

## Investigating the Use of Short Stories in Improving Students' Reading Comprehension

تقصي استخدام القصص القصيرة في تطوير استيعاب القراءة للطلاب

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### Abstract

This study aims at investigating the use of short stories in improving students' reading comprehension. The study adopts descriptive analytical method. A questionnaire has been used as primary tool for collecting the data of the study. The sample of the questionnaire is consisted of (70) students at University level. The researchers applied a chi-square test to analyze and verify the hypotheses. The findings of the questionnaire revealed that short stories improve students' reading comprehension. The study recommends that students should be provided with short stories in the process of reading comprehension.

**Key Words:** Storytelling, literacy, schema theory.

### المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تقصي استخدام القصص القصيرة في تطوير استيعاب القراءة للطلاب. تبنت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي. تم استخدام الاستبانة كوسيلة اساسية لجمع بيانات الدراسة. تتكون عينة الاستبانة من عدد (70) طالب بالمستوى الجامعي. طبق الباحثون اختبار مربع كاي لتحليل وتحقيق الفرضيات. اوضحت نتائج الاستبانة ان القصص القصيرة تحسن استيعاب القراءة للطلاب. اوصت الدراسة بضرورة تزويد الطلاب بالقصص القصيرة عند القراءة.

### Introduction

Stories are an important part of every culture. Short stories have their roots in folklore, or the oral tradition of storytelling. In the oral tradition, stories were told to explain beliefs about the world (e.g. myths), to remember the great deeds of past kings and heroes (e.g. legends), to teach moral principles (e.g. fables and parables) or simply for the sake of entertainment (e.g. folktales and fairy tales) The idea is also emphasized by Collie and Slater (1991, p. 196) when they list four advantages of using short stories for language teachers. First, short stories are practical as their length is long enough to cover entirely in one or two class sessions. Second, short stories are not complicated for students to work with on their own. Third, short stories have a variety of choice for different interests and tastes. Finally, short stories can be used

with all levels (beginner to advance), all ages (young learners to adults) and all classes (morning, afternoon, or evening classes). Thus, it is vivid that integrating short stories as one of instructional media is very prominent to be instructed in English teaching and learning environment because this is very potential and effective to empower students' four integrated language skills

Reading short stories can be an input to practice other language skills. Firstly, short stories can be an input to oral skill practice. After finishing reading, students can be asked to narrate the story in their own words, to give chronological sequences of events in the story, to paraphrase or to give a summary of the story. Besides, students can do the role play, act out some parts of the story, or dramatize the characters in the story (Khorashad yzadeh, 2014, p. 10).



Similarly, Short stories allow instructors to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency. Murdoch (2002) indicates that “short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency” (p. 9). He explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues.

Short stories promote students' motivation and this makes them more interested in classroom participation while students who merely and conventionally read the texts especially true ones like documentary texts choose to sit passively on their seats. Seemingly, it is not easy to stimulate these students to take part in classroom activities since they don't have information about it and they are not interesting. Also, many, if not all, students enjoy reading stories at least for fun. In addition, Khorashadyzadeh (2014, p. 14) revealed that the technique of reading simplified short stories can enhance the learners' speaking skill. The results also proved that being exposed to suitable literary texts has significant effect on EFL learners' listening skill. It showed that learners' speaking and listening ability (oral skills) in a second or foreign language can depend on their amount of exposure to written authentic or simplified literary texts like short stories.

In terms of writing skill, researches are found on the use of short stories in EFL classroom teaching. Murdoch (2002) explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues. Instructors can create a variety of writing activities to help

students to develop their writing skills. They can ask students to write dialogues (p. 9) or more complex writing activities if students have reached a high level of language proficiency. Also, Oster (1989) affirms that literature helps students to write more creatively (p. 85). Additionally, literary texts help students to practice and develop their reading and writing skills and strategies. This can be said to contribute to the development of their reading fluency and proficiency, and writing accuracy. As a result, there may be an increase in students' reading and writing speed and self confidence, and thus the students are able to pay more attention to the overall meaning of what they are reading (Bamford & Day, 2004). Besides through literature, students learn new vocabulary and expand their understanding of words they knew before, which contributes positively to their reading and writing skills consequently (Ono, Day & Harsch, 2004).

As seen above, this study will be aimed to investigate the role of students' attitudes towards using short stories to develop language skills. It will be conducted at Sudan University of Science and Technology- College of Languages. This study will carry out to first year students of English. The researcher will adopt the descriptive analytical method. One instrument will be used for collected data relevant to the study. Questionnaire will be distributed to students of English so as to check their point of view in this issue.

#### **Statement of the Study Problem**

Reading comprehension is not only a foundation of basic learning but also a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of students' life. It requires not only reading but also the ability to read fluently and understand what is read.

This study investigates the use of short stories in developing reading comprehension. So the importance of this study stems out of the fact poor knowledge of literature in general and short stories in particular negatively affect students' reading comprehension.

#### **Significance of the Study**

The study is considered a significant one as it tells us about the importance of short stories in enhancing reading comprehension. This study contributes to reading process as it helps readers enrich their vocabulary and grammar knowledge through short stories. This study will develop students' fluency in reading process. It will help teachers in Sudanese universities to be aware of using short stories in improving students' reading comprehension.

#### **Methodology**

This study was carried out at Sudan University of science and Technology with English language students at college of languages. A purposive sample used for this study includes (70) students. This is quantitative method research employing quantitative questionnaire.

The researcher bases inquiry on the assumption that collecting data via questionnaire best provides an understanding of research problem. This study used a quantitative research design comprising quantitative method and technique during data collection analysis because the researcher wanted to come up with rich information which would improve the validity and reliability of the overall finding.

#### **Tools of the Study**

The researcher used questionnaire as the primary tool for collecting the data related

to this study. The researcher has designed the questionnaire to find out students' conceptions about the role of short stories in improving student's reading comprehension.

#### **Aims and Scope of the Study**

This study aims at investigating the role of short stories in enhancing student's reading comprehension. The scope of the study is limited to third year students at Sudan University of Science and Technology, college of languages and experts in English language teaching at different Universities in Khartoum state, Sudan, in the academic year 2018 – 2019. The total number of the subject of the questionnaire was (70) students. The results of the study may not apply generally to all Sudanese Universities.

#### **Vocabulary Definition**

Vocabulary is the set of known words and their meaning which can be used in a language. According to Horn, the vocabulary is a set of words that make up a language. Understanding of the vocabulary is generally regarded as an important part of learning a language. Therefore, mastery of vocabulary is the most basic things that must be controlled by students in learning English as a foreign language.

There are a lot of teaching materials that be used by teachers to help students develop their vocabularies such songs, novels, articles, games and short stories. The importance of vocabulary teaching and learning is clearly stated in the following quotation:

“Vocabulary instruction forms a very important aspect of any foreign language teaching and learning.



This is because, the knowledge of the vocabulary, determines and decides the level of a foreign language learner. The knowledge of vocabulary also plays a very crucial role in the major language skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. Mastery over required knowledge of vocabulary can make a foreign language learner an effective speakers, listener, reader and writer. On the other hand, lack of vocabulary significantly affects four language skills”

Harmer argues that “if language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh” (p.153). He emphasizes the importance of acquiring vocabulary and states that very little can be expressed without grammar, while without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Short stories can be used to improve students’ vocabularies which are considered to be the most important component in learning English language.

The following quotation states the significance of using short stories in the classroom to develop student's vocabulary.

***“Although there are many methods and strategies of enhancing vocabulary are of EFL learners, the importance of extensive reading in the development of EFL learners’ vocabulary is of great importance.***

(Nagy and Anderson, 1984)

In this regard, implementing short stories can be the most efficient method to bring this goal to reality Short stories play crucial role in enhancing EFL learners’ vocabulary. It is believed that the more students read, the wider their scope of their vocabulary knowledge becomes. Through short stories to enhance vocabulary of EFL learners, teachers have the advantage of teaching

vocabulary in contextualized materials. This is simply makes the learners to look for clues in the sentence that may tell them something about the meaning of the word in question.”

According to Susanto in Tarin (1984:176) a short story is the story of a length of about 5,000 words and because students usually find it interesting, they try to find words’ meaning to understand the story. In addition to that, when students read short stories, they grasp the meanings of idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs. All that can help students to increase their command of vocabularies which can be expressed in oral communication.

Lao and Krashen (2000) present a group of students that read literary texts and a second group that read non- literary texts at a university in Hong Kong. The group who read literary texts showed improvement in vocabulary and reading.

He believes that learning and mastering of target – L vocabulary help students plays a very important role in any foreign language teaching and learning. The knowledge of vocabulary enables on EFL learner to establish and achieve successful communication which is the main goal of any foreign language teaching and learning. The knowledge of vocabulary also helps EFL learner to explore the beauty of that language through a great variety of new words. Knowledge of vocabulary also helps EFL learner to compare and contrast the foreign language and the mother tongue. It also helps understanding the similarities and differences between the two languages and helps in learning language in true sense of the term by understanding the language systems of both languages. In that sense, words are the building blocks of language and help a foreign language learner communicate and expressed effectively.



Brown (1994) claims that learning words with enjoyment through stories also guarantees a sense of achievement on the part of EFL learners and can help developing motivation for further learning. The use of short stories not only offer essential vocabulary for language learners but also helps them in learning about syntax and discourse functions of words learned and the possible usages of the word in different contexts of communication.

Though there exist many methods and strategies of teaching and developing vocabulary of EFL learners, the short stories play a crucial role in developing vocabulary of the students. The students acquire the vocabulary through oral comprehension of story. It is argued that students who read widely have extensive vocabularies. Story telling bridges the decreasing gaps of vocabulary and comprehension. As use of language in short stories is simple, students can engage in meaning making and guessing through comprehension. This leads them to acquire vocabulary and its usage in a greater way. Students construct knowledge, when vocabulary is developed through immersion in language activities. So, vocabulary is one of the most important parts of language acquisition. So, EFL teachers should attempt to develop the students' vocabulary and help them develop the communicative competence with the use of vocabulary technique in the class. Finally, short stories play a crucial role in developing vocabulary of students. The students acquire the vocabulary through oral comprehension of storytelling bridges the decreasing gaps of vocabulary and comprehension. As use of language in short stories is simple, students can engage in meaning making and guessing through

comprehension. This leads them to acquire vocabulary and its usage in greater way. So, vocabulary is one of the most important parts of language acquisition.

### **Storytelling by Students**

Storytelling, the art of narrating a tale from memory rather than reading it is one of the oldest of all art forms. Story telling foster emotional intelligence and help students to gain insight into human behavior. Story telling also promotes language learning by enriching students' vocabulary and acquiring new language structures (Brown & Yule, 1983).

By selecting suitable stories keeping in mind the level of the students, the teacher can motivate the students and prepare them as story tellers. When children start telling stories, they grow in many ways. Normally, storytelling improves the students' language skills but it promotes the self-esteem of the students also. The teachers should guide the children while they tell stories. Storytellers tell in many ways, let them celebrate the differences. Most of the students have creative thinking but they need to choose a story that they really enjoy, and one that feels right to tell. Children's telling can be improved by offering a variety of audiences. Telling to classmates is nice, but telling to younger listeners, community members or in other schools, etc. is even better. As children tell to new audiences, their confidence grows dramatically (Davison & Dowson 2003). Short stories help language instructors to teach the four language skills. That can be practiced in different activities such as group discussion, character role play, criticism and so on. Listening and reading short stories motivate students to develop their reading and imaginative skills.

It also improves students' vocabulary and finding synonyms and antonyms for the difficult words in activities for reading listening or reading comprehension. On other side, guessing words, matching them with their appropriate meanings and analysis of particular statement improve both reading and writing skills. Finally, telling stories make the students' minds evolved and their mouth becomes more and more flexible. Reading short stories provide them with an opportunity to speak the language in a more imaginative way (Collie and Slater, 1993).

To sum up, it is undoubtedly argued that short stories cover a wide range of fields such as language, arts, social studies and social issues, science and technology, plants and animals, etc. Short stories help instructors to teach literary, cultural and higher-order thinking aspects. Short stories have the power of motivating and inspiring capacities. They promote language skills as well as vocabulary development. There is a lot of scope for language acquisition. So, the incorporation of short stories as part of literature in the school curriculum is essentially encouraged. To make this success the teachers should select authentic materials on the basis of learners' needs and expectations, proficiency of the learner, interests, age and gender and different levels of learners. By doing this, the teaching-learning process becomes learner-centered. So, it has been eventually realized that the selection of short stories and their proper induction into ESL classroom teaching can definitely improve not only students' communicative competence in their target language, but also build up their cultural identity which automatically encourages students to excel in all the fields.

### Short Stories Improve Reading Skill

Short stories seem to be the most suitable literary genre for teaching foreign language. That is because they are short and aim at giving a single effect. There is usually one plot, a few characters and there is no detailed description of setting. In addition to that, research on EFL classrooms state that they can be a good indicator of increased motivation, increased interest in reading and improved reading skills (Vural, 2013; Saka, 2014; Pardede, 2011). This study aims to find the attitudes of students in Blumentritt University towards the short stories covered in reading skills course in 2015 – 2016 fall term. The results indicated that studying short stories has a number of benefits for the students such as broadening their perspectives, enabling them to think about the reasons than the results, showing them different life styles, providing them with comparison between cultures, increasing their appreciation for literature and making them read more short stories.

Tertiary students profit from reading short stories. What they read gives them the opportunity to come up with their own ideas and helps them to speak the language in a more imaginative way. They become more creative as they are faced with their own point of view. According to Oster (1989), this process leads to critical thinking, by confirming "focusing on point of view in literature enlarges students' vision and fosters critical thinking by dramatizing the various ways a situation can be seen" (p.85). That is possible because when students read, they interact with the text. When they do that, they interpret with the text. By interpreting what they read, they can work toward speaking English more creatively.

Finally, the issue of short stories selection is significant in using them in language classes. Selected short stories should be appropriate to students' linguistic, literary competence and interests. Therefore, short stories which are more contemporary and short enough with an appropriate language, style and diction to students will motivate them to read with interest.

"Reading is not merely a receptive process of picking up information from the page in a word-by-word manner (Grake, 1991, p.1). Rather, it is a selective process and characterized as an active process of comprehending".

In regard to the process of reading short stories, Knuston (1993) argues that there

are two processes through which proficient readers figure out the meaning of the text.

(1) "Bottom – up process" when the reader decodes the individual elements of the text to build total meaning.

(2) "Top- down process" when the reader starts with forming hypotheses and making predictions.

### Results and Discussion

The researcher used the questionnaire as the main tool for collecting the data related to this study. The researcher has designed the questionnaire to find out EFL students' concepts about the role of short stories in enhancing students' reading comprehension.

The tables and percentages below illustrate what has been stated above.

### *Hypothesis (2): Short stories can significantly improve EFL students' reading comprehension*

**Table No (1)** Reading short stories give me confidence to build and construct new form of sentences

Answer	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	40	57.1%
Agree	25	35.7%
Not sure	2	2.9%
Disagree	3	4.3%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	70	100%

It is clear from the above table (1) that there are (40) participants in the study's sample with percentage (57.1%) strongly agree with "Reading short stories give me confidence to build and construct new form of sentences." There are (25) participants with percentage (35.7%) agree with that and (2) participants with percentage (2.9

%) are not sure. and (3) participants with percentage (4.3%) disagree, while (0) participants with percentage (0.0%) strongly disagree. The majority of respondents strongly agree with the given statement this indicates that reading short stories give students confidence to build and construct new sentences.

**Table No (2)** Reading short stories automatically assist me grasp linguistic competence.

Answer	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	50	71.4%
Agree	15	21.5%
Not sure	1	4.3%
Disagree	4	5.7%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.7%
Total	70	100%

It is clear from the above table (2) that there are (50) participants in the study's sample with percentage (71.4%) strongly agree with "Reading short stories automatically assist me grasp linguistic competence.". There are (15) participants with percentage (21.5%) agree with that and (1) persons with percentage (1.4 %) are

not sure. and (4) participants with percentage (5.7%) disagree, while (0) persons with percentage (0.0%) strongly disagree. The majority of respondents strongly agree with the given statement this indicates that reading short stories automatically help students understand linguistic competence.

**Table No (3)** Reading short stories helps me expand my cognitive skills.

Answer	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	30	42.9%
Agree	29	41.4%
Not sure	3	4.3%
Disagree	4	5.7%
Strongly Disagree	4	5.7%
Total	70	100%

It is clear from the above table (3) that there are (30) participants in the study's sample with percentage (42.9%) strongly agree with "Reading short stories helps me expand my cognitive skills.". There are (29) persons with percentage (41.4%) agree with that and (3) participants with percentage (4.3 %) are not sure. and (4) persons with

percentage (5.7%) disagree, and (4) participants with percentage (5.7%) strongly disagree. The majority of respondents strongly agree with the given statement this indicates that reading short stories helps students expand cognitive skills.



**Table No (4)** Short stories improve my reading skills through elements such as authentic materials.

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	40	57.1%
Agree	25	35.7%
Not sure	2	2.9%
Disagree	3	4.3%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	70	100%

It is clear from the above table (4) that there are (40) participants in the study's sample with percentage (57.1%) strongly agree with Short stories improve my reading skills through elements such as authentic materials." There are (25) participants with percentage (35.7%) agree with that and (2) persons with percentage

(2.9 %) are not sure. and (3) participants with percentage (4.3%) disagree, and (0) participants with percentage (0.0%) strongly disagree. The majority of respondents strongly agree with the given statement this indicates that reading short stories helps students improve their reading via authentic materials.

**Table No (5)** The new story encourages me to read other stories.

Answer	Number	Percent
Strongly Agree	20	28.0%
Agree	29	41.4%
Not sure	10	14.3%
Disagree	10	14.3%
Strongly Disagree	1	1.4%
Total	70	100%

It is clear from the above table (5) that there are (20) participants in the study's sample with percentage (28.0%) strongly agree with The new story encourages me to read other stories." There are (29) participants with percentage (41.4%) agree with that and (10) participants with percentage (14.3 %) are not sure. and (10) persons with percentage (14.3%) disagree, and (1) participants with percentage (1.4%) strongly disagree. The majority of respondents strongly agree with the given statement this indicates that reading short stories encourage students read other short stories.

The data collected was analyzed in relation to the second hypothesis of the study. The data was collected through questionnaire which had been administered to University students, in particular, third year students at college of languages at Sudan University of Science and Technology.

Having analyzed and compared the results with the second hypothesis, the results have shown that short stories improve students' reading comprehension. That is to say short story technique is one important factor for improving reading comprehension. Short stories should be employed in reading lessons so that the students can make use of it in reading comprehension process.

#### Report Discussion:



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