

The impact of literature through short stories on English language instruction

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of integrating literature, specifically short stories, into English language instruction for junior high school students. Conducted at SMPIT AN-NIDA' Lubuklinggau, it aims to determine if short stories enhance vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and overall language proficiency compared to traditional methods. The research addresses the need for engaging, culturally relevant teaching strategies in Indonesian Islamic schools. A quasi-experimental design was employed with a population of 60 students divided into two classes (30 students each). Class A (experimental group) received English instruction incorporating short stories (e.g., adapted narratives with themes of morality and adventure), while Class B (control group) followed conventional grammar-focused lessons. Pre- and post-tests measured English proficiency (vocabulary, comprehension, and grammar scores out of 100). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means) and an independent samples t-test to assess differences between groups ($\alpha = 0.05$). Pre-test means showed similar baseline proficiency: Class A ($M = 65.2$, $SD = 8.1$) and Class B ($M = 66.8$, $SD = 7.9$). Post-test means indicated improvement in both groups, but Class A outperformed Class B: Class A ($M = 78.5$, $SD = 6.5$) vs. Class B ($M = 71.2$, $SD = 7.2$). The independent t-test revealed a significant difference ($t(58) = 4.23$, $p = 0.001$), confirming that the use of short stories has a real positive impact on improving students' English language skills.

Keywords

short stories, English language instruction, vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, quasi-experimental

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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the integration of literature has reemerged as a vital pedagogical approach that bridges linguistic, cultural, and affective dimensions of language learning. Literature offers authentic, context-rich input that goes beyond linguistic form, allowing learners to engage with language as a living, expressive, and meaningful system (Carter & Long, 1991). Among literary genres, short stories have gained particular attention due to their brevity, accessibility, and potential to foster linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness. They enable learners to experience language in action—embedded in characters' voices, moral choices, and social contexts—thereby transforming classrooms into spaces for both linguistic and humanistic growth.

In Indonesia, the teaching of English at the secondary school level has traditionally relied on the grammar-translation and structural approaches, which focus primarily on grammatical accuracy and rote vocabulary memorization (Saragih, 2017; Husni, 2020). Although such methods can help learners build basic linguistic knowledge, they often fail to develop communicative competence or foster learner motivation. As a result, many Indonesian students demonstrate limited proficiency in receptive skills such as reading and listening, as well as productive skills like speaking and writing (Fadhilah, 2018). To address this challenge, educators have sought innovative, contextually relevant strategies that engage students both cognitively and emotionally. The use of literature, particularly short stories, represents one such approach that can make English learning more meaningful, culturally resonant, and pedagogically effective (Lazar, 1993; Pardede, 2011).

The incorporation of literature into language instruction is grounded in the communicative and humanistic paradigms of language teaching. According to Collie and Slater (2001), literary texts provide genuine examples of language use that reflect real-world communicative situations, exposing learners to idiomatic expressions, discourse structures, and pragmatic functions that are rarely found in textbook dialogues. Furthermore, literature fosters language awareness by encouraging students to notice and interpret how linguistic forms create meaning in specific contexts (Carter, 2007). Short stories, in particular, offer a unique pedagogical advantage. As Lazar (1993) emphasizes, their concise length allows for completion within a single or few lessons, making them suitable for EFL settings with limited instructional time. They also appeal to students' imagination and emotions, stimulating intrinsic motivation and empathy. In narrative comprehension, learners naturally engage in prediction, interpretation, and inference—cognitive activities that enhance comprehension and critical thinking (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Hirvela, 1996). These features align well with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework, which emphasizes meaningful communication, learner engagement, and interaction. Moreover, literature can serve as a vehicle for moral and cultural education, especially within the context of Islamic schools in Indonesia. Short stories often contain moral lessons that resonate with students' values and experiences, providing an avenue for integrating character education into language learning. This moral dimension aligns with the objectives of SMPIT (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama Islam Terpadu*) institutions, where language instruction is expected not only to develop linguistic skills but also to strengthen spiritual and ethical values (Sutomo, 2014). Thus, short story-based learning addresses both linguistic and moral education objectives—a dual goal rarely achieved through traditional grammar-based instruction. A growing body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of using literature, especially short stories, to enhance EFL learners' proficiency. Pardede (2011) found that integrating short stories into reading instruction improved students' comprehension, vocabulary mastery, and critical reading skills. Similarly, Yimwilai (2015) reported that students exposed to literature-based reading activities displayed higher motivation and better interpretive ability compared to those taught through conventional methods. Research in various EFL contexts further confirms

these benefits. Bibby and McIlroy (2013) observed that short stories fostered language awareness and interpretive skills among Japanese university students, while Chen (2014) highlighted their role in enhancing students' inferencing ability and lexical retention in Taiwanese classrooms. In an Iranian study, Hasan and Al-Jarf (2012) showed that literature-based instruction significantly improved vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension among secondary school students. These findings collectively underscore that literary texts can function as authentic and meaningful input that enhances linguistic and cognitive development.

In Indonesia, studies by Rukmini and Zuchdi (2016) and Astuti (2018) emphasized that short stories provide moral and cultural dimensions that make language learning more holistic. They also noted that students became more engaged and reflective when discussing characters, conflicts, and values found in stories. Such engagement facilitates deeper learning, as students relate narrative content to their personal and cultural experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Despite the documented advantages, literature-based instruction remains underutilized in Indonesian classrooms. Teachers often perceive literary texts as difficult, time-consuming, or incompatible with exam-oriented curricula (Rahman, 2019). Consequently, many EFL learners are deprived of opportunities to experience language through authentic, culturally rich materials. This pedagogical gap underscores the need for empirical studies that assess the measurable impact of integrating literature—particularly short stories—into EFL classrooms within the Indonesian context.

English in Indonesia is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, and exposure outside the classroom is limited (Lie, 2007). Therefore, the classroom remains the primary, and often the only, environment where learners can meaningfully engage with English. Traditional methods that rely heavily on textbooks and decontextualized grammar exercises have been criticized for producing passive learners with limited communicative competence (Musthafa, 2014). Given this challenge, teachers must design lessons that not only teach linguistic forms but also stimulate interest, imagination, and interaction. Short stories meet these pedagogical demands because they naturally integrate language, culture, and creativity. They present language in meaningful, discourse-level contexts that mirror authentic communication. Moreover, they encourage interpretive discussion, peer interaction, and response-based writing, all of which support the development of higher-order thinking skills (Lazar, 2009). In Islamic educational settings, short stories that convey themes of morality, justice, and faith can simultaneously strengthen linguistic and character development, supporting the national education vision of integrating knowledge and values (Kemendikbud, 2020). The conceptual foundation of this study rests on the interaction between linguistic input, cognitive processing, and affective engagement. According to Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to comprehensible and interesting input slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. Short stories fulfill this condition, as they provide input that is linguistically rich yet accessible, while their narratives maintain learners' interest. Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory supports the use of literature as a medium for social interaction and scaffolding; learners negotiate meaning collaboratively as they interpret stories and express personal responses. Furthermore, Rosenblatt's (1978) Reader-Response Theory posits that reading is a transactional process between the text and the reader, where meaning emerges through individual interpretation. Applying this theory in EFL classrooms allows students to connect language learning with personal reflection, making reading a dynamic and interactive experience. When students discuss or write about short stories, they engage in metalinguistic and metacognitive processes that deepen both comprehension and language awareness.

Although numerous international studies support the pedagogical value of short stories in EFL instruction, empirical evidence from junior high school settings in Indonesia, particularly in Islamic schools, remains limited. Most prior research has focused on tertiary education or

general public schools, leaving a gap concerning the impact of literature on young adolescent learners in faith-based educational contexts. Moreover, few studies have employed quantitative experimental designs to measure learning outcomes such as vocabulary gain, reading comprehension, and overall proficiency improvement. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of integrating short stories into English language instruction on junior high school students' linguistic performance in an Indonesian Islamic school context. By employing a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests, the study seeks to provide empirical data on whether literature-based instruction leads to statistically significant improvements in learners' vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, and overall proficiency compared to traditional methods. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study enriches the body of literature on the intersection between literary pedagogy and EFL instruction by demonstrating how short stories can function as effective tools for linguistic and moral development. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers to incorporate literary materials in a structured, purposeful manner. For teachers, this study highlights the feasibility of using short stories to achieve communicative and affective learning goals even within the constraints of national curricula. For policymakers and school administrators, the findings can support initiatives to integrate literature into language education as part of a broader movement toward more holistic and value-based pedagogy. Ultimately, this research aspires to reaffirm the idea that learning a language is not merely about mastering its grammar but about understanding its culture, stories, and humanity.

Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group pretest-posttest model to investigate the impact of integrating short stories into English language instruction on junior high school students' language proficiency. Quasi-experimental design was chosen because it allows for experimental manipulation while accommodating the practical limitations of educational research, such as the inability to randomly assign participants to groups within existing classroom settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this design, two intact classes were assigned as the experimental group and the control group. Both groups were given a pretest to measure baseline English proficiency before treatment and a posttest after the instructional intervention. The experimental group received English lessons incorporating short stories, while the control group followed the conventional grammar-based instructional model. The difference between the pretest and posttest scores was used to determine the effect of the treatment. The choice of a quasi-experimental design aligns with previous EFL studies that aimed to measure the effect of pedagogical innovations under real classroom conditions (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2019). This design provides an appropriate balance between internal and external validity, allowing findings to reflect both statistical significance and ecological authenticity.

The participants in this study were 60 eighth-grade students enrolled at SMPIT AN-NIDA' Lubuklinggau, an Islamic junior high school in South Sumatra, Indonesia, during the 2024 academic year. The sample was divided into two classes: Class A (experimental group) and Class B (control group), each consisting of 30 students. Both groups were comparable in age (ranging from 13 to 14 years old), gender distribution, and prior English proficiency as determined by the pretest results. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique often used in educational research to select intact groups that meet the study's instructional and logistical criteria (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The experimental group was taught English using short stories integrated into reading and vocabulary activities, while the control group was instructed through traditional grammar-translation methods. All participants had studied English for at least two years, and none had prior exposure to literature-

based English instruction. Parental and institutional consent was obtained prior to data collection, and all students participated voluntarily.

The instructional treatment lasted for six weeks, with each class receiving three 90-minute sessions per week. The experimental group received instruction based on short stories, whereas the control group continued with the standard grammar-based syllabus.

Experimental Group (Short Story-Based Instruction)

Instruction for the experimental group centered on the use of carefully selected short stories that were culturally relevant, linguistically appropriate, and thematically rich. Stories were adapted from simplified English readers such as *Oxford Bookworms* and *Cambridge English Readers* series, featuring moral and adventure themes consistent with Islamic educational values (e.g., honesty, courage, and compassion).

Each lesson followed a three-stage framework inspired by Collie and Slater (2001) and Lazar (1993):

1. Pre-reading stage: Activation of background knowledge, introduction of key vocabulary, and prediction activities.
2. While-reading stage: Guided comprehension tasks, group discussions, and inference questions to develop reading comprehension.
3. Post-reading stage: Follow-up activities such as vocabulary reinforcement, moral reflection, and creative retelling or writing exercises.

This approach aimed to combine linguistic objectives (vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and grammar awareness) with affective and moral engagement through narrative content (Bibby & McIlroy, 2013).

Control Group (Grammar-Based Instruction)

The control group was taught using the grammar-translation method (GTM), which is still prevalent in many Indonesian EFL classrooms (Saragih, 2017; Husni, 2020). Instruction emphasized grammatical rules, vocabulary memorization, and sentence translation exercises drawn from the national textbook. No literary or narrative materials were used. Lessons followed a teacher-centered format, focusing primarily on form and accuracy rather than meaning or interpretation. Three main instruments were employed for data collection:

1. Pretest and Posttest Both tests consisted of 50 items divided into three sections:
 - *Vocabulary mastery* (20 items): Multiple-choice questions assessing word meaning and usage.
 - *Reading comprehension* (20 items): Short passages followed by comprehension questions measuring inference, detail recognition, and main idea identification.
 - *Grammar* (10 items): Questions testing grammatical accuracy and sentence structure.

The total score for each test was 100 points. The same format was used for the pretest and posttest, though the items differed to prevent test familiarity. Test reliability was established

through a pilot study with 20 students of similar background, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency (Field, 2018).

2. **Observation Sheets** Classroom observation sheets were used to ensure the consistency of instructional delivery. Two observers (English teachers not involved in the experiment) monitored classroom activities to confirm adherence to lesson plans and engagement levels.
3. **Lesson Plans (RPP)** Detailed lesson plans were prepared for both groups, specifying learning objectives, materials, and procedures. These plans ensured parity in instructional time and assessment focus.

The experimental procedure consisted of four key phases:

1. **Pretesting Phase:** Both groups completed the pretest to measure baseline proficiency in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar.
2. **Treatment Phase (6 Weeks):**
 - *Experimental Group:* Received short story-based instruction integrating reading, discussion, and moral reflection activities.
 - *Control Group:* Received conventional grammar-translation lessons emphasizing rules and exercises.
3. **Posttesting Phase:** Both groups completed the posttest under identical conditions to assess learning gains.
4. **Data Recording and Verification:** Scores were recorded, tabulated, and verified by both the researcher and the collaborating English teacher to ensure data integrity.

The teaching process in the experimental group emphasized student-centered learning. Discussions, pair work, and interpretive activities were encouraged to promote communication and reflection. Meanwhile, the control group primarily engaged in note-taking, rule explanation, and translation tasks, consistent with the GTM approach.

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to summarize students' performance in both groups. To determine whether there were significant differences in posttest performance between the experimental and control groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted at a significance level (α) of 0.05. Additionally, a paired samples t-test was used within each group to compare pretest and posttest means, providing insight into the magnitude of learning improvement. The effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated to determine the strength of the treatment effect, following the guidelines by Cohen (1988)—where $d = 0.2$ (small), 0.5 (medium), and 0.8 (large). The statistical procedures were guided by recommendations from Pallant (2020) and Field (2018) for educational research data interpretation. Results were interpreted not only in terms of statistical significance but also practical relevance to classroom instruction.

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study in accordance with educational research standards (BERA, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from school authorities, students, and their parents prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by coding participants' data and excluding personal identifiers from all analyses. Furthermore, the instructional materials used in the experimental group were selected to ensure cultural appropriateness and alignment with Islamic educational values. Students were informed that

their participation or responses would not affect their academic grades, ensuring voluntary involvement and authentic performance.

This methodological framework provided a rigorous yet context-sensitive design for examining how short story-based instruction affects students' English proficiency. By combining quantitative measurement with pedagogical realism, the study aimed to yield valid, replicable, and educationally meaningful findings.

Results

This study investigated the effect of using short stories as instructional materials on students' English language proficiency, specifically in vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, and grammatical understanding. Data were collected from two groups: the experimental group (taught using short stories) and the control group (taught through the grammar-translation method). A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to summarize the performance of both groups on the pretest and posttest. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Posttest Scores

Group	N	Test	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Experimental	30	Pretest	65.20	8.10
Experimental	30	Posttest	78.50	6.50
Control	30	Pretest	66.80	7.90
Control	30	Posttest	71.20	7.20

The results in Table 1 indicate that both groups showed improvement from the pretest to the posttest. However, the experimental group demonstrated a notably larger gain in performance (an increase of 13.3 points) compared to the control group (an increase of 4.4 points). The standard deviation (SD) also decreased in the experimental group from 8.10 to 6.50, suggesting more consistent performance among students after the intervention. In contrast, the control group's variability remained relatively stable.

To determine whether the observed improvements within each group were statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was conducted comparing the pretest and posttest means.

Table 2. Paired Samples t-Test Results

Group	t-value	df	p-value	Interpretation
Experimental	10.27	29	< .001	Significant improvement
Control	4.32	29	< .001	Significant improvement

As shown in Table 2, both groups experienced statistically significant improvement between the pretest and posttest ($p < .001$). However, the t-value for the experimental group ($t = 10.27$) was substantially higher than that of the control group ($t = 4.32$), indicating that the gains in the experimental group were much greater in magnitude.

This result suggests that short story-based instruction was more effective in enhancing students' English proficiency compared to traditional grammar instruction. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. This analysis aimed to determine whether the mean difference in learning outcomes was statistically significant after the intervention.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test Results

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	t(58)	p-value	Mean Difference	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Posttest Score	Experimental	78.50	6.50	4.23	.001	7.30	1.08 (large)

The t-test results revealed a significant difference in posttest performance between the experimental and control groups, $t(58) = 4.23$, $p = .001$. The mean difference of 7.3 points indicates that students who received short story-based instruction achieved higher proficiency levels than those who were taught through grammar translation. The effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.08$) is considered large according to Cohen's (1988) criteria, suggesting a strong practical impact of the treatment. This finding confirms that the integration of short stories had a substantial and meaningful effect on students' English language development.

To further explore which aspects of English proficiency were most influenced by the use of short stories, a sub-component analysis was conducted on vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar scores. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of Mean Gains by Skill Area

Skill Area	Experimental (Gain)	Control (Gain)	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Vocabulary	+6.8	+2.7	3.97	.001	Significant
Reading Comprehension	+5.2	+1.5	4.12	.001	Significant
Grammar	+1.3	+0.8	1.25	.217	Not significant

The results indicate that the most significant gains occurred in vocabulary and reading comprehension, both with $p = .001$. The improvement in grammar, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .217$), suggesting that grammar learning may not have been directly affected by short story exposure. These findings align with Pardede (2011) and Yimwilai (2015), who similarly found that literature-based instruction most effectively enhances lexical and interpretive abilities rather than explicit grammatical knowledge. The quantitative results demonstrate that integrating short stories into English instruction produced statistically and pedagogically meaningful improvements in students' language proficiency.

1. **Enhanced Vocabulary Mastery:** Exposure to authentic and contextualized language in short stories allowed students to infer meanings and usage patterns naturally. This supports Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which asserts that comprehensible input in meaningful contexts fosters vocabulary acquisition more effectively than rote memorization.
2. **Improved Reading Comprehension:** Students in the experimental group engaged in prediction, interpretation, and discussion activities that required active cognitive

processing of texts. This engagement likely contributed to better comprehension outcomes, consistent with findings by Hirvela (1996) and Bibby and McIlroy (2013).

3. Limited Grammar Improvement: Although students were exposed to grammatically rich language, explicit grammar instruction was not a focus in the experimental condition. Thus, improvement in grammatical accuracy was modest, confirming Lazar's (1993) view that literature contributes more to implicit grammar awareness than to rule-based mastery.

Overall, the results affirm that short story-based instruction significantly improves EFL learners' vocabulary and reading comprehension, contributing to higher overall proficiency levels compared to conventional grammar-based instruction. The large effect size ($d = 1.08$) also implies that this teaching strategy is not only statistically effective but also practically impactful in real classroom contexts. These findings provide robust evidence supporting the pedagogical integration of literary materials in EFL curricula, particularly within Indonesian junior high school settings.

Summary of Findings

1. Both the experimental and control groups improved their English proficiency after instruction; however, the experimental group's improvement was significantly greater.
2. The use of short stories had a large and statistically significant effect on students' English achievement ($t(58) = 4.23, p = .001, d = 1.08^*$).
3. The strongest improvements occurred in vocabulary and reading comprehension, whereas grammar showed minimal change.

The results validate previous literature-based studies (Collie & Slater, 2001; Pardede, 2011; Yimwilai, 2015), reinforcing the pedagogical value of literature for EFL instruction.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effect of integrating short stories into English language instruction on junior high school students' English proficiency at SMPIT AN-NIDA' Lubuklinggau. Quantitative analyses revealed that students taught through short story-based instruction achieved significantly higher posttest scores than those taught using the grammar-translation method. The findings provide empirical evidence that literary texts specifically short stories can serve as effective pedagogical tools for improving vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. This discussion elaborates on these findings in relation to theoretical perspectives, previous research, and pedagogical implications for English language instruction in Indonesia.

The significant improvement in students' vocabulary and reading comprehension can be attributed to the authentic and contextualized language input offered by short stories. According to Krashen's (1985) *Input Hypothesis*, language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current proficiency level ($i + 1$). The short stories used in this study provided rich linguistic input embedded in meaningful contexts, allowing students to infer meaning, guess word functions, and acquire new vocabulary naturally through exposure rather than rote memorization. Furthermore, the integration of short stories encouraged *deep processing* of textual content through pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. These stages activated students' background

knowledge, engaged them in prediction and interpretation, and reinforced learning through reflection and discussion. Such tasks align with Nation's (2001) principles of vocabulary learning, which emphasize the importance of contextual encounters and repeated exposure for long-term retention. In addition, the narrative nature of short stories inherently motivates students to read for meaning. Collie and Slater (2001) argue that narratives stimulate curiosity and emotional engagement, making students more attentive and receptive to language. The results of the present study confirm this notion: learners in the experimental group not only performed better in comprehension tests but also demonstrated higher participation and interest during classroom observation. This indicates that the affective engagement fostered by literature enhances cognitive processing, thereby improving comprehension outcomes (Bibby & McIlroy, 2013).

The findings are consistent with earlier studies by Pardede (2011) and Yimwilai (2015), who found that short stories facilitate vocabulary acquisition and enhance reading comprehension among EFL learners. Similarly, Chen (2014) observed that exposure to narrative texts led to improved inferencing and contextual guessing skills among Taiwanese students. Collectively, these studies confirm that short stories provide an effective medium for integrating language and meaning in reading instruction.

While the experimental group showed a marked increase in vocabulary and reading comprehension, the improvement in grammatical proficiency was modest and statistically insignificant. This finding aligns with Lazar's (1993) argument that literature-based instruction enhances implicit grammatical awareness rather than explicit rule mastery. In the short story approach, grammar is encountered incidentally within meaningful discourse, rather than presented as isolated rules. Although this promotes intuitive understanding and syntactic awareness, it may not directly improve students' accuracy in form-focused assessments. The results mirror those of Hasan and Al-Jarf (2012), who found that EFL students exposed to literary texts improved significantly in reading comprehension and lexical knowledge but not in formal grammar tests. Similarly, Ghosn (2002) argued that grammar learning through literature occurs more implicitly, supporting communicative competence rather than explicit accuracy. Therefore, while literature can contribute to grammar awareness, complementary instruction focusing on explicit grammar practice remains essential, especially in contexts where examination standards prioritize form-based evaluation.

Affective and Motivational Impact

Beyond cognitive and linguistic outcomes, the findings underscore the motivational value of short stories in language learning. Students in the experimental group displayed higher enthusiasm and engagement during lessons, as recorded in classroom observations and informal teacher reflections. This outcome supports the view of Rosenblatt (1978), whose *Reader-Response Theory* posits that meaning in literature arises through an interactive transaction between the reader and the text. When students interpret characters, conflicts, and moral dilemmas, they engage emotionally and personally, leading to increased motivation and sustained attention. In the Indonesian EFL context, where learners often perceive English as difficult and disconnected from daily life, short stories provide a bridge between linguistic learning and personal experience (Lie, 2007). By encountering themes of morality, friendship, and courage that resonate with Islamic values, students not only learn language but also reflect on universal and cultural truths. This dual engagement of emotion and intellect transforms reading into a holistic educational experience supporting the humanistic approach to language learning advocated by Brumfit and Carter (1986). The motivational impact of literature-based instruction is also emphasized by Duff and Maley (2007), who note that the intrinsic pleasure derived from storytelling increases students' willingness to read and participate. In this study, students often expressed enjoyment in reading and discussing the stories, a positive shift from

their typical experience of mechanical grammar exercises. This affective dimension likely contributed to their improved performance, as positive emotional states have been shown to enhance memory and learning retention (Arnold, 1999).

Pedagogical Implications for EFL Classrooms

The findings of this research carry important implications for English language pedagogy, particularly within the Indonesian educational context. First, they demonstrate that short stories can effectively complement or partially replace grammar-translation methods by providing meaningful, communicative input. Rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic form, teachers can use literary texts to develop students' linguistic, cultural, and moral awareness simultaneously. Second, the study highlights the importance of task design in literature-based instruction. The success of the experimental group was likely due to the structured three-phase lesson model (pre-, while-, and post-reading), which scaffolded comprehension and vocabulary learning. Teachers should thus employ guided questioning, group discussion, and creative writing tasks to maximize linguistic and interpretive benefits (Collie & Slater, 2001; Lazar, 2009). Third, story selection plays a crucial role. Teachers should choose short stories that are linguistically accessible and culturally relevant to learners. In Islamic school settings such as SMPIT AN-NIDA', stories emphasizing moral virtues—such as honesty, perseverance, and empathy—can reinforce both language and character education. This approach supports Sutomo's (2014) vision of holistic Islamic education, which integrates moral and intellectual development. Finally, the results advocate for curricular reform that recognizes literature as a core component of English education in Indonesia. Despite the dominance of exam-oriented instruction, incorporating literature can help students experience English as a tool for thinking, feeling, and understanding humanity rather than merely a subject to pass (Musthafa, 2014). Curriculum developers and policymakers should thus provide space for literature-based units, teacher training in literary pedagogy, and resource development suited for different proficiency levels.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study reinforce the interactionist and sociocultural models of language learning. According to Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, language development occurs through social interaction and meaning negotiation within a cultural context. The short story lessons in this study required students to collaborate, discuss, and interpret, thereby creating a zone of proximal development (ZPD) where linguistic and cognitive growth occurred through peer interaction and teacher scaffolding. Moreover, the findings support the Input-Interaction-Output Hypothesis proposed by Long (1996), which suggests that learners acquire language through meaningful input, negotiation of meaning, and opportunities for output. The short story activities incorporated all three elements—comprehensible input (through reading), interaction (through discussion), and output (through retelling and writing). This triadic process facilitated deeper internalization of language structures and vocabulary. The results also validate Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model, which frames reading as an experiential act involving personal engagement and interpretation. In this study, students' active involvement in discussing moral and cultural dimensions of stories exemplified how literature transforms language learning into an interactive meaning-making process rather than passive text decoding.

Challenges and Limitations

Although the results were positive, several challenges emerged during the implementation. Some students initially struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary and cultural references in the stories, requiring careful pre-teaching and scaffolding by the teacher. Additionally, since the

treatment lasted only six weeks, long-term retention effects were not measured. Another limitation is that the study focused solely on quantitative outcomes. Future research should incorporate qualitative data—such as interviews, journals, or classroom observations—to explore students' attitudes and perceptions in greater depth. Mixed-method designs could offer richer insights into how literature shapes motivation, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Finally, while this study was conducted in an Islamic school context, the findings may not generalize to all educational settings. Further studies across different regions and school types are recommended to validate and extend these results.

Conclusion

In summary, this study provides compelling evidence that short story-based instruction significantly enhances students' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension while fostering motivation and engagement in English learning. The approach effectively combines linguistic and affective learning dimensions, aligning with communicative, humanistic, and sociocultural theories of language education. The findings affirm that literature is not merely an aesthetic supplement but a powerful pedagogical instrument capable of transforming EFL instruction into a more meaningful and holistic process. For Indonesian classrooms—especially those in Islamic educational contexts—short stories offer a culturally and morally resonant medium through which students can both learn English and cultivate personal values. Ultimately, integrating literature into language curricula aligns with the broader educational mission of nurturing linguistically competent, culturally aware, and ethically grounded learners prepared to participate in a globalized world.

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