

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH SHORT STORIES ON READING COMPREHENSION OF UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the perceptions of ESL learners towards conventional reading material and English short stories as reading material at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazirabad, Pakistan. The quantitative research design was employed in this study to collect and analyse the data. The data was collected by using a questionnaire. The participants of the study (n=50) were BS.English second year students of department of English, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University. The data was analysed by using SPSS version 25. The findings of this study suggest that English short stories, due to unique characteristics, have great influence on the perceptions of ESL learners for reading comprehension and they feel more comfortable, confident and develop connection with the content of the short stories. Whereas the participants showed less interest in conventional reading material due to less familiarity, strange context and difficult vocabulary. The present study suggests that English short stories may be included in the reading courses since it is a genre that most of the students like since their childhood. This study also confirms the findings of previous studies acknowledging English short stories as an effective resource for developing reading skill.

Keywords: English Short Stories, Reading Comprehension, ESL

INTRODUCTION

English has been widely recognised as global language. It also matters for the academic progress of the students (Azeroual, 2013). Reading has been associated with the success in academics because almost whole formal education relies on being able to read efficiently (Hulme and Snowling, 2011). As a result, reading effectively has become a dire need of ESL learners that also enables them to access the published work (Lo et al., 2013).

Reading comprehension is an important skill of a language. It is defined as a language learners' capacity to understand written material and identify the main idea and particular details because it is essential for ESL student to have the ability to understand the text completely.

Woolley (2010) suggests that making meaning from the text is determined by the reading comprehension because the main aim is to gain understanding of what is expressed in the text rather than to get literal meaning of the words, phrases and sentences. Thus, a reader must understand the ideas described in the text during reading process. As Duke and Pearson (2001) argues that a reader constructs meaning by using the information in the text and the prior knowledge he/she possesses. Thus, in order to attain a degree of knowledge one must have good skills to understand the text.

In many cases, reading for second language (L2) learners is a way to drive meaning from a text along

with acquiring vocabulary and developing knowledge about grammatical constructions. Fraser (2007) indicates that L2 learners read more slowly in their L2 than in their L1. The reason is that the L2 learners come across to unfamiliar vocabulary and get confused to get the meaning of the text, (Coady & Huckin, 1997). In this context, my study proposes English short stories as significant reading material because they contain real life situations, and the context of the stories can help the readers to understand the vocabulary and as a result the interest for reading may be developed.

Reading is an opportunity for L2 learners to explore new horizons of English language. If students become proficient readers, they will be able to develop their writing and speaking skill (L2) as well. It is also responsibility of a teacher to create an environment that motivate as well as facilitate the students towards such activities.

Moreover, using literature to teach language has a number of advantages such as contributing to a better linguistic understanding, development of creative skills, and higher language proficiency, it also makes an important contribution to literary appreciation (Ramsaran, 1983). Integrating literature in EFL classes provides an authentic model of language use with its rich potential; by reading literary texts students face language written for native speakers and try to understand the texts. They also have to learn literary features such exposition, climax, narration, irony and so on (Collie & Slater, 1987). In this way, literature enhances readers' language and literary awareness. It is very motivating, and it provides them with an understanding of other cultures (Lazar, 1993). Together with learning about the culture, students also learn about the past and present and about people's customs and traditions (Erkaya, 2005).

Furthermore, literary text can be more helpful than informational material for stimulating the acquisition process since it provides authentic contexts for processing new language (Lashari, Umrani & Buriro, 2021). Literary text exposes learners to fresh themes and unexpected language. In this sense, "a literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly" (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 15). This quality makes literature suitable and beneficial for

language teaching in many contexts and cultures. Furthermore, since literary text contains language intended for native speakers, literature stands as a model for language learners to become more familiar with different forms and conventions (Collie and Slater, 1991, p. 4; Ur, 1996, p. 201).

Literature Review

Short Stories and English Language

There is a close and undeniable relationship between literature and language. Literature is composed of language and it also provides space for the applications of language. Brumfit and Carter (1986) considered literature as "an ally of language". Such method is undoubtedly novel, because literature has been greatly employed as a means in teaching language skills.

A short story is a fictional piece of work that is shortened in length than a novel. According to Ghasemi (2011) short stories carry distinctive features such as modernity, variety and brevity that make them appealing and interesting to language learners. Therefore, short stories can be more fascinating as a reading material for ESL learners as they also contain literary devices and simple language to tell the story that may ultimately attract the readers. Furthermore, there is a variety of choices in short stories for different interests and tastes. Therefore, they can be an excellent source for developing reading comprehension as well as second language acquisition.

According to Nhung (2016) folk stories for language teaching is a stress free approach because all the language skills are used in conversation or dialogues of a story in a natural tone thus, this approach may result in enhancing intellectual competency of the students as they focus more on context than the form.

McKay (2000) finds out that in stories, familiar context is used that may help the learners to engage and participate eagerly and may easily learn the use of vocabulary and sentence according to the context. Thus, the familiarity within the folk stories may lead the learners to develop the language skills.

Hadaway et al. (2002) suggest three benefits of using literature for teaching language. The first advantage considers the contextualization of language. Students get familiar with the

application of language in various conditions when they read a literary work. The second benefit considers social factors which are embedded in different genres of literature. The third advantage considers the natural and meaningful application of language which are accomplished via illustrations and use of descriptive language in literature.

The use of short stories, in developing reading comprehension has been appreciated for years by many ELT teachers. The use of short-stories has been largely discussed and recommended, particularly where English is taught as a foreign language. Mastering a foreign language brings many challenges for ESL learners such as lack of target language exposure, unsuitable teaching methods and boring and outdated teaching material (Lashari & Umrani, 2023). Therefore, scholars like Brumfit and Carter (1986) believes that the use of short stories can be useful in ELT. According to them, short stories are easy to complete in a class and definite to understand.

According to Scott (2009) argues that short stories as reading material are more engaging in relation to teach reading comprehension and the task can be achieved effectively if the learner is motivated towards the material. Moreover, short stories stimulate the learners' attention, reflect on the authentic language and provide a wide range of language expressions. Thus, short stories can be an appropriate material to be used in ESL reading comprehension.

According to Adyana (2016) appropriate selection of short stories not only develop reading comprehension but also creativity, imagination and writing narrative text.

Rahimi&Yadollahi (2017) examined the impact of offline vs. online digital storytelling on the development of reading and writing skills of EFL learners'. The findings of the study revealed that a great deal of improvement on reading and writing skills was observed among the participants who were lower intermediate language students.

Lao and Krashen's (2000) study compares the reading achievement between a group of students who read literary texts and a second group that read non-literary texts at a university level reveals that the group who read literary texts show improvement in vocabulary and reading.

Since, literary work usually reflects realities of a society thus, its language is rich in social and cultural information, helping L2 learners to understand and use the second language more effectively (Lu 2012).

Research Methodology

According to Collis and Hussey (2003), research methodology refers to the general approach used by the researchers to investigate the research issues from data collection to the data analysis. Dörnyei (2007) suggests that a researcher must be familiar with the fundamentals of research methodology and a number of technical components of the research; otherwise the results of the study may be flawed. Thus, it is essential for a researcher to identify the appropriate research methodology for the study, which can be determined by the aim of research and the research questions of the study being addressed(Collis and Hussey, 2003).

A range of approaches has been recommended by the researchers to carry a study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Creswell, 2013). In order to conduct a proper study, quantitative (Quasi-Experimental) design was adopted, in which an experimental treatment is administered over time to a single individual or a small number of individuals (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Neuman & McCormick, 1995). It is the most appropriate design for measuring the impact or effectiveness of a programme. (Creswell 2009, p.117) The change is measured by comparing the difference in the phenomenon or variable(s) before and after the intervention (Kumar 2011, p.130).

In a study utilising the Quasi-experimental design the researcher selects one population group instead of two, the questionnaire was administered to collect the pre-intervention data, following that an intervention (treatment) program was run for a semester on the group. Selected short stories were used as the material for explicit use of reading comprehension.All the participants of intervention programme were instructed to attend the post-intervention data collection phase soon after the completion of intervention the same questionnaire was administered to collect the post intervention data.

Findings

Perception of the ESL learners towards conventional reading material was analyzed by measuring the mean and standard deviation based on the responses of the participants (n=50) whether

they prefer conventional reading material at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University. In addition, a Paired Sample T test was run to measure the difference in perceptions before and after the intervention.

Table 5.2 Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-intervention	3.8720	50	.68304	.09660
	Post intervention	1.9520	50	.34831	.04926

Table 5.3 Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences		Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation		Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre intervention Post intervention	1.92000	.78792	.11143	1.69608	2.14392	17.231	49	.000

Paired Samples Statistics shows the results indicating a significant decrease in the mean score of the participants (n=50) before intervention M=3.8720, SD=.68304 to after intervention M=1.9520, SD=.34831.

The result shows the t value 17.231 with the very low p value .000 (two tailed) shows that the mean difference is statically significantly different. Furthermore, the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranges from 1.69608 to 2.14392. In addition, this score suggests that there is a significant shift in the perceptions of the participants towards conventional reading material after intervention program and the shift indicates that the conventional reading material is less appealing to the participants.

Moreover, the above results shows only the obtained difference in two scores taken on two different times (Before and after intervention) but it does not show the magnitude of the effect of the intervention. Therefore, in order to measure the effect size the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) were followed. However, IBM SPSS does not offer the statistics to measure the effect size but a number of useful websites allow to calculate the size effect or it can be done in a Excel Spreadsheet

(Pallant 2016). Thus the researcher used Excel Spreadsheet to calculate Cohen's d. The criteria for interpreting the magnitude of the Cohen's d value is as under:

.2=small effect, .5=medium effect, and .8=large effect (Cohen, 1988).

The Cohen's d value of the paired sample t test for measuring the difference in the perception of the ESL learners towards conventional reading material is 2.436796. If Cohen's d value is positive it shows that the prior condition or group has higher mean and if the value is negative it indicates that the second condition or group has higher mean. Thus the Cohen's d value 2.436796 suggests a large effect size showing a significant difference in the perceptions of the ESL learners towards conventional reading material at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, after the intervention program.

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