



Improving Students' Reading Comprehension Through Short Stories : A Classroom Action Research at Tenth Grade of SMK Swasta Panca Dharma Padangsidempuan

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in English language learning, yet many students continue to face challenges in understanding written texts. This study aims to improve students' reading comprehension through the use of short stories as an instructional medium. The research was conducted at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma Padangsidempuan using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach, which consisted of two cycles involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. The sample included 30 students from class X Akuntansi. Data were collected using pre-tests, post-tests, and classroom observations. The results showed a significant improvement in students' reading comprehension. The average pre-test score was 43.67, increasing to 68.00 in post-test I, and reaching 80.00 in post-test II. The percentage of students achieving the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM) increased from 20% to 83.33%. These findings indicate that the use of short stories can be an effective and engaging strategy to enhance reading comprehension in EFL classrooms.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in language acquisition, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Reading is not merely a passive act of decoding written symbols; it is an active cognitive process that involves interpreting, analyzing, and constructing meaning from texts. Despite its importance, many students in EFL settings continue to struggle with reading comprehension due to a variety of factors such as limited vocabulary, lack of effective reading strategies, and low motivation.

Preliminary observations at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma Padangsidimpuan revealed that the average reading scores of tenth-grade students were below the Minimum Competency Criteria (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal or KKM), which is set at 75. The students' low performance indicated a need for innovative instructional strategies that could both improve comprehension and engage learners more effectively.

Among various methods available, the use of short stories has gained attention as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms. Short stories, with their concise structure, relatable themes, and manageable length, offer authentic language input and promote meaningful interaction with texts. Research has shown that literary texts such as short stories can support vocabulary acquisition, develop inference-making skills, and enhance overall reading comprehension. Moreover, short stories tend to be more engaging and enjoyable for students, making them more likely to participate actively in the learning process.

This classroom action research investigates the implementation of short stories as a strategy to enhance students' reading comprehension. The objectives of this study are to: (1) assess students' reading comprehension prior to the use of short stories; (2) evaluate the impact of using short stories on their reading comprehension; and (3) determine the extent of improvement achieved through this instructional approach. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of effective and student-centered reading pedagogy in EFL contexts.

B. LITERATUR REVIEW

1. The Concept of Reading and Reading Comprehension

Reading is a complex cognitive process that requires the integration of various linguistic and background knowledge. Grabe (2009) defines reading as a strategic

process that involves interpreting, synthesizing, and evaluating information from a text. It is not only a means of acquiring information but also a foundational skill that supports learning across all academic domains. Heilman et al. (2005) argue that reading is the interaction between the reader and printed language, where comprehension is the ultimate goal.

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, process, and recall information presented in written form. According to the RAND Reading Study Group (2002), reading comprehension is a process of constructing meaning through interaction between the text and the reader. This interaction is influenced by multiple factors, including the reader's prior knowledge, vocabulary mastery, working memory, and attention (McNamara & Magliano, 2009; Lee, 2017). Thus, comprehension is not a passive process but requires active engagement and critical thinking.

2. Challenges in Reading Comprehension Among EFL Learners

EFL students frequently encounter difficulties in reading comprehension due to a range of cognitive and linguistic factors. Vocabulary limitations, lack of reading strategies, and insufficient background knowledge are some of the most prevalent barriers. As supported by Kholiq & Luthfiyati (2018), students often struggle to grasp the main ideas and infer meaning from texts, resulting in fragmented understanding.

Moreover, many students exhibit low motivation and engagement when reading in a second language, which further impedes their progress. Teaching methods that rely heavily on mechanical drills and textbook exercises may fail to capture students' interest, thus reducing the effectiveness of instruction.

3. Short Story as a Pedagogical Tool in EFL Reading Instruction

Literature, particularly short stories, has been widely acknowledged for its educational potential in EFL contexts. Ghasemi (2011) highlights the short story's brevity, thematic variety, and narrative appeal as key features that make it effective for language learning. Short stories provide learners with authentic and contextualized language, thereby supporting the development of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural understanding (Upreti, 2012; Ceylan, 2016).

In addition, literature-based approaches encourage emotional and intellectual engagement. According to Hismanoglu (2005), literary texts such as short stories can

integrate the four language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—within a single instructional framework. This integrated approach enhances students' language proficiency holistically.

Several empirical studies support the effectiveness of using short stories in reading instruction. Handayani (2013) found that students became more motivated and performed better in reading comprehension when short stories were used in class. Mustafa (2018) similarly reported significant improvements in students' reading abilities after implementing short stories in senior high school classes.

4. Theoretical Implications for Teaching Reading Through Short Stories

Using short stories in the classroom aligns with constructivist and humanistic theories of learning. Students are encouraged to construct meaning based on their interaction with texts, while also developing empathy, imagination, and cultural awareness. Khatib (2013) introduced the Short Story-Based Language Teaching (SSBLT) model, emphasizing its value in promoting learners' personal, linguistic, and cultural growth.

Therefore, the integration of short stories in reading instruction offers not only linguistic benefits but also cognitive and affective development. By engaging with narratives, learners enhance their comprehension skills while also fostering a deeper connection to the language.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design aimed at improving students' reading comprehension through the use of short stories. The CAR approach, based on the model proposed by Kurt Lewin, involves a cyclical process consisting of four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This model is particularly effective in addressing practical issues in the classroom through collaborative inquiry between the teacher and researcher (Arikunto, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

The research was conducted in two cycles. Each cycle comprised a series of instructional sessions followed by assessments to evaluate student progress. If the expected improvement was not observed in Cycle I, the research continued to Cycle II with revised interventions.

The research took place at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma, located in Aek Tampang, Padangsidempuan, during the second semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. The school was selected based on preliminary observations which identified reading comprehension as a significant challenge for the students.

The population consisted of all tenth-grade students enrolled at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma, totaling 109 students. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected class X Akuntansi, comprising 32 students (14 males and 18 females), as the research sample. This class was chosen due to their low average reading comprehension scores and the willingness of the English teacher to collaborate in the study.

The primary instrument used for data collection was a multiple-choice reading comprehension test, which served as both the pre-test and post-tests. The tests were designed to assess students' understanding of English texts and consisted of 10 items. Each correct response was awarded 10 points, allowing for a maximum score of 100.

Observational notes and field documentation were also utilized during the teaching process to record student engagement, behavior, and responses to the instructional strategy.

The CAR was implemented through the following four stages:

- Planning: The researcher designed lesson plans incorporating short stories and prepared all necessary teaching materials and assessment tools.
- Action: The researcher, in collaboration with the classroom teacher, delivered the lessons using short stories as the main instructional media over three sessions in each cycle.
- Observation: Student behavior and participation were monitored throughout the implementation to gather qualitative data on engagement and response to the learning strategy.
- Reflection: After each cycle, test results and observational data were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. Necessary adjustments were made before proceeding to the next cycle.

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-tests were analyzed to determine the mean scores and improvement percentages. The mean (M) was calculated using the formula:

$$M = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Where:

M = Mean score

$\sum X$ = Total score

N = Number of students

To calculate the percentage of students meeting the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM), the following formula was used:

$$P = \frac{R}{T} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P = Percentage of students who passed

R = Number of students who scored ≥ 75

T = Total number of students

Improvement in students' scores between pre-test and post-tests was calculated as:

$$P = \frac{y_2 - y_1}{y_1} \times 100\%$$

Where:

y_1 = Pre-test score

y_2 = Post-test score

The research was deemed successful if at least 70% of the students met or exceeded the KKM after the second cycle.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Result of Research

This section presents the findings of the Classroom Action Research (CAR) conducted over two cycles to improve students' reading comprehension through the use of short stories in class X Akuntansi at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma Padangsidimpuan.

Pre-Test Results

Prior to the intervention, a pre-test was administered to determine students' baseline reading comprehension levels. The results indicated that the students' average score was 43.67, with only 20% (6 out of 30 students) achieving scores at or above the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM) of 75. The majority of students

scored significantly below this threshold, highlighting substantial gaps in reading comprehension.

Cycle I Implementation and Post-Test I

In Cycle I, students participated in three instructional sessions using selected short stories as reading materials. These sessions were designed to engage students with texts in a more interactive and enjoyable manner, incorporating discussion, vocabulary reinforcement, and comprehension questions.

After the completion of Cycle I, a post-test was administered. The average score improved to 68.00, with 46.67% of students (14 out of 30) achieving or exceeding the KKM. This represented a 55.7% increase from the pre-test average. Although the improvement was substantial, the success criterion ($\geq 70\%$ of students reaching KKM) was not yet met, necessitating the continuation to Cycle II.

Cycle II Implementation and Post-Test II

In Cycle II, instructional activities were refined based on the reflection and evaluation of Cycle I. Emphasis was placed on group reading, targeted vocabulary support, and comprehension exercises tailored to students' needs. Students worked collaboratively to understand the texts and share interpretations, encouraging active engagement.

Following the completion of Cycle II, the post-test results showed a marked improvement. The class average rose to 80.00, and 83.33% of students (25 out of 30) met or exceeded the KKM. This demonstrated an 83.19% increase compared to the pre-test, confirming the effectiveness of the intervention.

Table 1
Summary of Results

Assessment Stage	Average Score	% of Students Meeting KKM
Pre-Test	43.67	20%
Post-Test I	68.00	46.67%
Post-Test II	80.00	83.33%

The data clearly demonstrate that the use of short stories significantly improved students' reading comprehension. The results validate the hypothesis that the

implementation of literature-based strategies—in this case, short stories—can lead to substantial gains in EFL learners' reading abilities.

2. The Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the use of short stories as instructional media significantly enhanced students' reading comprehension in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The results from the pre-test, post-test I, and post-test II demonstrate a consistent and substantial improvement in students' reading performance, aligning with existing literature and prior studies on the topic.

The pre-test results revealed that a majority of students struggled with reading comprehension, with only 20% meeting the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM). This aligns with earlier findings by Kholiq and Luthfiyati (2018), which highlighted vocabulary limitations and lack of reading strategies as significant barriers for EFL learners. In Cycle I, following the introduction of short stories, students' average scores increased to 68.00, and the percentage of students achieving the KKM more than doubled to 46.67%. This improvement, although promising, indicated the need for further instructional refinement.

By the end of Cycle II, the average score increased to 80.00, and 83.33% of students met or exceeded the KKM. This surpassed the success criterion set for the study, which was 70%. The results indicate that short stories provided a meaningful and effective medium for enhancing students' engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension abilities.

The improvement observed supports the assertion by Ghasemi (2011) and Ceylan (2016) that short stories, due to their structure and content, are well-suited for reading instruction in EFL classrooms. Their concise format allows students to process the entire narrative within a limited time, while their themes often resonate with learners' experiences and emotions, increasing motivation and interest.

Furthermore, the interactive and student-centered approach adopted in the teaching process—such as group discussions and active questioning—played a crucial role in improving comprehension. These findings echo those of Hismanoglu (2005), who emphasized the integrative potential of literature in developing language skills.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study aligns with constructivist and socio-cultural perspectives on language learning. Students were encouraged to build meaning through interaction with the text and their peers. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is reflected in the group reading activities, where more capable peers and the teacher supported learners in developing deeper understanding.

Moreover, the affective dimension of reading instruction—highlighted in Khatib's (2013) Short Story-Based Language Teaching (SSBLT)—was evident in students' growing enthusiasm and emotional connection to the texts, which contributed to increased motivation and cognitive engagement.

While the results are encouraging, this study was limited to a single class at one institution. Further research involving multiple schools or a larger sample size would be valuable to generalize the findings. Additionally, future studies could explore the long-term effects of literature-based reading instruction and its impact on other language skills such as speaking and writing.

E. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of using short stories as a strategy to improve reading comprehension among tenth-grade students at SMK Swasta Panca Dharma Padangsidempuan. Through the implementation of Classroom Action Research conducted over two cycles, the findings provide strong empirical evidence that short stories significantly enhance students' reading comprehension abilities.

The initial assessment (pre-test) revealed that most students were unable to meet the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM), with an average score of 43.67 and only 20% of students passing. After the first cycle, modest improvement was observed, with the average score rising to 68.00 and 46.67% of students meeting the KKM. Following instructional refinements in the second cycle, substantial progress was achieved—83.33% of students surpassed the KKM, with an average score of 80.00. This indicates an overall improvement of 83.19% from the baseline, thereby confirming the hypothesis that the use of short stories can effectively enhance reading comprehension.

In addition to quantifiable gains, qualitative observations during the learning process demonstrated increased student engagement, motivation, and confidence in reading.

These outcomes align with previous research affirming the pedagogical value of integrating literature, especially short stories, into EFL reading instruction.

In conclusion, the use of short stories is not only an effective instructional tool for improving reading comprehension but also a means of fostering a more interactive, enjoyable, and meaningful learning experience for students. Future research may expand this approach across broader educational contexts to further explore its benefits and applications.

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