



Examining Teachers' and Students' Beliefs, Practices, and Challenges in Utilizing Short Stories in Reading Classes: A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Gedeo Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This research aimed to examine teachers' practices, beliefs, and challenges in utilizing short stories in reading classes in selected secondary schools in Gede'o Zone, Ethiopia. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches with a descriptive design, the study involved 250 students and 12 English teachers. Data was collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The results reveal that both teachers and students have a positive view of the educational value of short stories. Teachers treasure the stories for their readability, brevity, and the fact that they raise students' self-awareness of numerous different modes of writing, cultures, and perspectives and essentially enrich students' vocabulary. Nonetheless, a big difference exists between students' preferences for learning and the methods used to deliver content. Bridging this gap could enhance the outcomes of language learning. Teachers have also noticed that students' interest and comprehension are sometimes diminished by technical jargon in textbooks, which frequently exceeds their comprehension levels. Also, not much difference is observed when compared with the results of reading strategies, motivational methods, or in brainstorming sessions. If these issues are addressed, then the potential of short stories for being tools for learning a language is likely to be very much increased.

1 Introduction

Since the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia in 1941, English has been taught and learned as a foreign language. Initially, it was introduced as a subject starting from grade three, but by the 1940s, English became the medium of instruction in Ethiopian secondary schools. Currently, English is taught from elementary school onward and serves as the primary language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education. Its significance extends beyond the classroom, as English is the preferred language in international relations, science and technology, commerce, and trade.

Despite its prominence, many Ethiopian students face significant challenges in mastering English, particularly in developing reading comprehension skills. According to Nuttall (1996), immersion among native speakers is the most effective way to learn a foreign language; however, many Ethiopian students lack opportunities for such practice outside the classroom. This limitation underscores the importance of reading as a fundamental skill for mastering English. Proficient reading enables students to absorb information, enjoy literature, and navigate various aspects of modern life. Moreover, reading proficiency significantly influences

students' performance across other academic disciplines. Reading fosters mental development and enhances attention span among young learners.

Utilizing literary works in language education offers numerous advantages for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, particularly in areas such as language acquisition, self-motivation, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. Erkaya (2005) posits that engaging with literature cultivates critical thinking skills in students. Similarly, Lazar (1993) argues that exposure to literary texts provides memorable syntactical and lexical items while encouraging learners to make predictions, draw inferences, and analyze character motivations and plot developments.

Among various literary forms, the short story stands out as an engaging genre suitable for EFL classrooms. Its brevity and accessibility make it an ideal choice for reading classes, allowing students to work independently while catering to diverse interests. Furthermore, short stories can be effectively employed across different age groups and proficiency levels (Pardede, 2011). The role of short stories in enhancing reading comprehension has been acknowledged by numerous English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals over the years. A well-crafted narrative captivates students' attention and stimulates their imagination while fostering a desire to use the language. Thiagarajan (2014) notes that reading short stories not only enhances reading skills but also nurtures imaginative thinking. Siahaan (2012) emphasizes that the context of a story including its events and characters invites active engagement with meaning-making processes, facilitating vocabulary acquisition without direct teacher intervention.

In Ethiopian secondary schools, where English serves as the medium of instruction, achieving high levels of English proficiency is essential for academic success. Reading skills are particularly vital; they enable students to maximize their educational experiences and are often regarded as the most critical macro skill for those learning English as a second or foreign language. However, many students struggle with reading comprehension, which hinders their overall academic performance.

As language teachers with experience instructing communicative English courses and reading skills for both pre-service and in-service trainees at various levels, we have observed that many students struggle with reading comprehension. For instance, at Dilla Secondary School, students frequently encounter difficulties when provided with reading materials. Leipzig (2001) highlights that reading poses challenges for EFL learners due to its multifaceted nature encompassing word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation.

Research into the challenges faced by students in developing their reading skills reveals several contributing factors. Teshale (2015) found that students at Bonga College of Teachers Education lacked strategy-based processing skills such as reading for gist or specific information and guessing meanings from context. Additionally, low language proficiency among students and insufficient teacher commitment were identified as significant barriers to effective reading practices. Deribe (2019) examined grade six students in Addis Ababa and identified ineffective instructional methodologies and inadequate exposure to English as key issues affecting their reading abilities. Getachew (2018) pointed out that high phonological awareness problems and poor teaching methodologies contributed to student difficulties at Ethio National School in Addis Ababa.

While these studies highlight the challenges students face, they also underscore the potential of literary materials to address these issues. For instance, Haileul (2012) and Yeniale (2014) conducted experimental studies demonstrating that literary texts significantly enhance student interest in learning while improving linguistic and communicative competencies. Similarly, case studies by Murat (2005) and Ahmad (2014) revealed that incorporating literary materials fosters language acquisition.

Despite these findings, there remains a significant gap in research concerning teachers' and students' practices, beliefs, and challenges associated with utilizing short stories in reading classes, particularly at the secondary school level in Ethiopia. This study aims to address this gap by investigating these dimensions within selected secondary schools in

Gede'o Zone, Ethiopia. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are EFL teachers' beliefs regarding the use of short stories in reading classes?
- Do EFL teachers implement strategies to teach reading skills through short stories effectively?
- What challenges do teachers encounter when integrating short stories into their teaching practices?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of short stories in improving reading comprehension among secondary school students in Ethiopia. This research has the potential to inform teaching practices and contribute to the development of more effective reading instruction strategies in EFL contexts.

2 Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design, employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gather comprehensive data on English language education. The research focused on four secondary schools-Bule, Yirgachefe, Wonago, and Dilla-selected through simple random sampling across four Woredas in the Gede'o Zone. A total of 262 participants were involved in the study, comprising Grade 9 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and EFL teachers.

Grade 9 students were specifically selected for this study as this grade represents a crucial stage in secondary education, marking the transition from basic to more advanced reading comprehension skills. From the total population of Grade 9 students in the selected schools, 250 students were randomly selected to ensure a representative sample. Additionally, 12 EFL teachers (three from each school) were purposively selected based on their experience teaching English at the grade 9 level.

To collect quantitative data on students' beliefs and practices regarding the use of short stories in their English lessons, a questionnaire was administered to the Grade 9 EFL students. The survey aimed to assess three key areas: students' beliefs about the

use of short stories in English classes, their practices in engaging with short stories during lessons, and the challenges they face when utilizing short stories as learning materials.

The survey was conducted within the classroom under the supervision of the researchers, who were available to assist students and ensure that the questions were understood clearly. To overcome any language barriers and ensure accurate responses, the questionnaire was translated into the Amharic language orally. This translation allowed all students, including those with limited English proficiency, to complete the questionnaire accurately, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Classroom observations were conducted using a standardized checklist to record practices and challenges during English language classes. This qualitative approach provided valuable insights into teaching practices, focusing on student engagement with the material and how teachers facilitated reading activities. The observations took place in a natural classroom setting, ensuring authentic data on both teaching practices and student engagement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with EFL teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences, beliefs and challenges concerning the use of short stories in the classroom. These interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to offer detailed, open-ended responses, enabling a more in-depth exploration of their perspectives and instructional practices.

The quantitative data from the student surveys and classroom observations were analyzed using descriptive statistics, primarily focusing on percentages. The survey included closed-ended questions, utilizing a five-point Likert scale ranging from "always" to "never," to assess students' responses. Classroom observations included yes/no questions to capture specific behaviors and practices during the lessons. This approach facilitated a systematic analysis of both the students' responses and the observed teaching practices. The qualitative data from the teacher interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Findings of students close ended questionnaire

The figures and tables provided below display the results obtained from the conducted questionnaire, which aimed to collect information on students' beliefs, practices in utilizing short stories, and the challenges encountered when integrating short stories into English class. The Likert scale employed in this study utilizes the following values: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = no opinion, 2 =

disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

As figure 1 indicates, a high population of the respondents (18.4%) and (45.2%) strongly agreed and agreed respectively that short stories introduce the learners to the sensation of learning something regarding real life. For the 2nd item, (24.8%) strongly agreed while (45.2%) agreed that the presence of short tales in reading classes encourages students to read more. As is evidently reflected in item 3, (15.6%) responded that they strongly agree, while (54.0%) agreed that reading short stories exposes them to other lifestyles.

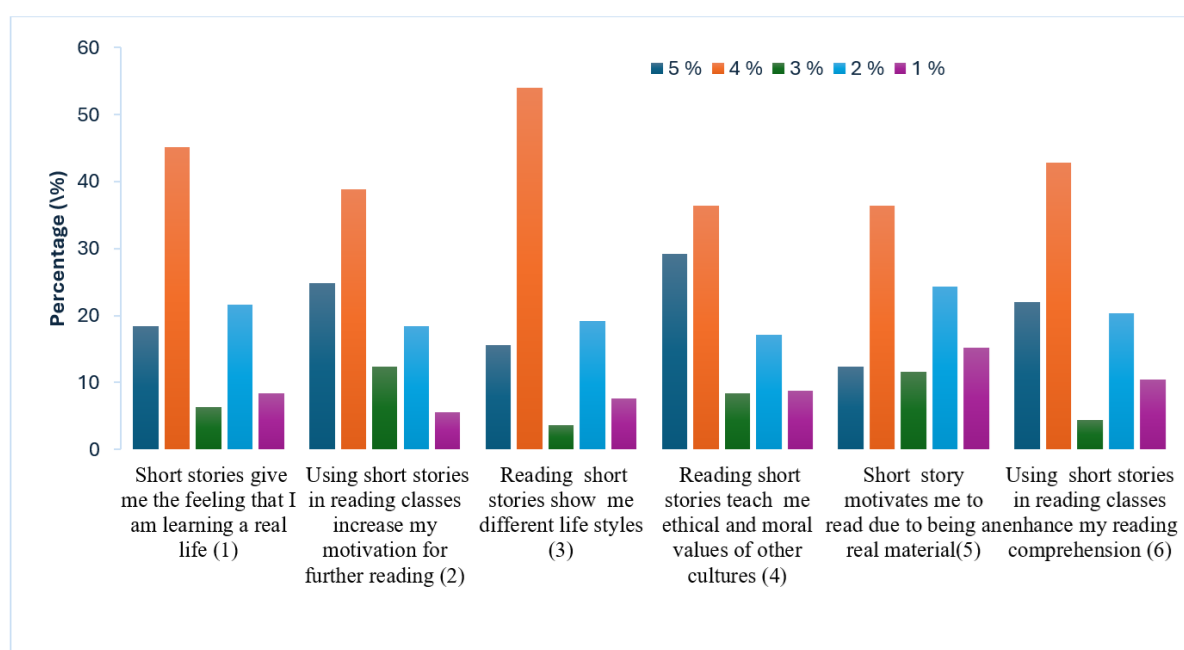


Figure 1: Students' beliefs on using short stories in English class

To question 4, it is revealed that (29.2%) of the respondents strongly agree, while (36.4%) agree that through short story reading, they acquire ethical and moral values of other cultures. As reported in the figure, (12.4%) and strongly agreed, and (36.4%) agreed that short stories are motivational reading materials as they are in real-life situations. For item 6 which says using short stories in my reading class enhances my reading comprehension (22.0%) agreed and (42.8%) strongly agreed.

Overall, data shows that short stories are generally welcomed as teaching materials of high value in the reading classroom. They are seen as devices that are functional tools in shaping the real-life

experiences of individuals, boosting reading motivation, exposing learners to different lifestyles, and inculcating moral and ethical principles. Every short story has a start, middle, and end. Thus, this will motivate students to read or listen all the way through. For instance, knowing the story's climax or what will happen at the end (Erkaya, 2005). The use of short stories as motivational tools can assist language learners in honing and strengthening their skills (King, 2001). The findings also suggest that short stories offer a continuous, evolving engagement with language learning. Rather than being a one-time learning activity, short stories serve as a dynamic resource for developing students' language abilities over time. They create a relaxed environ-

ment where students feel more comfortable with the English language, increase their motivation to read, foster creativity, and accelerate reading com-

prehension skills. This ongoing engagement with short stories enhances their utility as an effective pedagogical tool in language acquisition.

Table 1: Students' Practices in Using Short Stories in English Classes

No.	Item	5 %	4 %	3 %	2 %	1 %	T %
1	My teacher teaches me reading comprehension and vocabulary using short stories.	-	24.0	8.8	67.2	-	100
2	My teacher teaches me reading strategies before I read short story.	-	22.0	4.0	43.2	30.8	100
3	My teacher motivates and engages me during short stories classes.	-	8.0	5.6	54.0	32.4	100
4	My teacher encourages me to tell the story orally to the class after reading the text.	-	20	-	49.2	30.8	100
5	My teacher uses short stories inside classrooms to develop all my language skills	7.6	13.6	4.8	60.0	14.0	100

As depicted in the presented table1, a significant majority of respondents, amounting to (67.2%), indicated that their teacher did not instruct them reading comprehension and vocabulary using short stories. Examining the data, many participants, specifically (43.2%), disagreed, and an additional (30.8%) strongly disagreed with item number 2, which states, "My teacher teaches me reading strategies before I read short stories." Turning to item 3 in the table, a prevailing sentiment emerged where most respondents, comprising (54%) and (32.4%), disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, with the statement, "My teacher motivates and engages me during short stories classes." Regarding item 4, designed to assess whether teachers encourage students to orally present the story to the class

after reading the text. So, as indicated in Table 1, a notable proportion of respondents, comprising (49.2%) and (30.8%), expressed disagreement and strong disagreement, respectively. Focusing on item 5 in the table, which aimed to assess whether teachers utilize short stories in classrooms to develop all students' language skills, (60%) of respondents disagreed, and (14.0%) strongly disagreed. These findings underscore the importance of effective instructional strategies and engagement practices in teaching reading through short stories, as research highlights that motivation and explicit instruction in reading strategies are critical for developing students' comprehension and overall language skills (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Baker, 2005).

Findings from Students' Challenges in Using Short Stories in English Classes

Table 2: Challenges faced by students in using short stories in English classes

No.	Item	5 %	4 %	3 %	2 %	1 %	T %
1	Most short story topics are culturally understandable .	-	5.6	-	71.6	22.8	100
2	I usually understand the information provided in the text.	-	28.0	-	72.0	-	100
3	The majority of short story reading materials in English promote indigenous knowledge.	13.2	25.6	3.2	42.0	16.0	100
4	The vocabulary in short stories is challenging to understand so I am having trouble learning them.	26.0	54.8	-	10.8	8.4	100

As item one in the above table reveals, many respondents, including (71.6%) and (22.8%) have been found to disagree and strongly disagree when asked whether the short story topics presented to them are culturally understandable. On item 2, which addresses whether they understood the information being given in the text or not, an overwhelming majority, a whopping (72.00%) do not understand. In item 3, (42%) and (16%) of the respondents disagreed that short story reading materials in English contribute to the promotion of indigenous knowledge. In item 4, most of the respondents (26%) and (54.8%) strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that the content of short stories is challenging, hence not enabling them to comprehend and learn. These findings highlight challenges related to content comprehension, cultural relevance, and difficult vocabulary. Such barriers make it difficult for students to fully engage with the material. As previous research suggests, when students encounter unclear syntactic structures or unfamiliar vocabulary, their comprehension can be significantly hindered (Rawson, 2004; Harmer, 2002).

3.2 Findings of teachers Semi-structured interviews

The first question posed to the teachers was, "To what extent do you teach short stories in reading classes based on your teaching experience?" Most teachers indicated that they create a safe and supportive learning environment that encourages students to engage with short stories during reading classes. They strive to cultivate an interest in reading activities. However, they have observed that many students are unmotivated, attributing this lack of motivation to the difficulty of the texts being read. The teachers believe that addressing these comprehension challenges is essential for fostering a more positive attitude toward reading.

The second question attempted to find out what factors affect the teaching of reading using short stories. A majority of the teachers emphasized adequate resources and access to suitable short stories. Most of the teachers were unable to get a good collection of short stories that would enhance the teaching aims of the lesson. Also, some teachers mentioned that the short stories present within

the textbooks contain very challenging vocabulary which eventually creates a problem for the students to fully grasp the story and even hinders their understanding of the material given. Research supports these findings, indicating that complex vocabulary can pose significant barriers to comprehension for students (Beck *et al.*, 2013).

The third question aimed to gather insights from teachers based on their teaching experience, specifically regarding the relevance of incorporating short stories into the reading class. Many teachers stressed the fact of short stories' applicability in reading classes. They pointed out that the very size of short stories is a valuable issue for classrooms under strict time limits, as students may manage to accomplish them in just one class period. Besides, short stories helped to further improve understanding in literature since students got a lot of different types of genres and themes, which also exposed them to the writer's different styles, cultures as well as perspectives. Since the stories are shorter, direct discussions can be carried out in a classroom, which helps students to explore the characters, themes, and plots in detail. Moreover, teachers acknowledged that short stories are very useful in developing the language. Through stories, students are exposed to new words and sentence patterns, through a context that is far more comprehensible than otherwise occurs in developing language learning.

The fourth question sought input from teachers regarding the suitability of the short stories included in the textbook for students at their current proficiency levels. All participants replied that the short stories within the textbook are not appropriate material for students at this class level. The main issue here is that these short stories use terminology far too advanced for the students to be learning. The use of advanced, foreign terminology places the students at a disadvantage, because they experience trouble relating since the content becomes too difficult for them to understand and reason out for themselves. The latter highly affects the engagement of the students with the content as the vocabulary of the short stories is not within reach of the level of ability that the students are at. When students are engaged with something

not understood, it is going to throw off the flow of reading and reduce the comprehensibility of the whole story. That language barrier can provoke irritability, low directive behavior, and ultimately less success in the process of learning. Short story vocabulary should be of a level where students' proficiency enables them to interact with the material, allowing them to follow the story and derive meaning. For this very reason, it is pertinent to offer a more specialized selection of short stories at the student's level of vocabulary in order that the reading experience be enjoyable and successful.

In response to the last question, which asked whether teachers encourage their students to read short stories, many respondents said that they em-

phasize the value of short story reading for the improvement of reading comprehension. Despite this acknowledgement, all respondents stated they did not take any steps to actively promote students reading skill development.

3.3 Analysis of teachers' classroom observation

Classroom observations were conducted to examine the actual beliefs, practices, and challenges of teaching reading skills using short stories. Twelve English teachers participated in the study, each observed twice, resulting in a total of 24 hours of observation. A checklist was used to guide the observations and ensure a structured approach to data collection.

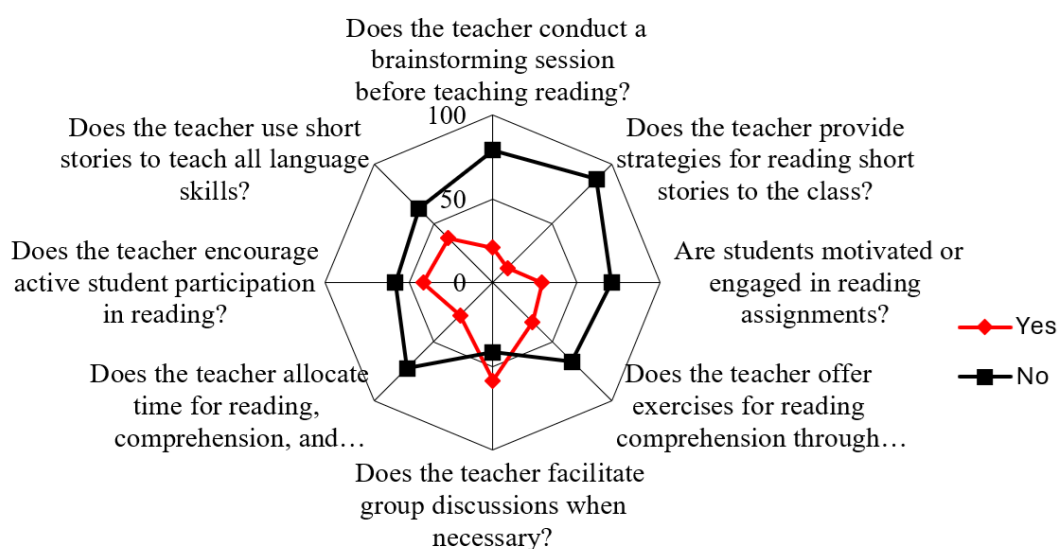


Figure 2: Classroom observation

The observation results reveal several areas for improvement in reading instruction. Notably, only 20.83% of teachers conduct brainstorming sessions before reading instruction, suggesting a missed opportunity to engage students' prior knowledge, which is crucial for effective comprehension. Additionally, a mere 12.5% of teachers provide strategies for reading short stories, potentially hindering students' critical text engagement and contributing to low motivation (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). Furthermore, only 33.33% of teachers offer comprehension exercises, meaning many students may

lack adequate practice in this essential skill. While 58.33% of teachers facilitate group discussions, which enhance critical thinking and social learning, there remains room for increased opportunities. Alarming, only 27.59% of teachers allocate time for reading, comprehension, and reflection, which could impede deeper learning (Zwiers and Crawford, 2011). Moreover, 41.67% of teachers encourage active participation. Lastly, 37.5% of teachers utilize short stories to teach all language skills, indicating a need for broader integration of this effective practice (Hernandez *et al.*, 2014).

In general, the data suggests that current teaching practices involving short stories in reading classes are generally insufficient in several areas. A majority of observed classes do not use brainstorming sessions, strategies for reading short stories, and exercises for reading comprehension. Additionally, student motivation and engagement in reading assignments are low. Group discussions and active student participation are not widely facilitated, and there is a significant lack of time allocated for reading, comprehension, and reflection.

4 Conclusion

The information highlights a positive perception among students regarding the educational benefits of short stories. These advantages include improved motivation, creativity, fluency in the language, improved reading comprehension, and cultural insights. The results imply that short stories are useful teaching tools that enhance and involve students in their reading lessons. Teachers emphasized the value of short stories in reading classes as well, pointing out that they are concise, fit into busy schedules, and expose students to a variety of genres. They underlined how short stories, with their variety of vocabulary and sentence patterns, can help students gain a better grasp of writing styles, cultures, and points of view, as well as language ability.

The data analysis, however, shows a large disparity between the students' chosen learning strategies and the ways short tales are currently taught. Closing this gap could improve the process of learning a language. Diverse viewpoints were shared by participants about pre-reading activities, instructional techniques, motivation, language proficiency, peer interaction, diversity of content, and the function of short stories in reading comprehension.

Teachers have observed that short stories in textbooks often use technical language that exceeds their students' comprehension levels, creating a vocabulary gap that diminishes both motivation and understanding. This linguistic barrier can lead to a less effective learning process. Furthermore, despite teachers' efforts to use short stories to capture students' attention and engage them in reading activities, there is a general lack of enthusiasm

among students. Research also indicates a potential deficiency in the incorporation of brainstorming sessions, reading strategies, and motivational techniques in teaching short stories. Addressing these gaps could significantly enhance the effectiveness of short stories as a tool for language learning.

To optimize short story use, it is essential to select texts that match students' proficiency levels and incorporate pre-reading activities to activate prior knowledge. A variety of instructional strategies, including group discussions and role-playing, should be used to engage students. Motivational techniques, such as offering choice in reading materials and linking stories to students' interests, can further enhance engagement. Peer interaction through collaborative activities can also improve comprehension and learning outcomes.

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