Promoting Student's Reading Comprehension through Short Stories in ELT Classroom

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ARTICEL INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the impact of utilizing short stories to enhance student's reading comprehension abilities in English Language Teaching. Employing a qualitative approach through comprehensive interviews with three first-semester students, this study found that short stories not only enrich vocabulary and sentence structure, but also improve understanding of cultural context. The interview results showed that all participants showed high interest in short stories, with varied genre preferences, such as horror, culture, and fantasy. This research emphasizes the importance of selecting teaching materials that match students' interests to increase motivation and learning engagement. In addition, the integration of technology through interactive applications and digital media was also shown to increase students' reading interest. The findings suggest that the incorporation of short stories as an educational resource in English is not only effective in improving reading comprehension but also broadening students' cultural horizons, making it an attractive strategy in language learning. This study recommends that future teaching practices consider genre variation and technology integration to further enrich students' learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read and understand texts in English is a fundamental skill in learning a foreign language. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reading plays a pivotal role not only in language acquisition but also in academic development and access to global knowledge. Reading is more than simply recognizing words or decoding sentences; it involves complex cognitive processes such as understanding implied meanings, making inferences, evaluating content, and reflecting on the message conveyed (Ahsani & Budairi, 2022; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Nafa, 2022). As such, reading becomes a critical component of students' educational journey, especially in higher education.

However, despite the importance of reading in EFL education, many students in Indonesia continue to struggle with comprehending English text. This issue is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of exposure to authentic reading materials, low motivation, and anxiety towards English reading tasks (Jeni, 2020; Ginting et al., 2020; Larisa et al., 2023). Conventional teaching methods focus only on textbooks and exercises which further worsen the situation. These approaches often present reading as a tedious and isolated activity, discouraging students from engaging actively with texts. As a result, learners may perceive reading as irrelevant or burdensome, leading to a lack of interest and continued difficulty in comprehension (Roy et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, educators are increasingly encouraged to adopt innovative and engaging reading instruction strategies. One effective approach is using literary texts, especially short stories. Short stories have features that make them great for the classroom. They have concise plots, diverse themes, and rich language that is still accessible for EFL learners (Kaya, 2014). By nature, short stories are concise, rich in meaning, and often reflect universal themes that resonate with readers (Pardede, 2021). Their manageable length and compelling plots make them accessible to EFL learners while providing opportunities to explore various literary elements such as character, setting, conflict, and theme. Additionally, short stories can express cultural and moral values that relate to students' personal experiences. This connection can foster emotional engagement and a deeper understanding of the text. According to Pardede (2011), short stories are suitable for classroom use because they offer a balance between linguistic challenge and comprehensibility.

Incorporating short stories into reading instruction can yield significant pedagogical benefits. For instance, students engage more deeply with content when they can connect emotionally with characters or situations in the stories. The narrative structure of short stories encourages learners to follow a logical progression of events, which supports the development of inferencing skills, prediction, and interpretation (Wong et al., 2020). Additionally, reading and analyzing stories promote critical thinking, as students are encouraged to reflect on the characters' decisions, identify underlying messages, and form personal judgments. These skills are not only essential for academic success but also for students' broader cognitive and emotional development.

From a cultural perspective, short stories serve as a valuable medium for introducing students to different worldviews and traditions. Language and culture are inherently connected, and through literature, students can experience the perspectives, values, and lifestyles of people from other cultural backgrounds. At the same time, stories that reflect local or familiar contexts can help students reflect on their own identities and experiences, thereby creating a bridge between self and others. This cultural engagement contributes to the development of cross-cultural awareness and empathy, which are increasingly important in today's globalized society.

In the digital age, accessing short stories has become easier. Online platforms allow students to read anytime and anywhere. Abd Rahman & Bakar (2020) showed that online short stories not only improve text comprehension skills but also boost motivation and lessen reading anxiety. Students can access audio, video, and interactive discussions, making the reading experience more engaging. The availability of multimodal materials enables students to choose texts that suit their preferences and learning styles, leading to a more personalized and enjoyable reading experience.

Furthermore, several studies support the effectiveness of using short stories in reading instruction. Handayani (2013) found that including short stories in learning can enhance students' vocabulary and reading comprehension. In a similar vein, Ceylan (2016) discovered that students who learn through short stories show improvements in critical thinking, cultural awareness, and empathy. Research by Abu-Namaah (2015) on elementary school students in Hebron also showed similar results. Students were better able to grasp main ideas, make inferences, and understand vocabulary in context after being exposed to short stories (Ilham et al., 2023).

A recent study by Irhamni et al. (2025) at State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang also supported these findings. They added further evidence by applying a text previewing strategy before students engaged with short stories. The results showed a decrease in students' reading anxiety and an increase in readiness to read. Introducing key story elements in advance helped students better anticipate and engage with the content. Likewise, Herawan (2013) demonstrated that students who read short stories were significantly better at identifying key information in texts and displayed more positive attitudes toward reading activities.

The emotional aspect is an important part of language learning. Barzani (2020) found that both EFL teachers and students view the use of short stories positively. Short stories can boost motivation, cultural understanding, and language skills like vocabulary and grammar. When students enjoy a story's content, they are more likely to read, discuss, and write about it. Herawan (2013) revealed that the use of short stories in reading activities can significantly improve students' comprehension, particularly in identifying important information in texts. In addition to academic results, students also showed positive attitudes toward learning because the content of the stories was considered close to their personal experiences. This closeness also encouraged emotional involvement, which had 8an impact on increasing reading motivation.

On the other hand, research by Mohammadnejad (2018) shows that short stories not only support reading comprehension but also strengthen lexical skills, particularly in mastering collocation. Through an experiment with pre-intermediate EFL students, it was found that the group that learned using short stories achieved better collocation outcomes than the control group. These findings confirm that short stories are effective in enriching language competence comprehensively, both in terms of meaning and structure. Besides short stories, other literary forms like poetry are also beneficial. Burhanuddin et al. (2023)

emphasized that poetry stimulates emotional expression and creative thinking. While poetry and short stories differ in structure, both genres expose students to authentic language and foster deeper reflection on human experiences. Nonetheless, short stories may offer more narrative coherence, which is beneficial for beginners or lower-level EFL students who need contextual clues to aid comprehension.

Despite the growing interest in literature-based approaches, students' preferences for specific genres remain an under-researched area. Some learners may gravitate toward horror, fantasy, or culturally themed stories, while others may prefer realistic or inspirational narratives. According to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), learners are more intrinsically motivated when their interests and autonomy are acknowledged. When students read stories that align with their preferences, they are more likely to engage with the text, persist through difficulties, and take ownership of their learning. Given the various benefits of short stories for EFL learners and the need to understand students' preferences more deeply, this study aims to explore first-semester university students' perceptions of using short stories in reading instruction. Specifically, it examines how students perceive the impact of short stories on their reading comprehension and how genre preferences influence their motivation and learning engagement.

This study employs a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews to collect rich, descriptive data from participants. By positioning students as active participants in the research, the study aims to uncover their voices, experiences, and reflections on reading short stories in an academic setting. Through this lens, the research seeks to contribute to a more learner-centered and context-sensitive approach to EFL reading instruction.

In addition to addressing the current gap in research on literary genre preferences, this study holds practical significance for EFL teachers and curriculum developers in Indonesia. It offers insights into how to select, present, and utilize short stories more effectively to support students' reading development. The findings can inform teachers and curriculum developers about how to select and present literary texts in ways that are more responsive to students' preferences, cultural backgrounds, and emotional realities.By integrating literature into the classroom in ways that are responsive to students' interests and emotional needs, educators can promote both linguistic proficiency and personal growth.

The inclusion of genre preference also opens possibilities for differentiated instruction. For instance, learners who enjoy horror stories may be encouraged to analyze suspense and tone, while those who prefer realistic fiction might focus on character development or social themes. This personalized approach not only enhances engagement but also nurtures higher-order thinking skills, such as interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation. Thus, reading short stories offers a variative approach to language learning that combines academic, cultural, emotional, and motivational benefits. However, to fully realize these benefits, teachers must understand students' perspectives and tailor reading instruction to match their needs and preferences. This study not only underscores the pedagogical value of short stories in EFL contexts but also advocates for

a more empathetic and responsive teaching approach. One that connects language learning to the real lives and interests of students.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach through the execution of interviews with English education department first semester student at State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang regarding short stories as the incorporation of literature in ELT to enhance students' reading comprehension abilities. Akhter (2022) asserted that the interview technique is effective when the researcher aims to understand the informant's experiences and perspectives, or when the study's subject is focused on specific issues. Lim (2025) stated that qualitative research is particularly effective when the research objective is to understand processes rather than outcomes. For example, a researcher interested in understanding how a policy is implemented in an organization might choose a qualitative approach. Through interviews, the researcher can understand how the policy is received, interpreted and implemented. Qualitative research is particularly effective when the research objective is to understand processes rather than outcomes. For example, a researcher interested in understanding how a policy is implemented in an organization might choose a qualitative approach. Through interviews and observations, the researcher can understand how the policy is received, interpreted and implemented.

In this study, we collected data through a semi-structured interview method to understand students' experiences and views on the use of short stories in English Language Teaching (ELT). Participants consisted of three first-semester ELT students. Interview questions focused on preferred short story types (horror, cultural, fantasy), the impact of reading short stories on vocabulary acquisition, understanding sentence structure and cultural context, and the role of technology in assisting reading activities. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accuracy of transcription and analysis. In addition to the interviews, observation notes were recorded after the interviews were completed to provide contextual support for student responses. This approach was inspired by previous research that emphasized the importance of observation. As noted by Poejilestari (2019), data in short story-based reading research can be obtained from both direct field observations and learning evaluations to understand student participation and reading development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this era of globalization and the rapid development of information technology, reading skills in English are becoming increasingly important, especially for students studying the language. One method

that can be used to improve reading comprehension is through the utilization of short stories. Short stories not only offer an enjoyable reading experience, but can also introduce new vocabulary and useful sentence structures. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), understanding how narrative texts, such as short stories, contribute to the improvement of reading comprehension is an important aspect of pedagogical strategies. The ability to effectively engage students through short stories can not only improve language skills, but also foster cultural awareness.

Based on interviews with three first semester students of the English Education Department, various findings emerged regarding their perceptions of the use of short stories in improving their vocabulary comprehension. All students agreed that short stories had a positive impact on their vocabulary development, understanding of sentence structure, and appreciation of cultural values.

"The simple language in short stories makes it easier for me to learn new words" (Student 1).

This answer reflects the accessibility of vocabulary in short stories, especially for EFL learners. The vocabulary used in short stories tends to be contextual, repetitive and relevant, making it easier for students to recall and reuse it in other contexts. This is in line with the findings of Pathan (2013), who reported that Libyan EFL learners found short stories useful for enriching vocabulary due to repeated exposure to meaningful language.

In terms of sentence structure, students noted how the narrative flow of the story helped them identify patterns in sentence formation, such as the use of past tense, direct and indirect sentences. The three students in this study also reported different preferences for the genres of horror, fantasy and cultural stories. These preferences reflect the importance of personalization in learning materials. When students read stories that match their interests, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to understand the content deeply. This is in line with Deci & Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which highlights how intrinsic motivation increases when individuals engage in personally relevant tasks.

"Reading short stories helps me connect with different cultures" (Student 2).

In terms of story genre, students have different preferences. Student 1 is interested in horror stories, student 2 prefers cultural stories, while student 3 prefers fantasy stories. These findings indicate the importance of selecting learning materials that are in line with individual interests to increase engagement and motivation to learn, in line with the theory of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). All students also agreed that short stories helped them understand the cultural context, an important aspect of language learning. Besides vocabulary and culture, students mentioned how technology helps them enjoy short stories more easily. Digital platforms such as Wattpad and other interactive apps allow them to explore more genres. Abd Rahman & Bakar (2020) noted that digital access significantly reduced students' reading

anxiety and improved comprehension thanks to the integration of multimedia, including visuals, audio narration, and annotations.

In addition, the use of short stories encourages emotional engagement and that is very important in second language acquisition for students. Students often relate to the characters or situations in the story, thus making the learning process more meaningful and memorable. This emotional engagement is a powerful driver for long-term retention of language elements, such as idioms, collocations and figurative language. When students are emotionally connected to the content, they are more likely to actively participate and reflect on the story outside of class.

In addition, the use of short stories encourages emotional engagement and personal connection, which is crucial in second language acquisition. Students often relate to the characters or situations in the story, thus making the learning process more meaningful and memorable. This emotional engagement is a powerful driver for long-term retention of language elements, such as idioms, collocations and figurative language. When students are emotionally connected to the content, they are more likely to actively participate and reflect on the story outside of class (Barzani, 2020).

The use of short stories allows for the integration of other language skills beyond reading. Teachers can design follow-up activities such as summarizing the story orally, acting out scenes, or writing the ending, which helps develop speaking and writing skills. Listening activities can also be incorporated by using audio books or asking students to listen to each other's retellings. This multi-skill integration helps to reinforce language naturally and contextually (Pathan, 2013)

Another advantage of short stories is their adaptability. Teachers can choose texts based on students' proficiency levels, themes being discussed in class, or even current events. This will make short stories a versatile tool for different classroom situations, ranging from intensive reading to extensive reading projects. Literature-based activities can foster reading habits in students. Exposure to interesting and enjoyable stories can encourage students to read outside of class, helping them develop independence and a lifelong interest in reading. This independent reading habit supports vocabulary acquisition, comprehension and overall language fluency over time. Another advantage of short stories is their adaptability. Teachers can choose texts based on students' proficiency levels, themes being discussed in class, or even current events. This makes short stories a versatile tool for different classroom situations, from intensive reading to extensive reading projects.

In addition, group discussion emerged as another useful learning strategy. Students shared that they better understood the plot, moral values and less understood words after discussing the story with peers (Iqbal et al., 2023). This interaction with peers encourages critical thinking, as students have to justify their interpretations and listen to alternative viewpoints. Study by Rizqi Hidayat(2022) also implemented the group discussion in students' English club in understanding literature in form of short story to better

understand its content. Khatib & Mehrgan (2012) explain that critical thinking skills are often nurtured through literary analysis of short stories, where students evaluate characters' decisions, recognize bias, and infer themes.

Another interesting finding was that even though one of the students (Student 2) had less time to read outside of class, they still appreciated how short stories made reading tasks more enjoyable. Unlike textbooks, which often feel rigid and academic, short stories offer imaginative and emotional engagement. This emotional aspect plays an important role in motivation. Barzani (2020) reported that students who connect emotionally with the content of a story tend to understand it more deeply and remember it longer.

The use of short stories in ELT also supports skill development. For example, in horror or fantasy genres, students often infer character motives or predict plot developments, thus activating higher-order thinking. This is in line with the findings of Ameera Sultan et al. (2015), who showed that fifth grade students experienced significant improvement in inference and recognition of main idea after reading and discussing short stories regularly. Despite these advantages, students also reported certain challenges. For example, Student 2 mentioned that complex plots or unfamiliar cultural references sometimes made short stories difficult to understand. Furthermore, Putranto et al. (2023) shared another challenges faced by teachers including the aspect of learning media, students' English skill gap, and the time of the English lessons. This highlights the need for teachers to provide learning by teaching keywords in advance, providing context before reading, and guiding students through important parts of the text. Ceylan (2016) emphasizes that teacher scaffolding plays a crucial role in ensuring that students effectively extract meaning from stories.

Teachers should also consider the cognitive load involved. Although short stories are shorter than novels, they still require students to understand plot, characters, setting, theme, and language. To address this, tasks such as creating story maps, role-playing, or visualizing scenes through drawings or plays can be introduced. These methods not only aid comprehension but also accommodate various learning styles. A growing body of research supports the integration of literature, particularly short stories, in learning to read. According to Saadawi (2024), short stories not only enhance literacy development but also foster empathy and intercultural awareness, allowing learners to reflect on personal and cultural identities.

In terms of methodology, our research relied on qualitative interviews, which allowed us to explore individual perceptions in depth. The richness of the personal narratives provides insight into how students relate to the texts on a cognitive and emotional level. Although the sample size is small, it reflects meaningful student experiences and provides a foundation for more extensive research.

To strengthen the impact of literature in English language learning (ELT), some strategies are recommended as suggested by Saadawi (2024) and Pathan (2013), who emphasize the importance of a contextualized approach in teaching short story-based reading: First, teachers can diversify genres by

offering students a wide range of stories—such as mystery, science fiction, romance, or folklore—to match different interests. Second, they can integrate technology through e-books, audiobooks, and apps, which enrich the reading experience. Third, it is helpful to use multimodal tasks that combine reading with writing, speaking, and creative activities to deepen engagement. Fourth, teachers can encourage peer interaction by introducing book clubs or discussion circles that promote collaboration. Finally, stories that reflect real-life themes, such as social issues or moral dilemmas, can be chosen to make reading more relevant and meaningful for students.

The findings of this study are also in line with research by Yunita & Machdarifah (2018), who explored the use of short stories in Indonesian EFL classrooms and concluded that literature not only develops language proficiency but also increases students' confidence and willingness to communicate in English.

Finally, the role of the teacher is important. The teacher's enthusiasm, selection of stories and ability to facilitate meaningful discussions significantly influence how students understand and benefit from literary material. When teachers are able to connect stories to students' lives and cultural backgrounds, reading is not just a task, but an exploration of meaning. In summary, the integration of short stories into English Language Teaching (ELT) holds great promise for improving reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure awareness, cultural appreciation and motivation.

However, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the number of participants was limited to only three first semester students from one university, which may not represent the diversity of perspectives in the wider educational context. Secondly, data was collected only through interviews, with no other instruments such as observation or reading assessment. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and may serve as a preliminary exploration and not as generalizable conclusions. Future research is encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, as well as to examine the impact of specific short story genres on different aspects of reading comprehension. Quantitative research or a mixed methods approach may also provide more comprehensive insights into how short stories serve as effective tools in English language education.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant potential of using short stories as an effective medium to improve students' reading comprehension skills, particularly in the areas of insight, sentence structure, and cultural understanding. The results of interviews with three third-semester students confirmed that short stories not only improve students' language skills but also provide insight into cultural contexts, making them a valuable pedagogical tool. Students expressed a high level of interest in short stories, with varying preferences in

genres such as horror, fantasy, culture, which emphasize aligning learning materials with students' personal interests to increase motivation and engagement, as supported by intrinsic motivation theory.

The study also showed that short stories facilitate comprehension by exposing students to everyday language, while also introducing new words and sentence structures. Furthermore, the study also integrated technology into the learning process, such as interactive applications and videos that can increase student engagement and provide easier access to short stories, thereby broadening learning horizons. Group discussions, combined with independent learning, have also been shown to improve student comprehension, allowing for richer understanding through the exchange of perspectives between students. In conclusion, incorporating short stories into English Language Teaching (ELT) not only improves reading comprehension but also enhances cultural awareness, making it an effective and engaging strategy to improve language skills. Future research and teaching practices should consider incorporating different genres according to readers' or students' interests and integrating technology to further enrich the learning experience.

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