

# Enhancing Learners' Reading Comprehension Skills through Short Stories

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**Abstract.** This study examined the effect of using short stories on the reading comprehension performance of second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education English major students. Using an experimental design, 28 students were divided into control and experimental groups. A validated researcher-developed reading comprehension test was administered as pre-test and post-test. The experimental group was exposed to selected short stories, while the control group received conventional instruction. Data were analyzed using mean scores, independent samples t-test, and dependent samples t-test at a 0.05 level of significance. Results revealed no significant difference between groups in the pre-test, indicating baseline equivalence. However, a significant difference was found in the post-test, with the experimental group showing significantly higher performance. Furthermore, only the experimental group demonstrated significant improvement from pre-test to post-test. The findings suggest that short stories are an effective instructional tool for enhancing reading comprehension.

## Introduction

The integration of literary texts in English language instruction has become increasingly recognized as an effective approach for improving students' reading abilities. Modern language teaching practices highlight the importance of meaningful engagement with texts rather than focusing solely on isolated grammar or vocabulary exercises. Within this framework, literature is not only appreciated for its artistic value but also utilized as a powerful instructional tool that exposes learners to authentic language and promotes deeper understanding of written materials (Grabe & Stoller, 2020 in Centina, 2021).

Reading comprehension is considered one of the most important skills for learners of English as a second or foreign language, yet it remains one of the most difficult to master. According to Grabe and Stoller (2020) in Centina (2021), comprehension involves constructing meaning from written texts by combining linguistic knowledge, background experiences, and cognitive strategies. Many learners, however, tend to focus only on answering comprehension questions rather than developing a deeper understanding of the text itself. Such challenges indicate the need for teaching materials that actively involve students in the reading process.

Recent research highlights the effectiveness of literature-based instruction, particularly the use of short stories, in improving students' reading comprehension. Short stories are widely regarded as suitable instructional materials because they are relatively brief, contain a complete narrative structure, and present language within meaningful contexts (Hirvela & Boyle, 2006; Hasanayn, Abdullatif, & Iskandr, 2024). Additionally, their concise form allows learners to focus on the overall meaning of the text, making them appropriate for guided reading activities and classroom discussions.

Several empirical studies support the role of short stories in strengthening reading comprehension skills. For instance, Putra et al. (2024) reported that students who learned through short stories demonstrated noticeable improvement in their reading performance and expressed positive attitudes toward the learning process. Similarly, Irhamni et al. (2025) found that students who engaged with short stories developed stronger reading abilities due to increased motivation and involvement with the text. These findings suggest that short stories encourage learners to interact actively with reading materials rather than merely decoding words.

In addition, short stories contribute to the development of inferencing skills, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking. Ali and Nizam (2024) explained that short narratives present language in meaningful contexts that allow learners to understand relationships among ideas, characters, and themes within the text. Likewise, Toshtava (2024) noted that exposure to short stories encourages learners to analyze events, characters, and messages, which helps deepen their comprehension. Because stories often reflect universal human experiences, students can easily relate them to their own lives, increasing engagement and encouraging greater effort in understanding the text.

Despite the growing body of literature supporting the use of short stories in language instruction, important gaps remain in the existing research. While many studies have established the general effectiveness of short stories in improving reading comprehension, there is limited experimental evidence focusing on pre-service English teachers within the Philippine higher education context. In addition, several previous studies rely primarily on descriptive outcomes and do not employ rigorous experimental designs that compare pre-test and post-test performances between control and experimental groups. This limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the use of short stories and improvements in reading comprehension.

Furthermore, existing research often emphasizes general reading gains without grounding findings in well-established cognitive theories that explain how comprehension develops. As a result, there is a need for a theory-driven and methodologically rigorous investigation that examines how short stories influence reading comprehension through cognitive processes such as schema activation and mental model construction.

This study is grounded in Schema Theory proposed by Anderson (1997) in Dadvivas et al. (2014). The theory emphasizes that reading comprehension occurs through the interaction between a reader's prior knowledge and the text. Knowledge is organized in the mind as schemas, which function as stored mental structures. When learners engage with a text, they connect new information with these existing schemas, allowing them to construct meaning. Thus, effective comprehension depends on the reader's ability to relate textual content to their background knowledge.

Furthermore, Carrell (2000), as cited in Dadvivas et al. (2014), explains that reading speed and comprehension are influenced by the richness of a learner's schema. Readers with more extensive background knowledge can process and understand texts more efficiently. In line with this, the present study assumes that exposure to short stories helps expand learners' schemas, thereby improving their reading comprehension skills.

In addition, this study is supported by the Mental Model Theory, which explains how readers create mental representations of the text. According to Gunning (1996), as cited in Talabon, Palmes, and Cause (2014), readers form a "mental model" or a vivid representation of events while reading, particularly in narrative texts such as short stories. This process involves focusing on characters and situations and continuously updating the mental representation as the story unfolds. Important elements related to the main character are retained in the reader's mind, enabling deeper understanding.

With the aforementioned ideas, the researchers would like to investigate the effect of short stories in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of the second year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED), major in English students of West Visayas State University – Calinog Campus during the school year 2022–2023. Specifically, this study seeks to determine the respondents' pre-test and post-test performances in reading comprehension in both the control and experimental groups. It also aims to examine whether there are significant differences between the pre-test performances of the two groups, as well as their post-test performances. Moreover, the study intends to determine whether there are significant differences between the pre-test and post-test performances within the control group and within the experimental group.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This experimental research aimed to determine the effect of exposure to short stories on the reading comprehension skills of the second year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED), major in English students of West Visayas State University - Calinog Campus during the school year 2022 – 2023. This was conducted during the second semester of the aforementioned school year.

According to Bell (2009) as cited by Zubair (2023), experimental research design is a systematic approach to research in which variables are carefully controlled to ensure accurate findings. This design is primarily used to determine whether changes in an independent variable produce measurable effects on a dependent variable.

#### *Participants and Sampling Technique*

The study involved 28 second-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education program with a major in English at West Visayas State University–Calinog Campus during the academic year 2022–2023. The pre-test scores of the respondents were used as the basis in assigning them to the control and the experimental groups. First, the scores were arranged in hierarchical order (from the highest down to the lowest). A fair coin was then flipped to determine the group to which the respondent with the highest score would be assigned. The result turned out in favor of the experimental group. So, it followed that the respondent with the highest score was assigned to the experimental group and the respondent with the second highest score was assigned to the control group. To further even the field, the respondents were assigned alternately to either group based on their scores (the respondent with the third highest score was assigned to the control group, while the fourth was assigned to the experimental group, and so forth) until all the respondents had been assigned to a group.

Table 1 shows of the 28 respondents, 14 (50.00%) of them belonged to the control (non- intervention) group and another 14 (50.00%) belonged to the experimental (intervention) group.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Entire Group	28	100.00
Control Group	14	50.00
Experimental Group	14	50.00

*Table 1. Distribution of the Respondents*

#### *Data Gathering Procedure*

After the pre-oral defense, the researchers secured permission to conduct the study from the Campus Administrator, the Dean of Instruction, and the Dean of the College of Education of West Visayas State University–Calinog Campus. A similar permission was also obtained from the subject teacher in whose class the study was integrated.

Prior to the conduct of the study, the researcher-developed reading comprehension test was subjected to content validation by three experts in the field of English language teaching and educational research to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the test items. The validators carefully reviewed the instrument and provided suggestions for improvement, which were incorporated in revising the test before its administration.

After obtaining the necessary approvals, the researchers sought the consent of the students regarding their willingness to participate in the study. An orientation was conducted prior to the distribution of the research instruments to explain the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. All instructions were clearly explained in both English and the local dialect to ensure that the respondents fully understood the directions. The researchers coordinated with the participants during their vacant period to administer the instruments.

*Pre-test.* After all necessary permissions had been granted, the researchers administered the pre-test to determine the initial reading comprehension performance of the second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) students majoring in English.

*Experimental Use of Short Stories.* The experimental group was exposed to six selected short stories: *Love in the Cornhusks* by Aida Rivera-Ford, *Footnote to Youth* by Jose Garcia Villa, *Wedding Dance* by Amador T. Daguio, *How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife* and *Midsummer* by Manuel E. Arguilla, and *The House on Zapote Street* by Quijano de Manila. Each short story was accompanied by ten reading comprehension questions designed to assess the students' understanding of vocabulary, main ideas, and significant details in the text. These literary pieces were selected because they are included in the course syllabus for second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education students majoring in English. The intervention aimed to determine the effect of using short stories on the reading comprehension performance of the experimental group. During the intervention, the experimental group engaged in guided reading activities using the selected short stories. Each session included silent reading, vocabulary clarification, and teacher-guided discussions focusing on the characters, themes, and key events in the stories. Students also answered comprehension questions that required them to identify the main ideas, interpret important details, and make inferences from the text. These activities were designed to promote active engagement with the reading materials and to help students develop a deeper understanding of the texts.

The intervention was implemented over a period of three consecutive weeks during the students' literature class, from January 23, 2023 to February 10, 2023.

*Post-test.* After the completion of the three-week intervention, the post-test was administered to the respondents. The same test used in the pre-test was administered to determine whether exposure to short stories had a significant effect on enhancing the students' reading comprehension performance.

#### *Data Analysis*

Prior to conducting inferential statistical analyses, assumption testing was performed to ensure the appropriateness of the statistical techniques used in the study. The normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Results indicated that the data were normally distributed ( $p > 0.05$ ), supporting the use of parametric tests. In addition, the data were examined for the presence of outliers, and none were found to significantly affect the results. Skewness and kurtosis values were also within acceptable ranges, indicating that the data met the assumptions required for t-test analysis. These procedures ensured the validity and reliability of the statistical conclusions drawn from the study.

The data gathered for the study were subjected to the following statistical analysis:

*The Mean.* This was used to determine the pre-test and the post-test performances in reading comprehension of the respondents in the control and the experimental groups.

The following scale of the means was used for this purpose: 0.00 – 10.00 – poor; 10.01 – 20.00 – below average; 20.01 – 30.00 – average; 30.01 – 40.00 – above average; and 40.01 – 50.00 – excellent.

*The Independent t-Test.* This was used in determining the significance of the differences in the performance of the control and experimental groups during pre-test and the post-test.

*The Dependent t-Test.* This was used to determine the significance of the differences in the pre-test and post-test performances of the control and the experimental groups.

All the statistical computations were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, with the level of significance set 0.05.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

In the conduct of this study, ethical standards were strictly observed to ensure the protection and welfare of the participants. Prior to data collection, the study was reviewed and approved by the appropriate academic authorities of West Visayas State University–Calinog Campus, including the Campus Administrator, the Dean of Instruction, and the Dean of the College of Education. The research adhered to the institutional ethical guidelines for studies involving human participants.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. The respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their role in the study. They were also assured that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty or consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. The identities of the participants were not disclosed, and all data collected were used solely for research purposes. The results were presented in aggregate form to ensure that no individual respondent could be identified.

Furthermore, the researchers ensured that no harm, discomfort, or risk was imposed on the participants during the conduct of the study. All instructions were clearly explained in both English and the local dialect to guarantee full understanding. The data gathered were handled with utmost care and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Descriptive Data Analysis*

#### *The Pre-Test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

Table 2 shows that the pre-test reading comprehension performances of the respondents in both the control ( $M = 32.14$ ) and the experimental ( $M = 31.50$ ) groups are 'above average'.

These findings indicate that participants in both groups had moderate reading comprehension skills prior to the intervention. The similarity in mean scores demonstrates baseline equivalence, which strengthens the validity of the experimental design by ensuring that later improvements can be attributed to the intervention rather than pre-existing differences. From a theoretical perspective, these baseline results align with Schema Theory (Anderson, 1997 in Suito et al., 2024), which emphasizes the reader's existing knowledge structures in interpreting texts. The respondents' "above average" pre-test scores suggest they already possessed sufficient schemas to engage meaningfully with reading materials, setting the stage for schema expansion during the intervention. Establishing baseline comparability also aligns with prior research in reading comprehension interventions, such as Khaki (2014, as cited in Centina, 2021), where equivalent starting levels were critical for valid evaluation of treatment effects.

Category	Mean	Description
Control Group	32.14	Above Average
Experimental Group	31.50	Above Average

  

Scale	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
	40.01 - 50.00	Excellent	10.01 - 20.00	Below Average
	30.01 - 40.00	Above Average	0.00 - 10.00	Poor
	20.01 - 30.00	Average		

*Table 2. The Pre-Test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

*The Post-Test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

Table 3 shows that the post-test reading comprehension performance of the respondents in the control group (M = 32.43) is 'above average', while that of the respondents in the experimental group (M = 44.00) is 'excellent'. The significant improvement in the experimental group suggests that short stories effectively enhanced reading comprehension. Exposure to narrative texts likely engaged learners in active reading, inference-making, and vocabulary acquisition, consistent with Schema Theory (Anderson, 1997 in Collom & Senaratne, 2024). By interacting with short stories, learners could activate prior knowledge and integrate new information, expanding their schemas and enabling them to answer more questions correctly in the post-test.

Additionally, the improvement aligns with Mental Model Theory (Gunning, 1996 in Centina, 2021), which posits that readers construct dynamic mental representations of events and characters while reading narratives. The respondents may have visualized scenarios from the short stories as "movie scenes," which facilitated understanding and retention of information. The Propositional Theory (Gunning, 1996 in Suito et al., 2024) further explains this improvement: as learners read, they organized main ideas and details hierarchically, giving priority to core concepts and effectively processing complex textual information.

Empirically, these results are supported by Chusniawati, Sibarani, and Rohmana (2025), who found that reading short stories improved vocabulary, sentence structure, and cultural understanding. Similarly, Alhabahba et al. (2016, as cited in Centina, 2021) reported that concept-oriented reading instruction significantly improved comprehension. This alignment demonstrates both theoretical and empirical support for the efficacy of short stories in enhancing reading skills.

Category	Mean	Description
Control Group	32.43	Above Average
Experimental Group	44.00	Excellent

  

Scale	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
	40.01 - 50.00	Excellent	10.01 - 20.00	Below Average
	30.01 - 40.00	Above Average	0.00 - 10.00	Poor
	20.01 - 30.00	Average		

*Table 3. The Post-Test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

*Inferential Data Analysis*

*The Difference in the Pre-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

The *t*-test for independent samples result in Table 4 reveals a non-significant difference [*t* (26) = 0.414; *p* = 0.682] in the pre-test performances in reading comprehension of the respondents in the control and the experimental groups. The

computed p-value is greater than 0.05 indicating that, despite the numerical difference in their means, the pre-test performances of the two groups of respondents are comparable. The null hypothesis assuming a non-significant difference in this regard is accepted.

Furthermore, the lack of significant difference confirms that both groups were statistically equivalent at baseline, ensuring that subsequent improvements can be attributed to the intervention. This methodological rigor aligns with prior reading comprehension studies (Centina, 2021) and supports the validity of the experimental design. From a theoretical standpoint, it highlights that initial schemas were comparable, allowing for fair evaluation of schema expansion and mental model construction during the intervention.

Compared Groups	df	Mean	SD	t-ratio	t-prob
Group	26			0.414	0.682
Control Group		32.14	4.20		
Experimental Group		31.50	4.01		

Table 4. The Independent t-Test Results for the Difference in the Pre-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups

*The Difference in the Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups*

The t-test for independent samples result in Table 5 reveals a significant difference [ $t(26) = 10.306, p = 0.000$ ] in the post-test performances in reading comprehension of the respondents in the control and the experimental groups. The computed p-value is less than 0.05 indicating that, in the post-test, the reading comprehension performance of the respondents in the experimental group is significantly higher than that of the respondents in the control group. This could indicate further that exposure to short stories may have helped enhance the reading comprehension skills of the respondents in the experimental group. The null hypothesis assuming a non-significant difference in this regard is rejected.

In addition, the experimental group's higher post-test scores demonstrate that short stories positively impacted reading comprehension. Narrative texts likely facilitated schema activation and expansion, enabled learners to integrate new information with prior knowledge more efficiently. Moreover, by engaging with characters and events, learners may have constructed mental models to represent situations and relationships in the stories, promoting comprehension (Gunning, 1996; Casa et al., 2021).

This finding is consistent with Taye and Teshome (2025), who reported that extensive reading strategies, including short stories, significantly enhanced EFL students' comprehension. It also aligns with CORI-based studies (Alhababha et al., 2016; Centina, 2021), showing that structured engagement with texts leads to measurable improvements in reading comprehension.

Compared Groups	df	Mean	SD	t-ratio	t-prob
Group	26			10.306***	0.000
Control Group		32.43	4.20		
Experimental Group		44.00	4.01		

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 5. The Independent t-Test Results for the Difference in the Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control and the Experimental Groups

*The Difference in the Pre-test and Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control Group*

The t-test for dependent samples result in Table 6 reveals a non-significant difference [ $t(13) = 0.718; p = 0.486$ ] in the pre-test and the post-test performances in reading comprehension of the respondents in the control group. The computed p-value is greater than 0.05 indicating that, despite the numerical difference in their means, the pre-test and the post-test performances of the respondents in the control group are comparable. The null hypothesis assuming a non-significant difference in this regard is accepted.

Additionally, the control group's minimal improvement indicates that traditional reading instruction alone did not significantly enhance comprehension. This underscores the importance of interactive and meaningful reading materials, as passive exposure is insufficient to expand learners' schemas or facilitate mental model construction. This result is consistent with previous studies (Taye & Teshome, 2025), which found that traditional methods without structured reading interventions produced minimal gains in reading comprehension.

Compared Groups	Mean	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig.
Control Group		0.296	0.718	13	0.486
Pre-Test	32.14				
Post-Test	32.43				

Table 6. The Dependent t-Test Results for the Difference in the Pre-test and Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Control Group

#### The Difference in the Pre-test and Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Experimental Group

The t-test for dependent samples result in Table 7 reveals a significant difference [ $t(13) = 23.969$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ] in the pre-test and the post-test performances in reading comprehension of the respondents in the experimental group. The computed p-value is less than 0.05 indicating that the reading comprehension skills of the respondents in the experimental group significantly improved during the experimental period. This could indicate further that exposure to short stories may have helped enhance the reading comprehension skills of the respondents in the experimental group. The null hypothesis assuming a non-significant difference in this regard is rejected.

Furthermore, the substantial improvement confirms the effectiveness of short stories in enhancing reading comprehension. Exposure to narrative texts allowed learners to expand their schemas, construct mental models, and organize main ideas. These cognitive processes facilitated deeper comprehension, retention, and the ability to answer post-test questions correctly. Empirically, this finding aligns with Chusniawati et al. (2025) and Taye & Teshome (2025), confirming that narrative-based reading interventions consistently improve comprehension outcomes.

Compared Groups	Mean	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig.
Control Group		12.500	23.969***	13	0.000
Pre-Test	31.50				
Post-Test	44.00				

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 7. The Dependent t-Test Results for the Difference in the Pre-test and Post-test Performances in Reading Comprehension of the Respondents in the Experimental Group

#### Potential Challenges and Limitations

While the use of short stories has been shown to enhance reading comprehension among second-year BSED English majors, several challenges and limitations should be considered. One potential challenge is that teachers need adequate preparation and guidance to effectively implement literature-based instruction. Without proper training, short stories may be used superficially, limiting their impact on student learning. Time constraints in the classroom may also pose a limitation. Guided reading activities, discussions, and comprehension exercises require sufficient time for students to engage deeply with the texts, which can be difficult to balance with other curricular demands. Additionally, learners have diverse abilities and preferences; some students may respond more positively to narrative-based learning, while others may find traditional methods more comfortable or efficient.

Another limitation relates to the research design. The study was conducted with a small sample at a single campus, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The intervention also focused on a specific set of six short stories, and the results may vary with different texts, genres, or levels of difficulty.

Finally, while the reading comprehension test was validated by three experts, the instrument may not capture all aspects of comprehension, such as critical thinking, motivation, or deeper interpretive skills. Future studies could address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples, longer intervention periods, and additional measures of cognitive and affective outcomes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of short stories on reading comprehension.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the use of short stories is an effective strategy for enhancing the reading comprehension skills of second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) English major students. Exposure to narrative texts allowed

learners to engage actively with the material, expand their prior knowledge, and organize ideas more effectively, highlighting the potential of short stories to promote meaningful learning in literacy development.

The findings have several implications for practice and education. Teachers can incorporate short stories into reading instruction to foster comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking. Educational institutions may consider integrating narrative-based materials into curricula to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, particularly in resource-limited settings. The study also underscores the value of using structured reading interventions to complement traditional teaching methods.

For future research, longitudinal studies could examine the sustainability of reading comprehension gains over time. Comparative investigations may explore the effectiveness of short stories relative to other reading interventions, while studies considering learner differences, such as motivation or prior knowledge, could provide further insights into optimizing reading strategies for diverse student populations. In general, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence that narrative-based instructional approaches can meaningfully improve literacy skills and offers practical guidance for educators seeking to enhance reading comprehension in higher education contexts.

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## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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## Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.