

The use of short stories in improving reading skills

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of short stories in improving reading skills among English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, with a particular focus on the "previewing the text" method. The research examines how introducing students to key elements of a short story, such as characters, setting, and themes, before reading the full text enhances their reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and engagement with the material. A qualitative approach was employed, involving a literature review and interviews with both students and teachers who have used short stories in their language learning and teaching practices. The findings reveal that short stories, when used in conjunction with the previewing technique, significantly boost students' ability to understand and analyze the text, foster critical thinking, and increase their vocabulary retention. The previewing method also helps students feel more prepared and less intimidated by unfamiliar words or complex structures, resulting in a more confident and motivated reading experience. The study highlights the potential of short stories to improve reading skills in EFL contexts and suggests that educators should integrate this approach into their curriculum to promote active engagement and deeper language development.

Keywords: *short stories in language learning, reading comprehension in EFL, previewing technique in reading, EFL teaching strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Reading skills are fundamental to language learning, particularly in foreign language acquisition. One of the most effective strategies to enhance these skills is the integration of short stories into the learning process. The use of short stories in language classrooms has garnered significant attention due to its potential to engage learners, foster critical thinking, and improve comprehension abilities. This approach is particularly useful in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where learners often face challenges in acquiring language skills. Short stories, with their concise yet rich narratives, offer an ideal medium for enhancing various aspects of reading proficiency, such as vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and analytical thinking.

One of the main reasons short stories are effective in improving reading skills is their ability to capture the attention of students through engaging content. Unlike long novels, short stories are accessible and less intimidating for language learners. According to Barzani (2020), both EFL teachers and students have recognized the effectiveness of short stories in enhancing reading comprehension. The brevity of the stories ensures that learners are not overwhelmed, while the captivating nature of these texts keeps them motivated to continue reading. As Barzani notes, short stories provide

a diverse range of genres and themes, offering learners an opportunity to explore different cultural perspectives, characters, and life situations.

Short stories also play a crucial role in improving reading comprehension. Khatib and Nasrollahi (2012) highlight that reading short stories in the classroom can significantly enhance learners' ability to understand and interpret texts. The rich contexts of short stories encourage students to make connections between the text and their prior knowledge, thus improving their overall comprehension skills. Furthermore, as they analyze the plot, characters, and themes of a story, learners develop the ability to infer meaning, make predictions, and critically assess the content. These cognitive processes are essential for developing higher-order thinking skills that are not only valuable for language learning but also for academic success.

In addition to comprehension, short stories also serve as a valuable tool for vocabulary development. By reading stories, learners are exposed to new words and phrases in context, which allows them to understand the meaning and usage of vocabulary more effectively than through isolated vocabulary lists. This approach aligns with the findings of Ceylan (2016), who states that short stories facilitate vocabulary acquisition by providing contextual clues and encouraging learners to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. The repetition of key vocabulary in different contexts further reinforces learning, enabling students to retain and apply the new language more readily.

Moreover, short stories are a powerful means of fostering critical thinking skills. Khatib and Mehrgan (2012) assert that engaging with short stories allows learners to evaluate characters' motives, interpret the message behind the story, and explore different viewpoints. This process encourages students to question assumptions, analyze situations from multiple perspectives, and develop their reasoning abilities. The ability to think critically is vital in academic and real-life situations, and short stories offer an excellent platform for cultivating this skill in an enjoyable and accessible way.

The inclusion of short stories in EFL classrooms is not limited to improving reading skills alone. According to Al-Jarf (2015), short stories can also enhance speaking skills by providing a foundation for discussions. After reading a story, students can engage in group discussions, debates, or presentations about the themes and characters, thus reinforcing their understanding of the text while practicing speaking and listening. This interactive process, which encourages communication and exchange of ideas, can significantly enhance the learners' language proficiency.

Another significant advantage of using short stories in language learning is their potential to expose learners to various cultural contexts and values. This multicultural exposure broadens students' understanding of the world and enhances their ability to engage with different cultures. As Pathan (2013) points out, short stories often reflect

the customs, beliefs, and challenges of various societies, giving learners a deeper appreciation of global diversity. This cultural exposure not only enhances reading comprehension but also contributes to the development of intercultural competence, which is an essential aspect of language learning in today's globalized world.

With advancements in technology, short stories are no longer confined to printed books but are also available in digital formats, such as interactive e-books and online reading platforms. These digital versions introduce new dimensions to reading comprehension by incorporating multimedia elements, hyperlinks, and interactive features that support engagement and meaning-making. From a metacognitive perspective, digital short stories can enhance self-monitoring strategies by providing instant access to glossaries, summaries, or discussion prompts, encouraging readers to regulate their comprehension in real time.

In short, the use of short stories in language classrooms offers a multifaceted approach to improving reading skills. By fostering engagement, enhancing comprehension, promoting vocabulary acquisition, and encouraging critical thinking, short stories provide a rich learning experience for EFL students. The diverse themes and cultural insights embedded in short stories also contribute to the development of intercultural awareness, making this approach particularly valuable in today's globalized world. As research continues to demonstrate, integrating short stories into language instruction is an effective strategy for improving reading skills and promoting overall language proficiency. Through careful selection and thoughtful incorporation of short stories, educators can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that supports the development of essential language skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE RELATIONSHIP OF SHORT STORIES AND READING SKILLS

The effectiveness of short stories in enhancing reading skills is supported by numerous studies. For example, Ghasemi (2011) emphasizes that using short stories as a tool in language instruction improves both reading and writing skills. Similarly, Pratiwi, Putri, and Suhadi (2020) found that short stories are an effective medium for motivating students to improve their reading abilities. The engagement and motivation provided by these stories lead to better academic outcomes, as students are more likely to invest time and effort in reading activities when they are presented with compelling narratives.

Furthermore, the use of short stories in language instruction promotes active learning. Rather than passively absorbing information, students are encouraged to interact with the text, discuss their interpretations, and engage in problem-solving activities related to the story. This active engagement enhances their reading comprehension and allows

them to internalize the language in a meaningful way. As Novasyari and Fauziah (2024) argue, short stories encourage learners to think critically, analyze text structure, and identify literary devices, thus developing a deeper understanding of language and its use.

LITERARY ACQUISITION

Jeanne Chall's (1983) provide a theoretical framework for literacy acquisition, outlining the progression from basic decoding to fluent and critical reading. Short stories play a crucial role in facilitating this development. Chall's (1983) mentioned in the pre-reading stage (Stage 0, birth to age 6), children build oral language skills, phonemic awareness, and print concepts. Picture books and read-aloud short stories enhance vocabulary and listening comprehension, preparing them for later decoding. As children enter Stage 1 (ages 6-7), the initial reading or decoding phase, they begin recognizing letter-sound relationships and decoding simple words. Short stories with repetitive structures and controlled vocabulary support this process by reinforcing phonics skills. Moving to Stage 2 (ages 7-8), the confirmation and fluency stage, readers develop automatic word recognition and fluency. Engaging short stories with predictable syntax and controlled vocabulary provide repeated exposure to words, improving phrasing, prosody, and reading speed.

In Stage 3 (ages 9-14), reading for learning the new, students transition from learning to read to reading to learn. At this stage, short stories introduce new vocabulary, encourage inferencing, and develop comprehension strategies such as summarization and prediction. As readers advance to Stage 4 (ages 14-18), the multiple viewpoints stage, they engage with complex narratives that require critical analysis and an understanding of different perspectives. Short stories featuring diverse characters and themes challenge readers to interpret deeper meanings and analyze narrative techniques. Finally, in Stage 5 (ages 18+), the construction and reconstruction stage, readers synthesize and evaluate information independently. Literary short stories with open-ended interpretations foster higher-order thinking, intertextual connections, and creative responses. By providing structured yet engaging content at each stage, short stories effectively support readers' journey from basic decoding to fluent, critical, and independent reading.

In addition, it is strengthened by the theory of metacognitive reading strategies, as proposed by Flavell (1979), involve readers actively monitoring and regulating their comprehension processes. Short stories provide an ideal medium for developing these strategies, as their concise yet meaningful narratives encourage self-monitoring during reading. One key metacognitive strategy is planning, where readers set goals, predict outcomes, and activate prior knowledge before engaging with a text. Short stories, with their clear yet varied structures, prompt readers to anticipate plot developments and identify key themes. During reading, monitoring allows readers to assess their

understanding, recognize comprehension breakdowns, and employ fix-up strategies such as rereading or questioning. The brevity of short stories makes them particularly effective for this process, as readers can quickly revisit sections without feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, short stories often contain implicit meanings, requiring evaluative reflection, where readers assess their interpretations, infer character motives, and draw connections to their own experiences. This encourages the use of regulation strategies, such as adjusting reading pace or shifting strategies when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or complex ideas. Through repeated exposure to short stories, readers develop greater awareness of their thought processes, fostering independent comprehension and critical thinking. Thus, short stories serve as an effective tool for cultivating metacognitive reading strategies, enabling readers to become more self-directed and reflective in their approach to texts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research method, combining literature review and semi-structured interviews, to examine the effectiveness of short stories in improving reading skills. The research explores how short stories as a pedagogical tool influence students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking abilities. A key instructional strategy examined in this study is the previewing the text technique (also referred to as "pre-reading") which involves introducing learners to the content of a short story before they engage in the actual reading. This method aims to activate students' background knowledge and provide them with a framework for understanding the text, thus enhancing comprehension and retention. The previewing strategy involves presenting students with key elements of a short story, such as the title, main characters, setting, and themes, before they begin reading. By familiarizing students with these aspects, the method encourages them to make predictions about the story's plot, fostering curiosity and engagement. Research suggests that when students are given a contextual foundation, they can better focus on critical aspects of the text, such as the author's intent and deeper narrative meanings (Khatib & Nasrollahi, 2012). Additionally, previewing reduces cognitive overload by preparing students for unfamiliar vocabulary or complex sentence structures, enabling them to navigate the text more effectively.

To gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of this strategy, the study includes semi-structured interviews with both EFL teachers and students. The interviews aim to provide qualitative data on how learners perceive the role of short stories and the pre-reading approach in enhancing their reading skills. The study involves 3 EFL teachers and 20 students from an Islamic Tahfiz Quran school, all of whom have experience using short stories in their reading classes. Teachers are selected based on their involvement in teaching reading comprehension and implementing short stories

in their lessons, while students are chosen to represent different proficiency levels, ensuring diverse perspectives on how short stories impact reading skills. The interview questions for teachers focus on how they integrate short stories into their lessons, the challenges they face, students' responses to pre-reading activities, and their assessment of the previewing strategy's effectiveness in improving reading comprehension. Meanwhile, students are asked about their experiences with short stories, the usefulness of pre-reading activities, the challenges they encounter, and any improvements they have noticed in their vocabulary or reading skills.

The data collected from the interviews is analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. First, the interview responses are transcribed and reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. Next, initial codes are generated by labeling key concepts emerging from the transcripts. These codes are then grouped into broader themes related to reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and student engagement. The identified themes are reviewed and refined to ensure coherence before they are clearly defined and named. Finally, the themes are synthesized into a report, with supporting quotes from participants to illustrate key findings. By employing a combination of literature review and qualitative interviews, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how short stories, and the previewing technique contribute to reading development. The inclusion of both teacher and student perspectives ensures a well-rounded examination of the topic. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the pedagogical advantages of incorporating short stories into EFL classrooms and their potential to enhance students' reading proficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that the use of short stories, particularly when combined with the "previewing the text" method, significantly enhances reading skills in EFL learners. Both the interview data from students and teachers, as well as the literature reviewed; highlight the benefits of this approach in improving students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and engagement. These findings align with previous research, which supports the idea that short stories can serve as an effective tool in language classrooms by making reading more engaging, accessible, and meaningful. In this section, we will discuss the key findings related to the effectiveness of short stories in enhancing reading skills, including their impact on comprehension, vocabulary, critical thinking, and motivation, as well as the role of the previewing method in maximizing these benefits.

IMPACT ON READING COMPREHENSION

One of the primary benefits of using short stories in the classroom is their positive effect on reading comprehension. The data collected from student interviews revealed that students who were introduced to short stories using the "previewing the text" method showed a deeper understanding of the narrative compared to those who read the stories without any prior context. By familiarizing students with key elements such as the main characters, setting, and possible themes before reading, the previewing technique helped them to better grasp the central ideas of the text. This is consistent with the findings of Khatib and Nasrollahi (2012), who emphasize that providing students with a framework for understanding the story helps them to make meaningful connections between the text and their prior knowledge. The act of previewing allows students to predict what will happen in the story, thus setting the stage for a more focused and intentional reading experience.

Moreover, the previewing method seems to increase students' ability to infer meaning from the text. The students reported that by having a general understanding of the story's direction, they were able to focus on the details more effectively. This skill is crucial in reading comprehension, as it allows learners to process information more efficiently and make connections between different parts of the text. Thematic analysis of student interviews revealed that students found it easier to understand complex ideas and emotions in the story when they had already been exposed to the basic context, rather than feeling lost or confused by unfamiliar vocabulary or cultural references. This aligns with Barzani (2020), who suggests that previewing helps students to orient themselves within the text, making it less intimidating and more accessible.

VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

The use of short stories also played a significant role in enhancing students' vocabulary. Through the previewing technique, students were introduced to key vocabulary words before reading, which allowed them to approach the story with a better understanding of the language they would encounter. Interviews with students indicated that this method helped them recognize and understand new words in context, which significantly aided their retention. For instance, students reported that when they encountered unfamiliar words in the story, they were able to guess the meaning based on the information provided in the preview. The context-driven approach to vocabulary acquisition is supported by Ceylan (2016), who highlights the importance of providing learners with context clues, as it allows them to infer the meaning of new words in a natural and engaging way.

The repetition of vocabulary in different contexts throughout the story further reinforced students' learning. Teachers noted that students who engaged with short stories were able to recall new words more effectively than those who studied vocabulary in isolation. By seeing words in context, students not only learn their meaning but also how to use them correctly in sentences. This finding is in line with Ghasemi (2011), who argues that short stories provide a rich environment for vocabulary development, as they expose students to words and expressions used in a variety of real-world situations. Students' increased vocabulary knowledge was also reflected in their writing and speaking activities, where they demonstrated a greater ability to use new words with accuracy and confidence.

CRITICAL THINKING AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS

Another key finding of this study is the positive impact of short stories on students' critical thinking and analytical skills. The combination of short stories and the previewing method appears to foster a more reflective and evaluative approach to reading. Thematic analysis of interviews revealed that students were more likely to analyze the motivations of characters, make inferences about plot developments, and evaluate the story's themes after being introduced to the text beforehand. This mirrors the findings of Khatib and Mehrgan (2012), who argue that short stories stimulate critical thinking by encouraging students to interpret complex narratives, assess character decisions, and explore underlying themes.

Furthermore, by previewing the text, students were encouraged to engage with the story at a deeper level. Teachers observed that students were more inclined to ask questions about the text, challenge assumptions, and offer alternative interpretations after being guided through the initial context. This ability to think critically about a story not only improved students' reading comprehension but also prepared them for more complex literary analysis in future texts. In interviews, several students expressed that the process of previewing helped them approach the story with a more analytical mindset, allowing them to evaluate the plot and characters more effectively. This critical engagement with the text was seen as an important step in developing higher-order thinking skills, which are vital for academic success and lifelong learning.

ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

Engagement and motivation are crucial factors in the success of any language learning strategy. The results of this study indicate that short stories, especially when introduced through the previewing method, have a positive impact on students' motivation to read. Interviews with students revealed that the engaging nature of short stories—along with the anticipation created by the previewing process—made them more interested in

reading the story. Students appreciated that the stories were often shorter, more concise, and filled with intriguing plots, which made reading feel less like a chore and more like an enjoyable activity. This aligns with the research of Pratiwi, Putri, and Suhadi (2020), who suggest that short stories can motivate students by offering interesting content that is directly relevant to their language learning goals.

Teachers also noted that students were more enthusiastic about participating in post-reading activities, such as discussions and analysis, when short stories were used in the classroom. The previewing method seemed to set the stage for active engagement, as students felt more prepared and confident when they had prior knowledge of the story. As Pathan (2013) points out, the initial exposure to the content through previewing helps students feel less anxious and more curious about the story, which in turn boosts their motivation to read and discuss it.

The results of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of short stories, particularly when paired with the previewing technique, in improving various aspects of reading skills in EFL learners. By enhancing reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, critical thinking, and motivation, short stories provide a dynamic and engaging way to support language learning. The "previewing the text" method, which introduces students to key elements of the story before reading, plays a pivotal role in maximizing these benefits by helping learners feel more prepared and focused. The data from both student interviews and teacher observations confirm that short stories, when used strategically, create an enriching learning environment that encourages active engagement, promotes language development, and fosters a deeper understanding of the text. These findings suggest that short stories, particularly when introduced with a pre-reading strategy, should be incorporated more widely into language teaching practices as a means to enhance reading skills in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the use of short stories, particularly when combined with the "previewing the text" method, significantly enhances the reading skills of EFL learners. By introducing students to key elements of a short story before reading, the previewing technique helps activate prior knowledge, foster a deeper understanding of the narrative, and improve overall reading comprehension. The results indicate that this method not only facilitates students' ability to understand and retain information but also encourages critical thinking, vocabulary acquisition, and higher engagement with the text. Students reported greater confidence and motivation when reading short stories, which led to a more positive and productive reading experience.

Furthermore, short stories proved to be an effective tool in expanding vocabulary, as students were able to infer meanings from context and reinforce new words through

repetition within the story. Teachers also noted significant improvements in students' analytical skills, with learners displaying a stronger ability to interpret characters, themes, and plot developments. The findings align with existing literature on the benefits of using short stories in EFL classrooms, reinforcing the idea that this approach can serve as a powerful means of developing essential language skills. The success of the "previewing the text" method in this study underscores its potential as a key strategy in language teaching. By providing students with a framework for understanding the text before they begin reading, educators can help reduce anxiety, increase comprehension, and promote a more active, reflective approach to reading. This approach also encourages learners to engage more deeply with the content, ultimately leading to a more meaningful and enriching language learning experience.

However, despite these benefits, certain limitations must be acknowledged. One challenge in implementing short stories in EFL classrooms is the selection of culturally appropriate and level-appropriate texts for diverse learners. Ensuring that stories resonate with students' backgrounds while also being linguistically accessible requires careful consideration. Additionally, adapting short stories for students with lower proficiency levels can be difficult, as some texts may contain complex structures or unfamiliar vocabulary that hinder comprehension. Teachers may need to modify or scaffold texts to ensure that all students can engage effectively with the material. Furthermore, while short stories encourage engagement, some learners might struggle with maintaining interest in texts that do not align with their personal preferences or learning styles. These challenges highlight the need for thoughtful text selection, instructional flexibility, and additional support strategies to maximize the effectiveness of short stories in language learning.

In conclusion, the integration of short stories, especially when paired with pre-reading techniques like "previewing the text," offers a valuable and effective method for enhancing reading skills in EFL learners. The findings of this study suggest that educators should continue to incorporate short stories into their lesson plans as part of a comprehensive approach to language learning. By doing so, they can create an engaging and supportive learning environment that not only improves reading proficiency but also fosters a greater appreciation for literature and language. However, teachers should also remain mindful of the challenges associated with selecting and adapting short stories to suit the diverse needs of learners, ensuring that the benefits of this approach are accessible to all students.

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