents the 'Input processing model' that Van VanPatten (1993, 2004) proposed. This suggests learners focus on input which is not in the type of separate sentences but connected discourse in order to get more intake from the input. Storytelling provides learners with input in the type of connected discourse, which according to VanPatten (2004) can help learners pay attention to input and make form-meaning connections when they process input, thus increases the intake that is stored in their memory. This can explain why the experimental group formed the habit of using specific couples of words (such as zebra - bray, lion - roar, with the modal verb can), while the control group did not because the control group was provided with sentences, games instead of text and context.

The second finding which emphasizes the role of time in helping students apply their understanding of vocabulary and grammar to decode a text including some gaps supports the principle 'automaticity' in teaching language that H. Douglas Brown (2001, p. 56) puts forward, which points out that each individual needs time to become a successful language user:

Efficient second language learning involves a timely movement of the control of a few language forms into the automatic processing of a relatively unlimited number of language forms. Overanalyzing language, thinking too much about its form and consciously lingering on rules of language all tend to impede this graduation to automaticity.

This explains why time played a pivotal role in students' progress of decoding a gapped text and filling in the text with appropriate words (which is the level of applying and analyzing). Storytelling provides students with exposure to language input, instead of overanalyzing language. According to Brown (2001, p. 55), 'an inductive process of exposure to language input and opportunity to experiment with output, children appear to learn languages without "thinking" about them'. Therefore, storytelling can help students increase instead of impeding their graduation to automaticity in using language, which led to their improvement in the ability of decoding a connected discourse including some blanks and filling in blanks after an exact time.

Although the finding shows that using storytelling is as effective as using other approaches for the teaching of English as a foreign language (such as games and exercises), teachers still need to use storytelling in an EFL class due to some positive effects it brings to the class that other methods do not. The first one is that it can form some habits of using particular couples of words, combinations or collocations for students. From the finding of the project, as can be seen that after storytelling, experimental students could form the habit of using some specific couples of words (such as, snake – hiss, zebra – bray) correctly. This may suggest that the story with the context and during-storytelling activities such as guessing the plot, ordering the animals and their actions, can facilitate the ability of remembering the events, the characters with actions, and some sentences of the story that they find interesting, therefore, assist students to build some habits of using words, word combinations and sentences correctly. The second one is that the combination of words in a context helps students guess and get the meaning of new words and sentences, which supports them in their recoding and decoding, and actually provides a natural language setting for students to acquire language, develop their reading like the way they learn to listen and talk (Thogmartin, 1977). The story-based lesson with the experimental group follows both bottom-up reading model and top-down reading model. With the combination of these two models, students are prepared with enough language (new vocabulary and grammatical structures) before listening to the story, which can reduce their anxiety while processing input. And during the story, students can rely on the context (the whole story) to guess and remember the meaning of new words and sentences, which can facilitate their understanding and memorizing new language. It is also important to emphasize that the storytelling applied in this paper is not free storytelling, it is a storytelling intervention, following the model of Ellis and Brewster (2014). The fact that storytelling as a method of instruction helped children to remember and understand the vocabulary

of a certain topic supports the findings of other studies (Beck and McKeown, 2007; Marulis and Neuman, 2010) which pointed out that the combination of both explicit and implicit instruction, introducing students to words with meaningful practice and review, has larger effects on students' word learning.

The study also has some limitations. The first limitation has to do with timing among the different parts of the experiments. While the pre-test was conducted roughly a year after the students had learnt the target vocabulary, the post-test was carried out one week after the story sessions finished. The fact that the two intervals were not similar could affect the students' performance and hence the results of the tests and exercises. However, to reduce the influence of this limitation, the GLM was applied to analyze not only the effect of methods used to teach students reading, but also the influence of time and the interaction between time and methods, in order to see the real effect of storytelling.

Secondly, although the story provides students with the vocabulary being tested, it does not include the modal verb 'can', which is the structure being tested. Nevertheless, this limitation can turn out to be an advantage; since, even if the story does not give students the structure being tested, the context of the story can make the meaning of 'can' easy to infer.

The finding of the effect of storytelling on fostering students' reading comprehension has implications for storytelling investigators in the field of teaching ESL. Investigators such as Wright (1995), Ellis and Brewster (1991, 2002, 2014), Cameron (2001), among others, strongly recommend the use of storytelling as a method of instruction when teaching a foreign language. Stachurska's study (2013) shows that children become more involved in story sessions on condition that a variety of pre- and post-story activities are employed. And the findings of this paper contribute to confirm storytelling's benefits in improving children's reading abilities, especially in reading-comprehending separate sentences. The findings of the project also suggest that storytelling can help students form specific habits in using language, such as the habit of using specific pairs of words correctly, (e.g.: zebra-bray, snake-hiss).

Regarding the practical implications of this case study, the findings of the role of storytelling and the role of time in improving students' reading-comprehension have important implications for L2 English teachers, especially for the ones teaching English for young learners. Due to the fact that learners need time to become successful language users, who not only understand but also analyze and use language without thinking much about the forms or the rules, teachers should not overanalyze language forms. Instead, they should provide learners with an inductive process of language exposure, including the use of storytelling. Storytelling provides young learners with language exposure and context-the natural environment to acquire language. Therefore, it can create a greater impact on learners for remembering vocabulary and understanding the meaning of a given text,

as well as form some habits for foreign language learners, such as the use of some specific pairs of words, which has been shown in the findings of this project. This nurtures learner's graduation to automaticity in using language, fosters their abilities of predicting and confirming the guess of what's coming next or the meaning of new words while reading, which benefits both their decode and recode process.

## **6. Conclusions**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, when children are exposed to stories as a vehicle for learning, there is a greater impact on retaining new words and understanding sentences. Secondly, time and continued language exposure play an important role in helping students master and use language proficiently.

With the discourse that the story provided, the students of the experimental group could form a persistent habit of matching the word to name an animal with the corresponding word to name an activity done by this animal (for example, snake - hiss, flamingo - flute, elephant - trumpet). From this observation, it can be inferred that storytelling can help students form some specific habits in using a foreign language better than other activities aiming at providing students with written input, such as games or exercises.

7. Appendices

A. Figures

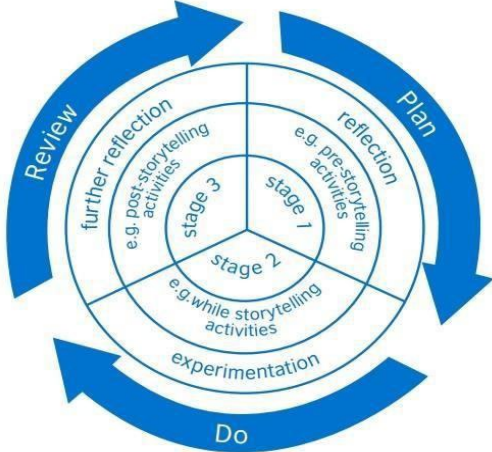


Figure A.1: a three-stage model for a story – based methodology (Ellis and Brewster, 2014 adapted from HighScope)

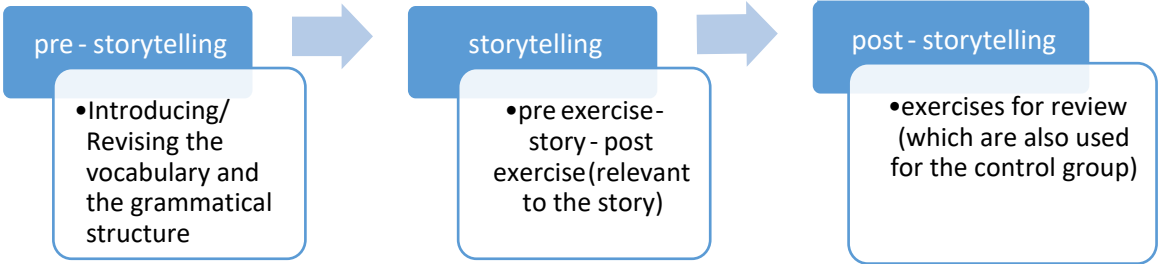
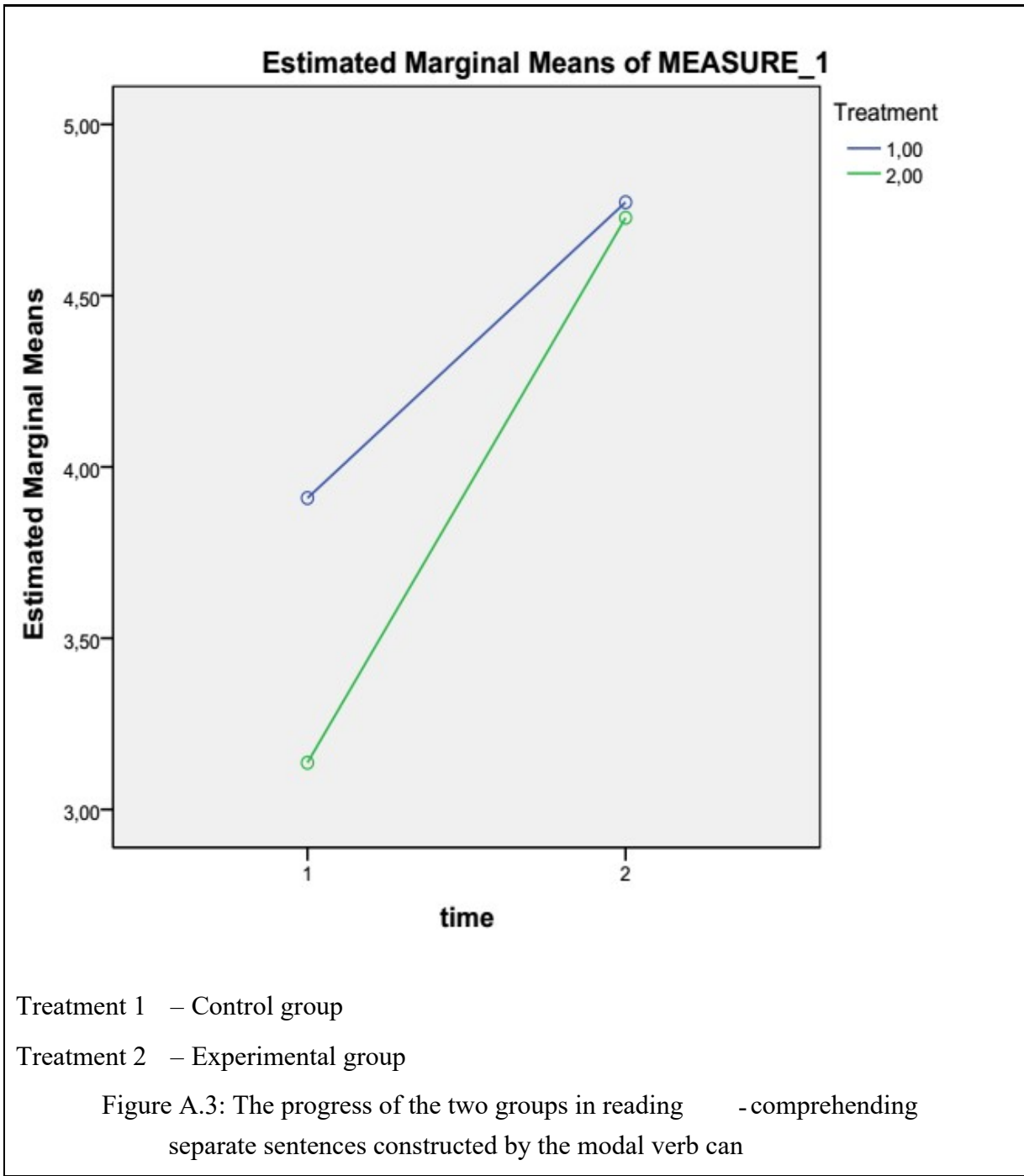
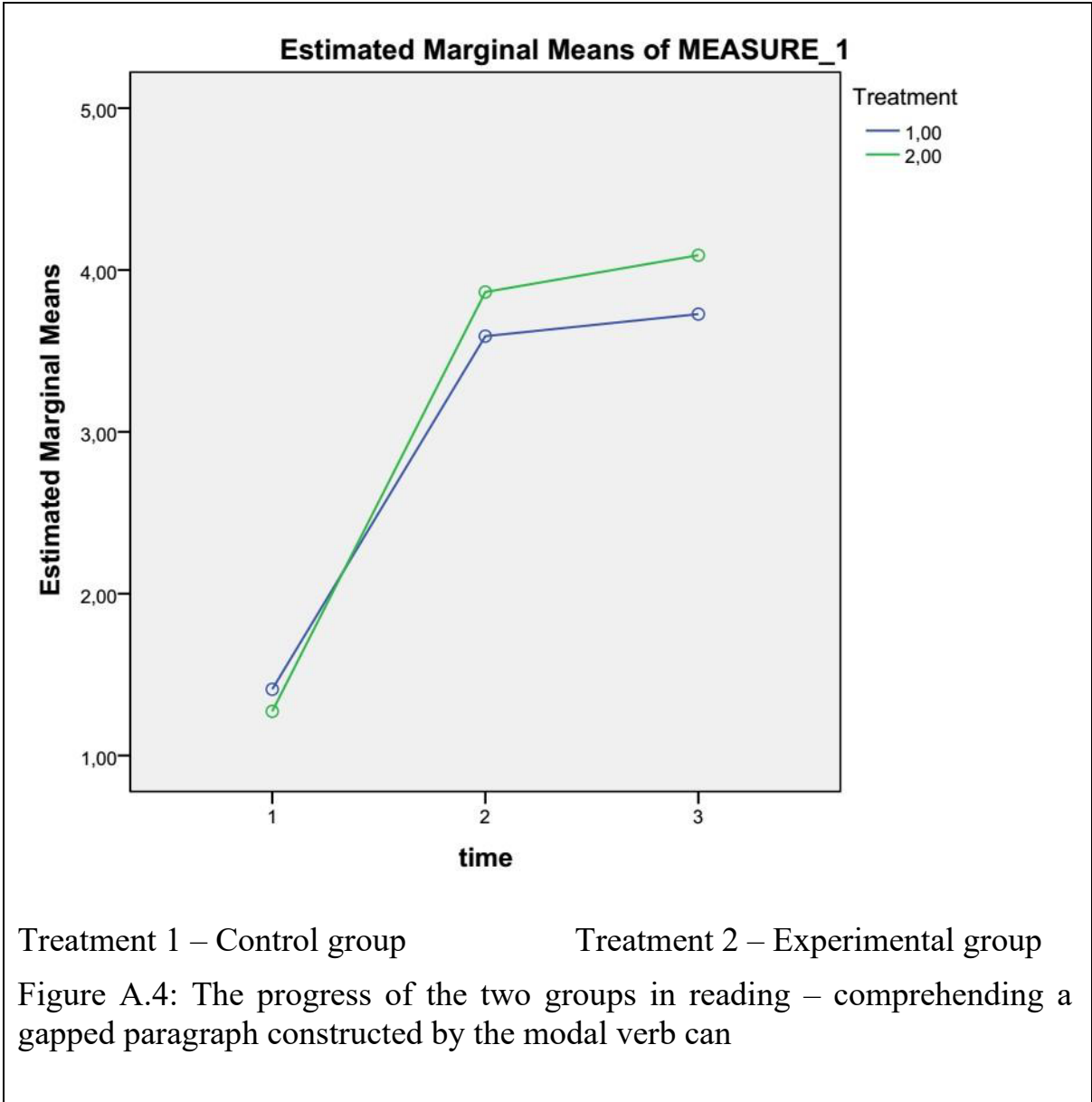


Figure A.2: The structure of a story-based lesson for the experimental group (Adapted from the three-stage model for a story based methodology proposed by Ellis and Brewster, 2014)





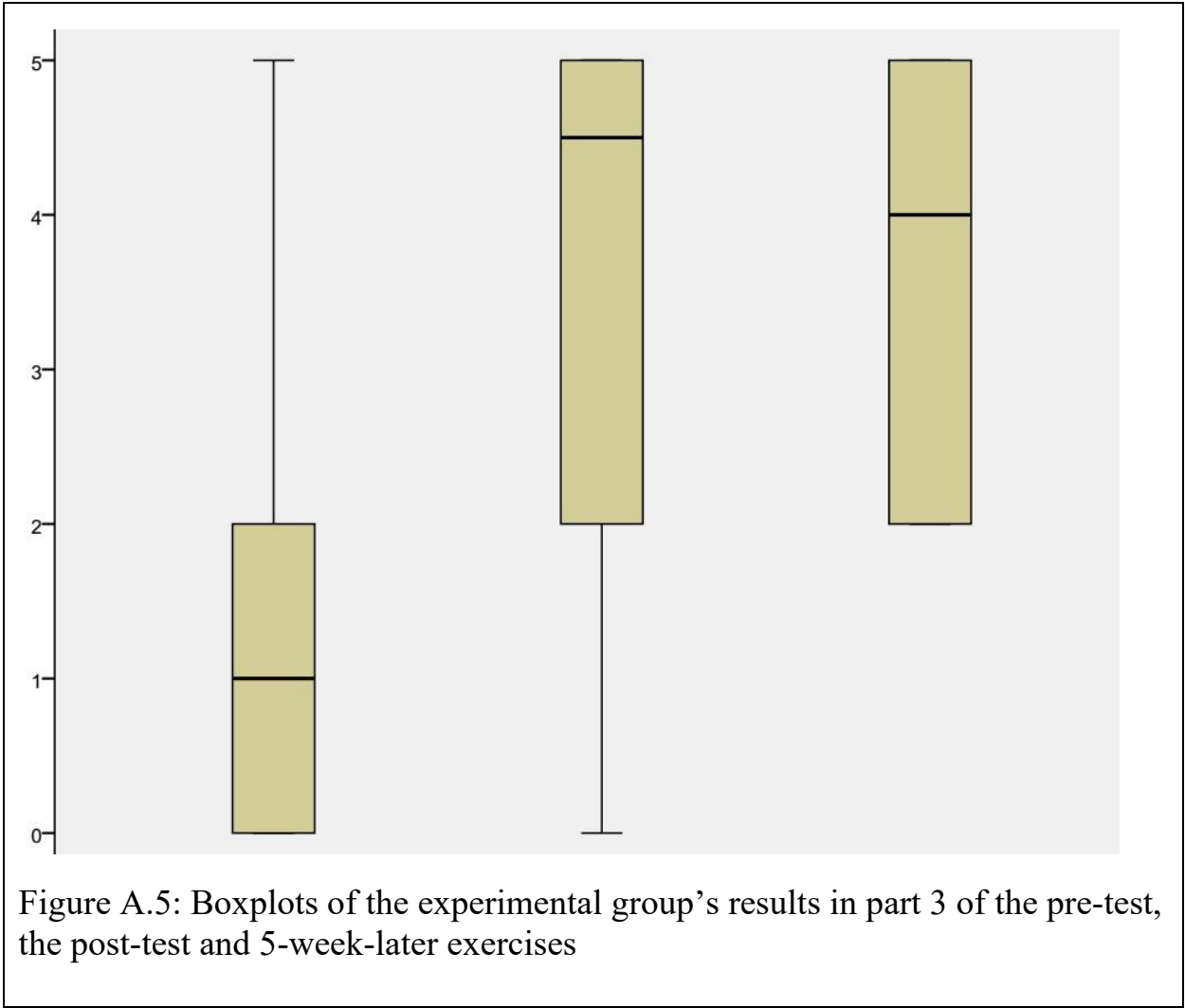


Figure A.5: Boxplots of the experimental group's results in part 3 of the pre-test, the post-test and 5-week-later exercises

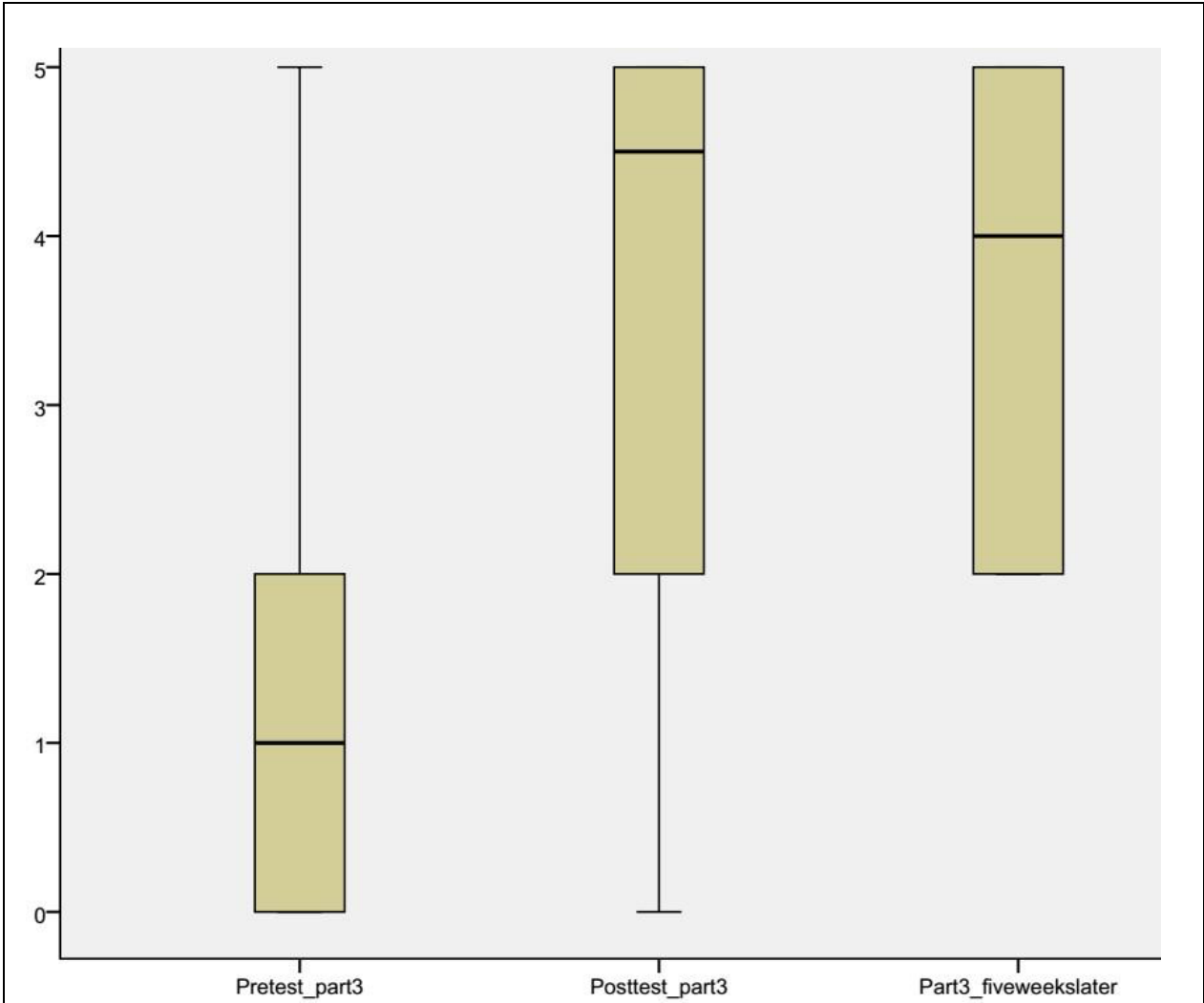


Figure A.6. Boxplots of the control group’s results in part 3 of the pre-test, the post-test and 5-week-later exercises

**B. Tables**

Test of Homogeneity of Variance					
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Pretest_part1	Based on Mean	1,420	1	42	,240
	Based on Median	,344	1	42	,561
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	,344	1	38,286	,561
	Based on trimmed mean	1,284	1	42	,264
Pretest_part2	Based on Mean	2,534	1	42	,119
	Based on Median	2,252	1	42	,141
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2,252	1	38,989	,142
	Based on trimmed mean	1,497	1	42	,228
Pretest_part3	Based on Mean	,185	1	42	,669
	Based on Median	,023	1	42	,881
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	,023	1	39,454	,882
	Based on trimmed mean	,135	1	42	,715

Table B.1: Levene test of homogeneity of variance of the pre - test results of the two groups

**Ranks**

	Treatment	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Pretest_part1	1,00	22	23,00	506,00
	2,00	22	22,00	484,00
	Total	44		
Pretest_part2	1,00	22	27,66	608,50
	2,00	22	17,34	381,50
	Total	44		
Pretest_part3	1,00	22	22,86	503,00
	2,00	22	22,14	487,00
	Total	44		

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Pretest_part1	Pretest_part2	Pretest_part3
Mann-Whitney U	231,000	128,500	234,000
Wilcoxon W	484,000	381,500	487,000
Z	-,591	-2,786	-,196
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,554	,005	,845
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	1,000	,004	,862
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	,500	,002	,431
Point Probability	,384	,000	,016

a. Grouping Variable: Treatment

Treatment 1: control group

Treatment 2: experimental group

Table B.2: Mann Whitney test for pre test results of the two groups

Test of Homogeneity of Variance					
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Posttest_part1	Based on Mean	,881	1	42	,353
	Based on Median	,216	1	42	,644
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	,216	1	40,748	,644
	Based on trimmed mean	,881	1	42	,353
Posttest_part2	Based on Mean	,632	1	42	,431
	Based on Median	,093	1	42	,761
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	,093	1	39,632	,762
	Based on trimmed mean	,202	1	42	,656
Posttest_part3	Based on Mean	1,754	1	42	,193
	Based on Median	,675	1	42	,416
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	,675	1	39,529	,416
	Based on trimmed mean	1,729	1	42	,196

Table B.3 : Levene test of homogeneity of variance of the post -test results of the two groups

**Ranks**

	Treatment	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Posttest_part1	1,00	22	22,00	484,00
	2,00	22	23,00	506,00
	Total	44		
Posttest_part2	1,00	22	22,61	497,50
	2,00	22	22,39	492,50
	Total	44		
Posttest_part3	1,00	22	21,82	480,00
	2,00	22	23,18	510,00
	Total	44		

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Posttest_part1	Posttest_part2	Posttest_part3
Mann-Whitney U	231,000	239,500	227,000
Wilcoxon W	484,000	492,500	480,000
Z	-,470	-,081	-,378
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,639	,936	,705
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	1,000	1,000	,727
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	,500	,500	,364
Point Probability	,328	,140	,009

a. Grouping Variable: Treatment

Treatment 1: control group

Treatment 2: experimental group

Table B.4: Mann Whitney test for post - test results of the two groups

### Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest_part1	22	4,9091	,29424	4,00	5,00
Pretest_part2	22	3,1364	,77432	1,00	4,00
Pretest_part3	22	1,2727	1,38639	,00	5,00
Posttest_part1	22	4,9091	,29424	4,00	5,00
Posttest_part2	22	4,7273	,55048	3,00	5,00
Posttest_part3	22	3,8636	1,35560	1,00	5,00

### Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Posttest_part1 - Pretest_part1	Posttest_part2 - Pretest_part2	Posttest_part3 - Pretest_part3
Z	,000 <sup>b</sup>	-4,104 <sup>c</sup>	-3,784 <sup>c</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	1,000	,000	,000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. The sum of negative ranks equals the sum of positive ranks.

c. Based on negative ranks.

Table B.5.1 : Wilcoxon signed rank test for the experimental group's results of the pre -test and the post - test

### Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pretest_part1	22	4,9545	,21320	4,00	5,00
Pretest_part2	22	3,9091	1,15095	1,00	5,00
Pretest_part3	22	1,4091	1,56324	,00	5,00
Posttest_part1	22	4,8636	,35125	4,00	5,00
Posttest_part2	22	4,7727	,42893	4,00	5,00
Posttest_part3	22	3,5909	1,65210	,00	5,00

### Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Posttest_part1 - Pretest_part1	Posttest_part2 - Pretest_part2	Posttest_part3 - Pretest_part3
Z	-1,000 <sup>b</sup>	-3,213 <sup>c</sup>	-3,644 <sup>c</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,317	,001	,000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on positive ranks.

c. Based on negative ranks.

Table B.5.2 : Wilcoxon signed rank test for the control group's results of the pre - test and the post - test

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	1505,636	1	1505,636	2130,487	,000
Treatment	3,682	1	3,682	5,210	,028
Error	29,682	42	,707		

### Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Source		Sig.
time	Sphericity Assumed	,000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	,000
	Huynh-Feldt	,000
	Lower-bound	,000
time * Treatment	Sphericity Assumed	,020
	Greenhouse-Geisser	,020
	Huynh-Feldt	,020
	Lower-bound	,020
Error(time)	Sphericity Assumed	
	Greenhouse-Geisser	
	Huynh-Feldt	
	Lower-bound	

Table B.6 : GLM test with repeated measures for part 2 of the pre - test  
and part 2 of the post - test

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	1182,008	1	1182,008	315,384	,000
Treatment	,917	1	,917	,245	,623
Error	157,409	42	3,748		

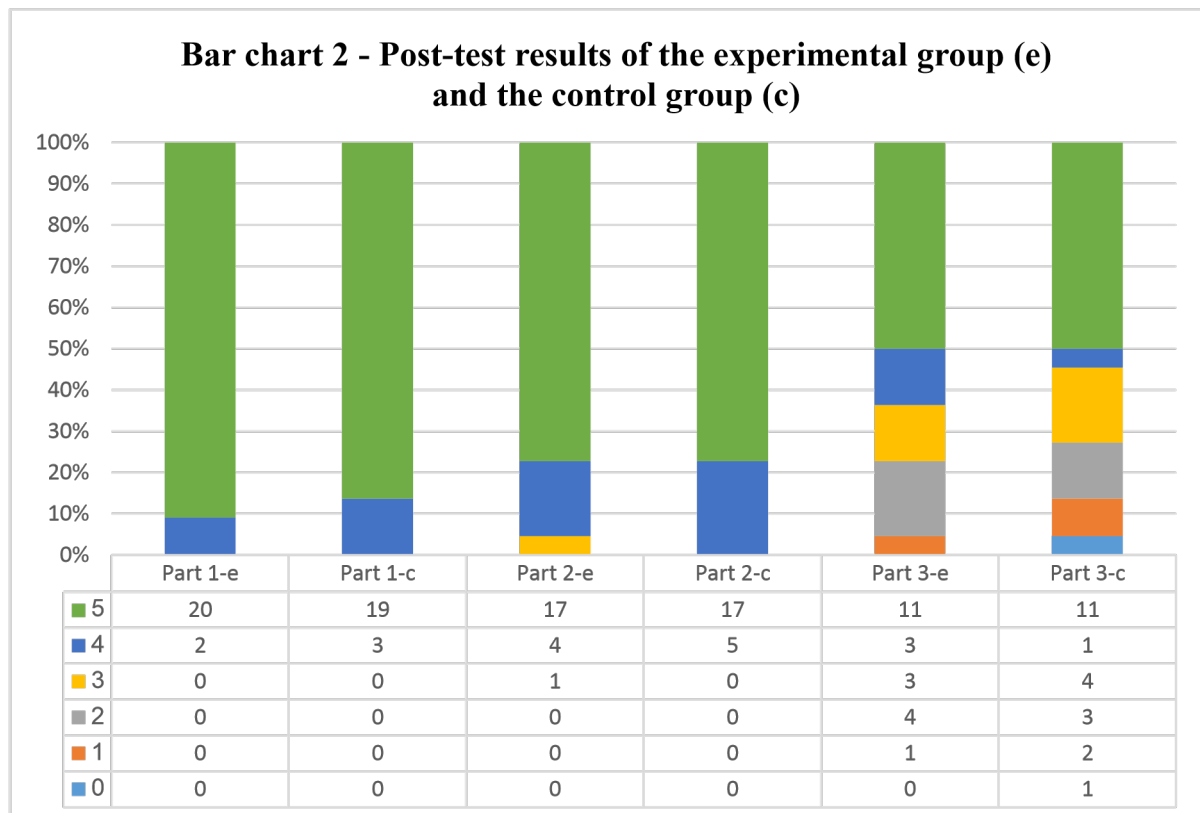
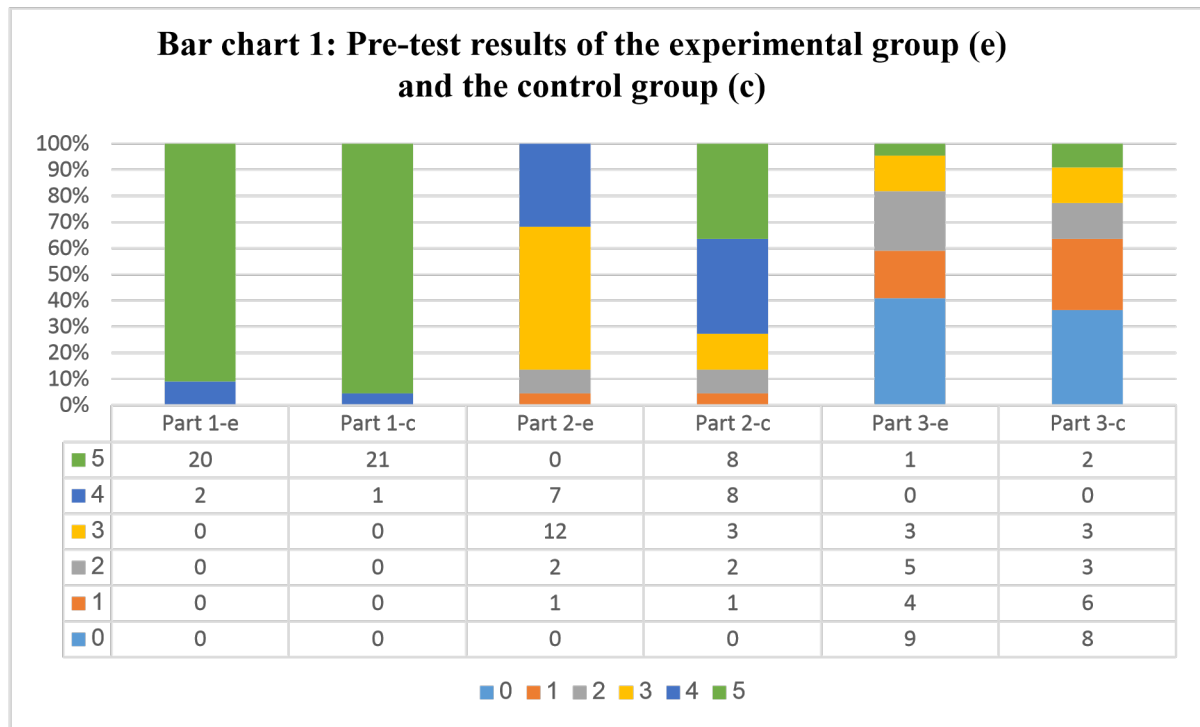
### Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Measure: MEASURE\_1

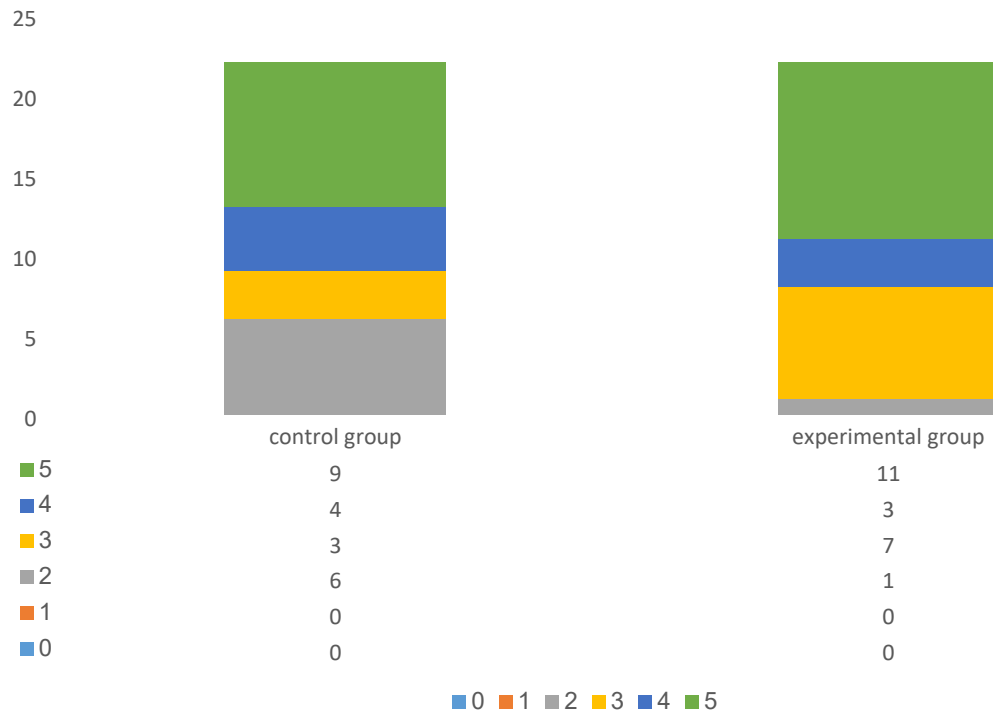
Source		Sig.
time	Sphericity Assumed	,000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	,000
	Huynh-Feldt	,000
	Lower-bound	,000
time * Treatment	Sphericity Assumed	,471
	Greenhouse-Geisser	,449
	Huynh-Feldt	,456
	Lower-bound	,389
Error(time)	Sphericity Assumed	
	Greenhouse-Geisser	
	Huynh-Feldt	
	Lower-bound	

Table B.7: GLM test with repeated measures for part 3 of the pre - test, the post - test and the 5 -week -later exercises

### C. Bar charts



**Bar chart 3**  
**The results of the two groups in part 3 of the post-test**  
**five weeks later**



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