The Use of Short Stories to improve English proficiency in Sixth Graders

El uso de relatos breves para mejorar el dominio del inglés en alumnos de sexto curso

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ABSTRACT

Existing research suggests that short stories are an engaging and immersive experience that actively stimulates foreign language students' imagination and promotes their interest in language acquisition; they can also foster empathy, critical thinking, and creativity, all of which are essential tools for language development. By bringing short stories into the language classroom, a variety of narratives, characters, and cross-cultural experiences might be met. This research examines English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' improvement and perceptions of the implementation of short stories into their English classes after a six-week period of exposure to it as a teaching-learning strategy. The findings of the investigation showed a slight difference in students' language improvement after comparing the pre- and post-test results; however, students' perceptions of the implementation of short stories could bring insights into the English classrooms to enhance students' language skills, promoting passion for reading, and encouraging critical thinking.

Keywords: Short stories; English proficiency; reading; teaching strategy; students perceptions.

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RESUMEN

La investigación existente sugiere que los cuentos son una experiencia atractiva y envolvente que estimula activamente la imaginación de los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras y fomenta su interés por la adquisición del idioma; también pueden fomentar la empatía, el pensamiento crítico y la creatividad, todas ellas herramientas esenciales para el desarrollo del lenguaje. Al introducir los relatos breves en el aula de idiomas, se puede conocer una gran variedad de narraciones, personajes y experiencias interculturales. Esta investigación examina la mejora y las percepciones de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) sobre la implementación de cuentos cortos en sus clases de inglés tras un periodo de seis semanas de exposición a los mismos como estrategia de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Los resultados de la investigación mostraron una ligera diferencia en la mejora lingüística de los estudiantes tras comparar los resultados previos y posteriores a la prueba; sin embargo, las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la implementación de cuentos cortos podrían aportar ideas a las aulas de inglés como una forma de mejorar las habilidades lingüísticas de los estudiantes, promoviendo la pasión por la lectura y fomentando el pensamiento crítico.

Palabras clave: Cuentos cortos; dominio del inglés; lectura; estrategia didáctica; percepciones de los estudiantes.

Introduction

Nowadays, language proficiency plays a crucial role in the academic and personal development of students, and English, being an international language, holds substantial significance in today's globalized world (Bartan, 2017). In this regard, authors such as Ceylan (2016), and Arias (2017), claimed that the incorporation of short stories into the classroom has emerged as a dynamic strategy to improve language skills. In this sense, Nazara (2019), indicates that short stories offer not only teachers but also students a technique that engages them in an immersive and interactive experience, fostering language skills and overall proficiency.

As mentioned above, English proficiency is essential in today's world, as it is a lingua franca for international communication, business, education, and career opportunities (Bartan, 2017). This author also indicates the importance of improving EFL students' language level represents a ponderous challenge for teachers as they must be updated with trendy methodologies and effective strategies to reach that very important goal. One of these strategies, short stories, offers an engaging and interactive way to develop language skills, improve vocabulary, and enhance reading comprehension activities (Ayu, 2018). According to Pratiwi et al. (2020), reading is not an easy task; it is more than just translating meaning from word to word to grasp what is been read; it is also thought of as an advanced intellectual process.

Regarding short stories, some remarkable research has been found. Nazara (2019), conducted mixed-method research in a suburban school in Indonesia. Students were constantly exposed to short stories for 12 weeks. At the end of the study, the results showed a positive effect on the students' vocabulary proficiency. Also, the author mentioned that students perceive short stories as an effective tool to learn English as they commented the stories were easy to read and enjoyable. Thus, students can learn English by completing and being engaged in tasks that look interesting to them. In the same vein, Gómez Rodríguez (2014) found that short stories can be an engaging strategy to be used in EFL classes. Students feel motivated to perform these kinds of activities and

at the same time, they improve their language proficiency significantly (Sasalia & Sari, 2020). Authors such as Pratiwi, et al. (2020) studied the utility of short stories as a means for motivating students' improvement in reading abilities at the University of Bengkulu in Indonesia. Their quantitative research showed that the difference between the pre-tests and the post-tests was substantial. The students felt motivated to learn and increased their test scores, especially in English reading and even writing and vocabulary. Arias (2017) conducted a study at Santo Tomás University in Colombia with 52 students. Her study demonstrated that the use of short stories after some weeks of exposure showed positive outcomes, the 52 participants showed an improvement in their vocabulary, oral, and writing competences. The author concluded her research by explaining that short stories are an important benefit in the students' learning processes, cultural awareness, and writing. Bartan (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study about the effects of using short stories to improve the writing skills in a Turkish school with seventh-grade students for a period of 13 weeks. The findings revealed a steady improvement in writing, grammar, and syntax. Another conclusion that the author pointed out was the high scores that the experimental group obtained compared to the control group. Furthermore, Aljaraıdeh (2020) researched the impact of digital storytelling on sixth graders in Jordan. In his quasi-experimental study, he found out that the use of digital storytelling helped students to develop learning styles. Reading stories can help students improve their English proficiency and learn literature using digital tools.

Concerning the Ecuadorian context, Castillo and Quinonez (2022), conducted a quantitative study to determine the impact of digital comics on improving English vocabulary during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcomes showed that the use of comics was motivating to students. The authors also explained that comics were effective in making students acquire new vocabulary.

The incorporation of short stories in language instruction could offer several pedagogical implications. In this regard, educators can integrate short stories into the curriculum to enhance vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, grammar and syntax, and cultural awareness (Ayu, 2018). Teachers can adapt and create meaningful activities, such as discussions, creative writing, and role-playing, to engage students in active language learning (Ayu, 2018). Additionally, incorporating culturally diverse short stories promotes inclusivity and provides opportunities for students to explore different perspectives (Kim, 2013).

Ghasemi (2011), considered that English is very important for students who want to acquire adequate social and academic development. Sixth graders are about to finish primary school and they are at a critical stage of language acquisition (Ghasemi, 2011). Additionally, some disadvantages such as overcrowded classrooms or lack of motivation could lead students to fail in the process of learning English successfully (Ayu, 2018). That is why the implementation of strategies such as the use of short stories may help the students improve their English level because these strategies provide a dynamic way of learning. Authors such as Berrarbi and Bahous (2018), indicated some benefits of using short stories in foreign language classrooms such as improving English proficiency, motivating students, increasing their cultural understanding, and stimulating their conversation abilities.

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Short stories and language learning approaches

Davidson (2010), has seen the use of literacy texts in language learning associated with constructivist and sociocultural approaches because "literacy learning is socially situated and that it is appropriated from more knowledgeable others in one's social and cultural environment" (p. 255). Davidson (2010), also stated that the sociocultural theory highlights the relevance of social interaction and cultural context in language learning. By using literacy texts, such as short stories, students manage to connect what they do in their English classes with real-life experiences, and promote interpretation, analysis, and application of different language skills (Nazara, 2019). Authors such as Davidson (2010) and Arias (2017) emphasized the importance of short stories in facilitating discussions and cultural exploration (Davidson, 2010), and improving language proficiency through meaningful interactions (Arias, 2017). These authors also emphasized topics such as language, literacy, and culture while discussing the benefits of using short stories.

Short stories constantly expose students to new vocabulary, enhancing lexical knowledge and understanding (Castillo & Quinonez, 2022). Context exposure to new words enhances comprehension and vocabulary retention (Nazara, 2019). Although, Berrabi and Bahous (2018) considered vocabulary as the biggest challenge that students face due to aspects such as understanding; pupils do not fully comprehend the target language, which contains a wide variety of tenses, nouns, adjectives, grammar structures, etc. The responsibility of choosing the right short story to work in the class is a key element in guaranteeing adequate vocabulary comprehension. Aspects such as the length of short stories are variable. "Therefore, teachers should choose a story that is short enough to handle within course hours" (Nazara, 2019, p. 160).

Analyzing short stories develops critical reading skills, such as inferencing, summarizing, and making connections (Nazara, 2019). Also, students improve their ability to extract meaning from text, enhancing overall language proficiency (Ceylan, 2016). Similarly, Arias (2017), perceived that "literature shows students a different and fantastic world full of new experiences, adventures, places, characters, fantasy, knowledge, and universal topics that encourage them in reading" (p. 106). In this way, short stories, when chosen correctly, could be an engaging and motivating tool to be implemented in the EFL classes. Short stories provide examples of grammatical structures and sentence patterns (Seo & Kim, 2020). Students can observe and practice correct grammar usage, reinforce their understanding of English syntax (Pratiwi et al., 2020), and have fun at the same time. Arias (2017) considered short stories often reflect cultural nuances and experiences; moreover, exploring diverse narratives promotes cultural understanding and empathy, contributing to students' language and social development.

In this realm, the objective of this study is to examine the impact of using short stories to improve sixth graders' English proficiency, as well as to analyze these students' perceptions of the implementation of this strategy in their EFL learning endeavor. In this regard, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the potential of short stories usage as an effective instructional tool for English language learning, and of course their academic success.

Methods

Materials and Methods

This case study utilized a pre-experimental *pre- and post-test research design of a single group* and a *descriptive design* (Cabrera-Tenecela, 2023). By integrating both *pre-experimental analyses* from standardized assessments and *descriptive feedback* from participants, the study aimed to capture a multidimensional view (Hernandez et al, 2014) of the educational intervention, examining not only measurable learning outcomes but also students' subjective perceptions.

Ethical Considerations. Before the commencement of the study, ethical protocols were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was diligently acquired from school authorities and the parents of the participants. The privacy and confidentiality of the students were paramount; hence, all data were collected and analyzed while ensuring anonymity. Students were also briefed about the study's objectives and reassured of their autonomy to withdraw from the study without any repercussions at any point should they choose to do so.

Participants. The research was conducted with a cohort of 41 sixth-grade students from a private educational institution in Cuenca, Ecuador. These students were evaluated using a standardized English proficiency test developed by Macmillan Education, which served as a tool for both pre-intervention and post-intervention assessment.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of a six-week program where students engaged with short stories through weekly sessions. These sessions were meticulously structured to encompass:

Reading: Engaging in group reading-aloud activities, students worked on enhancing their fluency and pronunciation skills with material that was carefully chosen to be age-appropriate.

Vocabulary: Targeted vocabulary words were extracted from the stories and reinforced through interactive learning activities such as games and the use of flashcards.

Comprehension: Critical thinking and comprehension were fostered through group discussions, responses to questions, and activities centered on summarizing the narratives.

Data Collection

Pre-experimental data were gleaned from pre-tests and post-tests administered to assess reading, vocabulary, and grammar competencies. Complementing this, descriptive data were gathered through:

- **Observations**: Direct observations were conducted during the intervention sessions, where researchers noted aspects of student engagement, teacher-student interactions, and overall classroom dynamics.

- **Student Surveys**: To glean insights into the control group's perception of the learning tool, surveys featuring Likert-scale items were distributed, querying their levels of agreement with statements regarding the efficacy of short stories in their language learning process.

Data analysis

The statistical analysis of the current study was conducted using JASP (Goss-Sampson, 2019; *JASP–A Fresh Way to Do Statistics*, 2023), an open-source statistical software package known for its user-friendly interface and advanced statistical capabilities. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the students' *pre- and post-test research design* (pre-experimental data) *of a single group* (Cabrera-Tenecela, 2023). This involved calculating means, standard deviations, and error margins to assess the central tendency and dispersion of scores. To test the normality of the data distribution, the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied, ensuring the appropriateness of parametric testing. Subsequently, a Paired Samples T-Test was employed to compare the pre- and post-intervention scores, which provided insights into the effectiveness of using short stories in language instruction by evaluating the statistical significance of score differences. Moreover, the students' perceptions regarding the impact of short stories on various language and cognitive skills were reported through frequency distributions and percentage calculations (descriptive data), offering a nuanced understanding of students attitudes towards this educational strategy.

Results

The findings of the study are systematically structured to present a comprehensive overview encompassing three core components: the demographic age of the participants, the empirical outcomes of the language placement test, and the evaluative feedback from a survey assessing student perceptions of the short story-based instructional program.

Demographic profile. The participant group in this study comprises a cohort of sixth-grade students with a specific age distribution. Of the participants, 2 students, making up 4.9% of the sample, are 9 years old. Most of the participants, 31 students, which represent 75.6%, are 10 years old. Finally, 8 students, constituting 19.5% of the sample, are 11 years old. This distribution indicates that the predominant age in the sample is 10 years, reflecting a typical cohort of sixth-grade students, where many pupils are expected to be in the 10 to 11-year age range. The inclusion of 9-year-old students may indicate the presence of academically advanced students for their grade level or variations in the age cut-off dates for school admission. Figure 1 illustrates the age distribution.

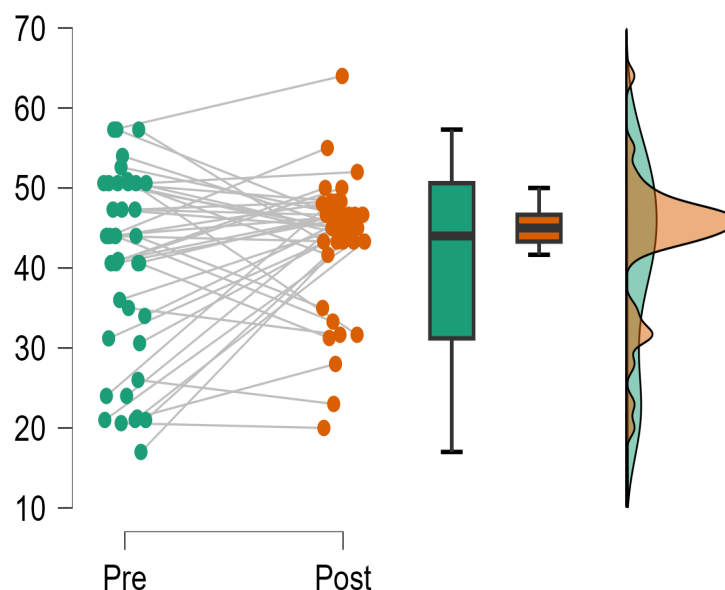Figure 1. Bar plot of the students' age distribution.
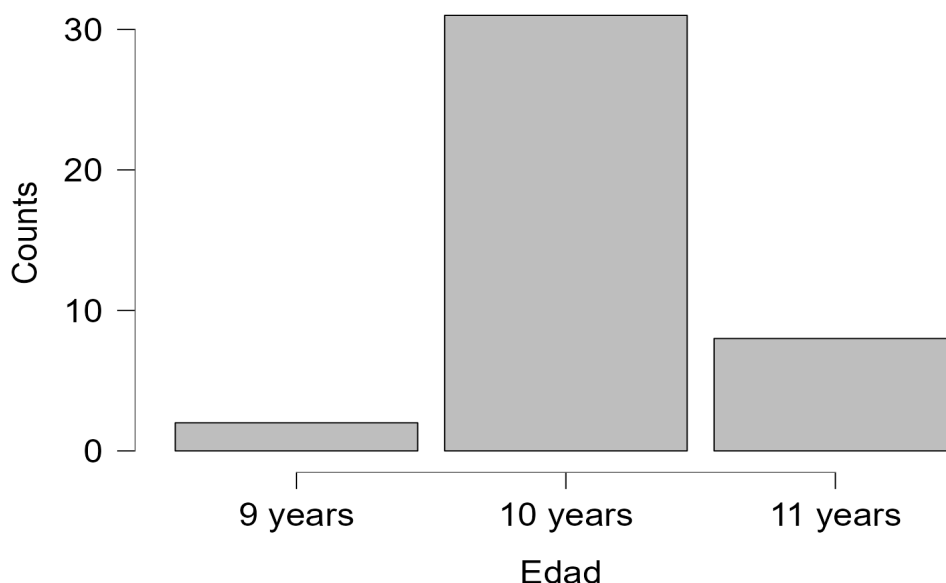
Source: Author's own.

Empirical outcomes. Within the educational research domain, this study was designed to assess the efficacy of short stories as a pedagogical tool for enhancing English language proficiency among sixth-grade learners. The investigation describes measures of language improvement and student perceptions regarding the use of short stories in their EFL studies.

The statistical analysis detailed in the provided table illustrates the quantitative aspect of this research. A pre-test and post-test design was employed, with both tests administered to a cohort of 41 sixth graders. The pre-test average score was 40.14, with a standard deviation of 11.83 and a standard error of 1.847, indicating a moderate spread of scores. The coefficient of variation was 0.30, reflecting a relative variability in English proficiency at the baseline. The post-test scores showed a notable improvement with an average of 43.41, a lower standard deviation of 8.26, and a standard error of 1.29, demonstrating a more compact distribution of scores and reduced variability, as indicated by the coefficient of variation of 0.19.

The Shapiro-Wilk Test for normality confirmed that the distribution of scores did not significantly deviate from a normal distribution (W = 0.962, p = 0.178), validating the assumption of normality for subsequent parametric tests. A Paired Samples T-Test between the pre-test and post-test scores indicated a statistically significant improvement (t = -1.804, df = 40, p = 0.039), supporting the hypothesis that the intervention—utilizing short stories in instruction—had a beneficial impact on the students' English language proficiency. Figure 2 shown how each student increased or decreased their proficiency of the language.

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Figure 2. Pre and posttest raincloud and boxes plot of the pre and posttest English proficiency.

Source: Author's own.

Students' perceptions. On the other hand, student feedback regarding the integration of short stories into their EFL curriculum was collected to complement the statistical findings and provide a complete understanding of the instructional strategy's effectiveness. The combination of the pre-experimental analysis with the description of the students' perceptions contributes to a comprehensive evaluation of short stories to foster not only linguistic competence but also to positively influence learners' attitudes and perceptions towards English language acquisition. A 9-item survey was administered to find out how satisfied they were with the program. Results are presented in the table 1.

The data reflects students' perceptions regarding the use of short stories in their English language classes. A significant majority of students strongly agree that reading short stories would aid in better understanding the language (75.6%), improving their English reading comprehension skills (75.6%), enhancing their English writing skills (73.2%), and improving speaking and listening skills in English (78%). These results suggest a high level of confidence among students in the effectiveness of short stories as a multifaceted educational tool in language acquisition.

Similarly, a substantial proportion of students perceive that short stories contribute to the development of English grammar understanding (63.4%) and believe that short stories help to awaken creativity and imagination (63.4%). The role of technology is also viewed positively, with 61% of students strongly agreeing that it would enhance their learning experience when reading short stories in English.

Moreover, students recognize the potential of short stories to improve critical thinking skills in English, with 63.4% strongly agreeing. The perception that short stories can positively impact academic performance is also prominent, with 78% strongly affirming this viewpoint.

These responses collectively indicate a robust endorsement of short stories as a valuable component in English language education, with students recognizing their potential to improve not only specific language skills but also broader academic and cognitive abilities.

Table 1. Students' opinion about the stories program applied.

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Reading short stories in my English classes would help me better understand the language.	Agree	10	24,4
	Strongly Agree	31	75,6
Short stories aid in developing a better understanding of English grammar.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	4	9,8
	Agree	11	26,8
	Strongly Agree	26	63,4
Reading short stories could improve my English reading comprehension skills.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	4,9
	Agree	8	19,5
	Strongly Agree	31	75,6
Reading short stories would enhance my English writing skills.	Strongly Disagree	1	2,4
	Agree	10	24,4
	Strongly Agree	30	73,2
Reading short stories would improve my speaking and listening skills in English.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	2,4
	Agree	8	19,5
	Strongly Agree	32	78
Short stories help awaken my creativity and imagination.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	5	12,2
	Agree	10	24,4
	Strongly Agree	26	63,4
Technology would enhance my learning experience when reading short stories in English.	Strongly Disagree	1	2,4
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	2,4
	Agree	14	34,1
	Strongly Agree	25	61
Reading short stories would improve critical thinking skills in English.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	4,9
	Agree	13	31,7
	Strongly Agree	26	63,4
I believe that the use of short stories during my English classes can have a positive impact on my academic performance at school.	Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	7,3
	Agree	6	14,6
	Strongly Agree	32	78

Source: Author's own.

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Discussion

The main objective of this study was to measure the effectiveness of short stories as a strategy to improve the English proficiency in sixth graders in Hermano Miguel School. The data analysis showed some curious outcomes for discussion.

First, the reviewed theoretical framework displayed some benefits of using short stories with children. Nazara (2019) found out that short stories could be used to develop vocabulary with primary students. Also, authors such as Ceylan (2016) and Gomez Rodriguez (2014), could demonstrate that short stories might be a useful strategy to develop reading and writing skills. Additionally, the cultural dimension could be developed using short stories in class (Berrabi and Bohuos, 2018). Many other benefits could mention. Therefore, it might be important to stablish a main objective regarding the use of short stories in class.

Second, the convergence of the pre-experimental outcomes from the description of students` perceptions underscores the efficacy of short stories in enhancing English language proficiency among sixth graders. Nazara (2019) in his study, also referred that student showed a positive perception of using short stories in class. Complementing this, the overwhelming student consensus—over 75% strongly agreeing—suggests that short stories are perceived as a powerful aid in understanding the language, and in developing reading comprehension, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Arias (2017) emphasized the benefit of using literacy texts to improve the four skills. Moreover, the students' strong belief in the positive impact of short stories on their academic performance further corroborates the quantitative findings.

Third, the pre-test and post-test results demonstrated a statistically substantial improvement in scores (See. Figure 2), indicating that the instructional strategy of incorporating short stories potentially facilitated linguistic advancement. One important issue to be addressed is motivation, Aljaraideh (2020) indicated that the impact of using short stories in class is related to the level of motivation students show during the intervention.

To sum all up, the intervention in Hermano Miguel proved the efficacy of using short stories. Notwithstanding, some variables such as age, economic status, and English proficiency level could be factors that may change the outcomes in other research.

Conclusion

Implementing short stories as a strategy to help students enhance their language proficiency as well as their motivation in the EFL classroom is not something new. However, this study proved that this strategy could give students a wide range of opportunities to be creative in their learning process. It was found that students' perceptions have been insightful in understanding their opinions on implementing different tools aside from the regular EFL book. They all agree that short stories help them to understand the language better, and to develop critical thinking skills.

Moreover, it also has helped them create a more interactive environment, meaningful to learning the language. It is necessary to mention that teachers need to be careful when selecting the stories that are going to be used in class, if they do not select the correct topic considering their students' age and needs, it could be a demotivating factor. A limitation that has to be mentioned is the fact that this study cannot be generalized due to the small sample of participants.

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Statement