Impact of Incorporating Short Stories in Enhancing the Reading Comprehension Skill of Undergraduate University EFL Learners in Lahore.

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Abstract

This study aimed at finding the impact of using short stories in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of EFL learners. It was a mixed-method approach study, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected. It was quasi-experimental research and two groups, experimental (consisting of 25 males and 23 females) and controlled group (consisting of 24 males and 21females) were participants for the study. Means of multiple-choice pretest-posttest scores were used to determine the level of improvement. Independent t-test was used to evaluate the significance of the difference in the outcome of controlled and experimental groups. Furthermore, One-way ANCOVA was used to eliminate the initial achievement difference. For qualitative data 7 Lecturers were interviewed and those lecturers were selected through purposive sampling. Result of the study suggested that short stories lay a positive impact on reading comprehension of the EFL learners.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension Skills, Short Stories, Undergraduate EFL Learners, Teachers.

Introduction

Literature has been used worldwide as a means to enhance the language proficiency of L2 learners. The positive impact of literature on the language proficiency of second language learners has attracted the attention of many FL/SL researchers. The choice of an appropriate literary text in the language classroom is the first step towards FL/SL teaching.

In order to know the efficacy of literature in enhancing language learners' proficiency, different genres of literature have been considered by ESL researchers, out of which many researchers were of the view that short stories can be considered as useful means for teaching four integrated language skills. The effectiveness of short stories in teaching language lies in the fact that they are shorter in length, which gives the reader a chance to understand it completely and easily in less time, in addition to that there are a number of short stories present in English literature, which gives teachers the liberty of choosing the appropriate short story as per to the level of their students.

Many of the researches have been conducted to assess the impact of using short stories on integrated language skills, which showed a positive impact on language skills. Researchers also witnessed a positive outcome of using short stories in the reading comprehension of second language learners. In a study, Zeraatkar & Hadipanah (2013) found out that the use of short stories laid a positive effect on the reading comprehension of the high school ESL learners of Birjand. This study aims at exploring the impact of using short stories in reading comprehension of Pakistani ESL undergraduate learners.

Statement of the Problem

This study was conducted because the EFL teachers, teaching the university undergraduate students, tend to use material readily available online for teaching reading comprehension skills. This readily available material on the internet usually consists of a random collection of topics/texts which are often not appropriate for the university level students, and thus this random collection of texts tends to serve no purpose in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of the ESL undergraduate learners.

Objectives of Research

The current study has the following objectives:

➢ To analyze the impact of incorporating short stories in teaching reading comprehension skill to university students.
➢ To explore teachers' opinions who have taught using both conventional methods and short stories for teaching reading comprehension skills to undergraduate students.
➢ To analyze if any specific gender performs better in reading comprehension test than its gender counterpart, when taught the reading comprehension skills, through the means of short stories.

Significance of the Study

The current research will be fruitful for the English teachers teaching at the undergraduate level, prospective English teachers who want to teach the adult ESL Pakistani learners apart from this, it will also be helpful for future researchers in the very field.

Literature Review

Reading is one of the four main language skills which plays a pivotal role in learning process. Reading comprehension is defined as a process of understanding the text being read (John R. Kirby, 2007). Eristiana Sri Augustin (2014) cites Langan (2002) who says that reading comprehension is the ability of understanding the text and it starts with the general feeling of what the text means to a deeper understanding of the text. John R. Kirby (2007) further elaborates the process of multilevel, lowest level is recognition of words which is prerequisite for the understanding of other levels but in some cases when word are not recognized well the upper levels can compensate for an overall comprehension of the text. Meneghetti, Carretti & De Beni (2006) say that reading comprehension is a very complex phenomenon, it requires the cognitive ability to integrate information of the text with that of reader's knowledge which results in mental representation of the in an elaborative manner.

Reading is also considered a token of literacy; Bouhedjam (2015) cites UNISCO that in the developing countries students' reading is assessed in early grades of school and the students who are unable to read lack "the prerequisite skills for the successful learning in the higher grades". Bouhedjam (2015) further says that reading is very important because it helps in motivating the students towards the learning process, it also gives every students an equal chance, regardless of their cognitive abilities, to process the information.

Rutzler (2020) says that many parents believe reading comprehension is related to language only, but its scope is a lot wider; comprehension process is going on in each and every subject be it math, science or history, without reading comprehension skills students will be unable to solve problems in those subjects.

There have been a number of studies conducted with the aim of finding suitable material for enhancing reading comprehension skill. ÖZKAN & TÖNGÜR (2014) concluded in their research that use of literature in reading comprehension classes lays a positive impact on the comprehension skills of the ESL learner. Khatib (2012) cited Erkaya (2005) the reading literary text enhances critical thinking of the students.

There have been a number of studies in past to assess the use of short stories in enhancing reading comprehension skills of the second language learners. Erkaya, O. R. (2005) suggested that short stories are helpful in keeping the students motivated to read further and thus they prove helpful in making them solve problems. Syafii, M., (2018) concluded in his research that students learnt the reading comprehension skill better when they were taught through online short stories and short story related activities. Sultan, Nafi, Qabaja, & Al-Abed (2018) found in their research that use of short stories brought a significant positive change in the reading comprehension skills of the 5th grade students in Hebron. Mustafa (2018) concluded in his research that use of short stories brought a significant improvement in reading comprehension skills of the EFL learner in class XMIA3 of SMA Negeri Bulukumba Kab. Zeraatkar & Hadipanah (2013) concluded in their research that use of short stories promoted the reading comprehension skills of the junior high school ESL learners of Birjand. Elhaj, A. (2017) conducted a research which resulted that use of short stories improved reading comprehension skills of secondary school ESL learners at Al-Nukhba.

The current study is also an attempt to explore the impact of incorporating short stories on reading comprehension skills of undergraduate EFL learners of Lahore. During the literature review a research gap was identified that eminent researches focused on students improvement on, teacher's opinion about the use of short stories was no included in any of the above mentioned studies. Further it was also observed that no major study focused on the effectiveness of the said pedagogy in terms gender. The current research is an attempt to fill the stated research gap.

Research Questions

- Is there any difference in the mean score of the pretest and posttest of both experimental and controlled groups?
- How far the study is significant in terms of difference between the mean score of pretest and posttest of both the groups?
- Is there still a significant difference between the means of pretest and posttest of both experimental and controlled groups if the initial difference in the scores of the pretest is eliminated?
- Does gender mark the difference in the result of posttest of experimental group?
- Do the teachers, who have taught through both conventional methods and short stories for reading comprehension skills, feel any positive difference in students' performance when taught through short stories?
- Do the teachers, after teaching reading comprehension skills through short stories, prefer to use it in the future as well?

Methodology

Sample Strategy and Research Design

A mixed-method approach was used for this study. Quasi-experimental Pretest-Posttest Non-equivalent Group design was used for collecting quantitative data. This experiment was carried over to a period of 15 weeks, two academic sessions per week and each academic session consisted of 1 hour and 30-minute duration. This research was delimited to the University of Management and Technology, Lahore because of

limited resources. The sample of the research was 1st-semester students (age ranging between 19-23 years). Two sections of non-English major students, BSCS students, were selected through a convenient sampling technique. The rationale for selecting non-English major students was that those students were not very proficient in language skills especially reading comprehension so it would have been easier to study treatment effect on them. Section one of BSCS was taken as an experimental group and they were given the treatment of short stories of teaching reading comprehension skills whereas section two was taken as a controlled group and they were not given the treatment.

Qualitative data was collected from the teacher of the University of Management and Technology. Teachers were selected through purposive sampling and only those teachers have been included in the study who have taught reading comprehension skills through both conventional methods used in the university and short stories in the past four years.

Tools and Variables

Quantitative data was collected from ESL undergraduate learners through achievement tests. Same pretests were taken from both controlled and experimental groups. Experimental group was taught EFL comprehension skills through short stories for the period of 30 academic sessions whereas the controlled group was not given this treatment for the stated period of time. After the last academic session of both the groups, a posttest was conducted to evaluate the difference in the achievement of both controlled and experimental groups. The pretest and posttest of both experimental and controlled groups consisted of 30 MCQs. For the pretest of both the group "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant was selected whereas "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde was used in the posttest of both experimental and controlled groups. Qualitative data from the teachers were collected through a semi-structured interview, the researcher conducted the interviews herself.

'IMB SPSS Statistics 21' mean scores, Independent Sample *t*-test, and ANCOVA were used to analyze the collected data. Although no significant difference in the mean scores of pretest of both controlled and experimental group was observed, yet ANCOVA was employed in order to eliminate any initial difference of achievement in pretest scores irrespective of its significance. Independent Sample *t*-test was used for comparing means of both pretests and posttests of the controlled and experimental group to evaluate the impact of short stories on the reading comprehension skills of the ESL undergraduate learners. Independent Sample *t* was used again for assessing the level of achievement of both the genders of the experimental group.

For the purpose of qualitative data collection, semi-structured audio interviews were used and later on they were transcribed in order to get the thematic analysis done. Each interview consisted of 10-15 minutes. In order to get spontaneous answers, no participant was told about the questions prior to the appointed time of the interview. After recording and transcribing the interviews, a copy was sent to each of the participants to get it verified that no changes occurred in their answers during the process of transcription.

Data Analysis

Hypotheses

Null hypotheses for the research were as follows:

$H_0(1)$: (There is no difference between the means of pretests of both controlled and experimental groups).
$H_0(2)$: (There is no difference between the mean scores of posttests of both controlled and experimental groups).
$H_0(3)$: (There is no difference between the mean score of posttests of both controlled and experimental group after eliminating the initial achievement difference).

$H_0(4)$: (There is no difference between the mean scores of both pretests and posttests of both genders in the experimental group)

Data analysis (Quantitative)

Experimental and Controlled groups (pretest)

Table 1. Pretest Means

Groups (Tests)	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest of experimental group	48	8	28	16.72	4.62
Pretest of controlled group	45	6	25	14.46	3.77

Experimental group N=48, its maximum scores in pretest are 28 and minimum scores are 8, mean scores of pretest of the experimental group are 16.72 whereas Standard deviation is 4.62 in the pretest of the experimental group. On the other hand Controlled group consisted of N=45, its maximum scores in pretest are 25 and minimum scores are 6, the mean score of pretest of a controlled group is 14.46 and its pretest Standard deviation is 3.77.

Experimental and Controlled groups (posttest)

Table 2. Pretest Means

Groups (Tests)	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Posttest of experimental group	48	16	29	23.22	2.56
Posttest of controlled group	45	10	26	16.422	3.31

Experimental group N=48, its maximum scores in posttest are 29 and minimum scores are 16, mean scores of posttest of the experimental group are 23.22 whereas Standard deviation is 2.56 in posttest of the experimental group. On the other hand Controlled group consisted of N=45, its maximum scores in the posttest are 26 and minimum scores are 10, the mean score of the posttest of a controlled group is 16.422 and it is posttest Standard deviation is 3.31.

Experimental and Controlled groups (Independent t-test)

Table 3. Posttest (comparison of means of both groups)

	F	Sig.	Df	p	t
Posttest of both groups	5.087	0.027	91	0.000[***]	11.078

As in the above-mentioned table *F*=5.087 and *Sig.*=0.027 thus we assume the equal variances amongst groups. *t*=11.078 and *p*=0.000[***]. On the basis of this highly significant value of *p* hull hypothesis is rejected.

Experimental and Controlled groups (ANCOVA)

Table 4. Posttest (comparison of means of both groups after ANCOVA was applied)

Source	Type III sum of all squares	Sig.
Pretest	3.143	0.064
Posttest	12.555	0.000[***]

As in the above-mentioned table *Type III sum of all squares*=3.143 for pretest whereas *Type III sum of all squares*=12.555 for posttest. For pretest *p*=0.064 on the basis of which null hypothesis was retained.

Whereas for posttest $p=0.000^{***}$, after the initial achievement difference was eliminated, on the basis of this statistical result null hypothesis was rejected.

Experimental group (Independent t-test for gender variable)

Table 5. Posttest of Experimental group (gender basis achievement difference)

	F	Sig.	Df	p	t
Posttest Experimental group (both genders)	0.05	0.825	43	0.553	0.598

As in the above-mentioned table F=0.50 and $Sig.$=0.825 thus we do not assume the equal variances amongst groups. t=0.598 and p=0.553 whereas f=43. On the basis of this insignificant value of the p, the null hypothesis is retained.

Data analysis (Qualitative)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from 7 teachers of the University of Management and Technology who have had used both conventional methods and short stories for teaching reading comprehension skills to the undergraduate ESL learners. There were two main reasons behind using the semi-structured interviews; reason one was a triangulation of data and the second reason was that of getting a thorough insight of teachers' opinions about the use of short stories and its impact on reading comprehension skills of the ESL learners.

Demographics of the participants of the semi-structured interview are as follows:

Table 6: Demographics of teachers

Sr.	Gender	Age (years)	Teaching experience (years)	Taught reading comprehension through conventional methods (years)	Taught reading comprehension through short stories (years)
ET1	Female	46	15	10	5
ET2	Female	39	9	5	4
ET3	Female	41	12	6	6
ET4	Male	52	24	19	5
ET5	Female	35	6	2	4
ET6	Female	37	9	4	5
ET7	Male	44	17	12	5

After going through all the stages of thematic analysis, and analyzing the assigned code; the following themes were identified in the collected data.

Table 7: Teachers' opinion about effectiveness and future use of short stories

Domain	Questions	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Predicting	Do you think students were better able to predict the upcoming story when they were taught the reading comprehension through Short stories? Why and How?	Inter-fabrication of events,	2	29
		The sequence of events,	6	86
		Prior knowledge,	5	71
		Interest in the story,	4	57
		narratology	5	71
			N=7	
Visualization	ESL learners were better able to visualize the whole picture of the text in their minds when they were taught reading comprehension through short stories? Why?	Movies available online,	4	57
		Pictorial,	6	86
		Scenes and settings,	5	71
		Sensory description,	4	57
		Important details descriptions	5	71
			N=7	
Vocabulary	Do you think short stories actually add up to learners' diction? How?	Better words in an essay,	4	57
		Detailed descriptions in the narrative,	3	43
		Better choice of words in writing,	5	71
		Improved written expressions	6	86
		Use of novel words in writing	5	71
			N=7	
Memory and attention	Did you find students memorizing better and paying more attention to the short stories as compared to the conventional online reading materials while teaching reading comprehension skills? (whether yes or no) Why and how?	Remembered and told what happened,	2	29
		Participated in retelling the story,	5	71
		Better summarized main points of stories,	4	57
		Answered the questions about events,	6	86
		Single plot	4	57
			N=7	

Attempting questions	Do you think students better understood how to deal with the wh-questions when they were taught the reading comprehension skills through short stories? (whether yes or no) why and how?	Keywords, Scenes and settings and characters, Minute details, understandable description,	4 5 5 4 N=7	57 71 71 57
Use of words in real life scenario	Do you think students understood, the real-life use of the words, better while being taught the reading comprehension skills through short stories? (whether yes or no) why and how?	The improved finding of meaning in context, Cultural use of the word, Situational use of words, connotative meanings	4 5 6 4 N=7	57 71 86 57
Future use of short stories	Would you like to keep on using short stories as literary authentic material for teaching reading comprehension skills to ESL learners? Why?	Interesting for learners, Easily remembered, Short and crisp language, Livelier, Cultural awareness, Students liking, Motivation in learners	6 5 4 4 3 5 5 5 N=7	86 71 57 57 43 71 71 71

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the impact of incorporating short stories in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of the undergraduate ESL learners. Earlier researches in this same field suggested that using short stories resulted in better outcomes of reading comprehension skills the ESL learners (Zeraatkar & Hadipanah, 2013). Vural (2013) also concluded that of short stories laid a positive impact on the reading and writing skills of the learners and motivated them more as compared to the simplified reading passages. Saka (2014) in his research found out that students were of the view that use of short stories in reading classrooms broadened their perspective and hence lead them to better understanding of the text. Sultan, A., Nafi', J., Qabaja, Z. & Al-abed, S (2018) also found out in their research that use of short stories brought a significant change in the reading comprehension skills of the learners. Result of this research confirms the results of previous studies that use of short stories lays a positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of the undergraduate ESL learners.

Furthermore the analysis of the quantitative data suggests that although there was no significant difference between the mean scores of pretests of both controlled and experimental group, but after the intervention of treatment for the period of 15 weeks there was a highly significant difference in the mean scores of controlled and experimental group. Experimental group performed significantly better as compared to the controlled group in the posttest conducted at the end of the experiment.

The researcher further tried to explore if any specific gender, in the experimental group, scored better as compared to its gender counterpart in the same group. The analysis of the data nullified the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis was retained which suggested that there was no significant difference in the mean scores of males and females of the experimental group.

Analysis of the qualitative data, collected from the teachers, seconds the findings of the quantitative data collected from the learners. The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews suggested that teachers also felt a positive change in learners' reading comprehension skills after they were taught through short stories. Teachers were of the view that inter-fabrication of events, and a proper plot of the narration made it easier for the learners to predict what is going to happen next which ultimately increased their interest in the reading process. Further the teachers said that students were better able to visualize the whole description given in the short stories. Teachers were further of the view that use of short stories enhanced students vocabulary, the learners understood the connotative meanings of the words and their use in the real life scenario which helped them in making better choice of words in their written expressions as well. According to the teachers, because of the understandable description of the short stories students also started to attempt wh-questions in a more efficient manner. Finally the teachers opined that they would continue to use short stories in while teaching reading comprehension skills to the undergraduate learners because they students take great interest in it and it not only increases their motivation to learn but also help them in getting to know other cultures better and also allow them to identify the shades of differences in meaning when it comes to connotative sense.

Conclusion, implications and recommendations

It is concluded from the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data that short stories are useful in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of the undergraduate ESL learners. It is also concluded that there might not be a significant gender-wise enhancement in reading comprehension skills when taught through short stories.

This is implicated from the result of the study that incorporating short stories in ESL course can be beneficial in improving reading comprehension skills of the adult learners. It is also implicated that introducing short stories does not only benefit the ESL learners in terms of lexis and syntax but it also improves the pragmatic sense of the ESL learners as well by giving exposure to the real-life usage of word in its native cultural setting.

It is recommended that the language teachers must try to integrate short stories in their reading classes so as to enhance students' learning experience. The curriculum of the universities must include short story based reading activities so as to give an opportunity to the adult learners to get the cultural sense of the words and hidden connotations for better understanding of the text.

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