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The Impact of Using Short Stories to Improve Students' Reading Comprehension in Eleventh Grade of SMA Negeri 2 Palu

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A B S T R A C T

Reading comprehension remains a major challenge in EFL classrooms due to passive teaching methods and low student engagement. This study investigated whether the use of short stories significantly improved the reading comprehension of eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving two classes: XI E as the experimental group and XI D as the control group. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests. The experimental group showed an increase in the mean score from 83.13 to 92.53, while the control group improved from 74.27 to 81.13. However, the independent t-test indicated that the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 0.21$, $p > 0.05$). These findings may be attributed to the relatively short treatment duration and the high initial reading ability of the experimental group, which limited the observable statistical effect. Nevertheless, the N-Gain analysis showed greater learning improvement in the experimental group (0.55) than in the control group (0.27). These findings suggest that short stories have pedagogical potential to support students' reading comprehension despite the absence of statistically significant differences.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the fundamental language skills that enables learners to construct meaning, evaluate information, and apply knowledge in academic and real-life contexts. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2026), reading is a constructive and interactive process of acquiring, evaluating, and using information from print or digital formats to build knowledge, promote social participation, and foster independence. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading competence extends beyond decoding written texts to include vocabulary development, critical thinking, and the ability to interpret information across

various contexts. However, despite its importance, developing effective reading comprehension remains a pedagogical challenge in many Indonesian schools due to the continued reliance on conventional, text-based instructional approaches that often reduce students' engagement and motivation.

The implementation of innovative instructional practices is also influenced by broader educational conditions. Kumala Shari and Yuliana (2026) found that educational transformation is often uneven because of differences in teachers' competencies, professional training, and school facilities. Therefore, schools require learning materials that are both pedagogically meaningful and practically accessible. One such medium is the short story, which provides authentic language input while remaining feasible for classroom implementation without requiring additional infrastructure. Previous studies have shown that short stories expose learners to grammatical structures, contextual vocabulary, and meaningful language use, thereby supporting natural language acquisition and promoting higher-order thinking skills (Nurul et al., 2025). Conversely, lengthy and monotonous textbook passages frequently reduce students' motivation and create negative attitudes toward reading (Ahmadi, 2017).

From a cognitive perspective, successful reading comprehension depends largely on readers' vocabulary knowledge and their ability to allocate cognitive resources efficiently. Perfetti and Stafura (2014) argued that rich vocabulary knowledge facilitates rapid word recognition, allowing learners to devote greater cognitive capacity to constructing textual meaning. Similarly, Sari and Sinaga (2026) emphasized that meaningful instructional materials, including short stories, promote active reading engagement by enabling students to focus on comprehension and analytical thinking rather than merely decoding words. In addition, Huzhlifat et al. (2026) highlighted the importance of differentiated learning, in which teachers adapt learning materials to students' readiness levels to improve motivation and learning outcomes. These theoretical perspectives suggest that appropriately selected short stories may support students' reading comprehension while accommodating diverse classroom needs.

These challenges were also identified during preliminary observations at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. Many eleventh-grade students experienced difficulties in comprehending English texts, particularly in identifying unfamiliar vocabulary, determining main ideas, and interpreting explicit as well as implicit information. Although several students demonstrated adequate reading fluency, many struggled to construct meaning from texts and showed limited participation during reading activities. Classroom instruction remained predominantly teacher-centered and relied heavily on textbook-based materials, resulting in passive learning and low student engagement. According to Setiawati (2022), short stories are concise fictional prose narratives characterized by a single plot, limited characters, and a focused theme that can be read in one sitting. Their brevity and structural simplicity reduce cognitive overload while encouraging students to concentrate on narrative comprehension and classroom discussion. Empirical evidence further supports their effectiveness. Supriatna and Rahmawati (2022) reported that short stories significantly improved students' reading comprehension by making reading

activities more enjoyable. Likewise, Andriyani (2022) found significant improvements in students' reading achievement through the use of short stories in a quasi-experimental study, while Irhamni et al. (2025) concluded that short stories provide manageable texts that enable EFL learners to understand narrative structures without becoming overwhelmed.

Despite these positive findings, several research gaps remain. Most previous studies have focused on junior high school students or have compared different cultural versions of short stories, such as the study by Zainal et al., (2022), who compared original and local short stories as two types of cultural sources. However, limited empirical evidence has examined the effectiveness of flash fiction, particularly stories with a maximum length of 750 words, for improving reading comprehension among senior high school students in localized EFL contexts such as Palu, Central Sulawesi. Furthermore, previous experimental studies have rarely considered the influence of ceiling effects caused by high pre-test scores or incorporated normalized gain (N-Gain) analysis to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of students' learning improvement.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the impact of using flash fiction, including *The Smart Deer* and *Malin Kundang*, on the reading comprehension of eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. Using a quasi-experimental design involving an experimental group and a control group, this study aims to determine whether the systematic use of short stories improves students' literal and inferential reading comprehension compared with conventional instructional methods. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of research on English language pedagogy and provide practical guidance for EFL teachers in selecting effective supplementary reading materials for senior high school classrooms.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design involving two intact groups of subjects: an experimental class and a control class. This design is highly appropriate for educational settings where random assignment of individual students is impractical (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population included all eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu, totaling approximately 450 students. Using purposive sampling to ensure administrative feasibility and baseline comparability, two classes were selected: Class XI E (30 students) as the experimental group receiving treatment with short stories and Class XI D (30 students) as the control group taught using conventional methods. The independent variable in this study was the pedagogical use of short stories, specifically flash fiction with a maximum length of 750 words to match the cognitive load of high school learners, while the dependent variable was students' reading comprehension achievement. The main instrument used for data collection was a reading comprehension test consisting of 10 essay questions and 10 true-false questions. This test was administered twice: as a pre-test to measure students' initial reading comprehension before the treatment and as a post-test to evaluate their progress after the intervention. Assessment was conducted using a predetermined scoring

rubric, and the final scores were converted to a 40-point scale to facilitate statistical analysis.

The treatment for the experimental group was conducted over six meetings, with each session lasting 60 minutes. The instructional procedures included an introduction and apperception, dividing students into six groups, presenting short stories such as *Malin Kundang* and *The Smart Deer*, and engaging students in retelling activities. During the treatment, students were encouraged to identify unfamiliar vocabulary and actively participate in group discussions to develop a deeper understanding of the narrative structure of the texts. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean scores and standard deviations of both the experimental and control groups. To determine whether there was a significant difference in students' reading comprehension between the two groups after the treatment, an independent-samples *t*-test was performed at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. Because the experimental group had a higher initial pre-test score than the control group, a normalized gain (N-Gain) analysis was also conducted to evaluate students' proportional learning improvement and minimize the potential influence of ceiling effects. According to Hake (1998), N-Gain is a robust metric widely used in educational research to measure students' actual learning improvement after instruction. The resulting N-Gain scores (g) were then categorized into three levels, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of N-Gain Score

No	N-Gain Score Range	Classification
1.	$g > 0.7$	High Gain
2	$0.3 \leq g \leq 0.7$	Medium Gain
3.	$g < 0.3$	Low Gain

The alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted if the independent-samples *t*-test indicated a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups and the experimental group demonstrated a higher N-Gain category than the control group. This criterion was established to ensure that the interpretation of the findings was based not only on statistical significance but also on students' actual learning improvement following the instructional intervention. Therefore, the findings of the descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t*-test, and N-Gain analysis are presented in the following section to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the research objective and the effectiveness of using short stories to improve students' reading comprehension.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Before presenting the statistical findings, it is necessary to describe how the treatment was implemented. During six instructional sessions, students in the experimental group learned narrative texts through carefully selected short stories,

including *Malin Kundang* and *The Smart Deer*. Each session consisted of vocabulary introduction, guided reading, group discussion, identification of narrative elements, and collaborative retelling activities. Meanwhile, the control group received conventional reading instruction using textbook-based materials without the integration of short stories.

Before the treatment, a pre-test was administered to measure the students' initial reading comprehension. The descriptive analysis indicated that the experimental group (Class XI E) began the study with a relatively high mean pre-test score of 83.13, whereas the control group (Class XI D) obtained a mean pre-test score of 74.27. After six instructional sessions, a post-test was administered to both groups. During the intervention, the experimental group learned through flash fiction texts such as *The Smart Deer* and *Malin Kundang* using collaborative retelling activities, while the control group received conventional reading instruction. The post-test results showed improvements in the reading comprehension of both groups. The experimental group's mean score increased to 92.53, while the control group's mean score increased to 81.13. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test mean scores is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Deviation
Experimental XI E	30	83.13	92.53	9.40
Control XI D	30	74.27	81.13	6.87

To test the null hypothesis (H_0), which states that there is no significant effect of using short stories on students' reading comprehension, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. The analysis involved calculating the mean score deviations and the sums of squared deviations for both groups. The statistical computation yielded a sum of squared deviations (Σx^2) of 76,873 for the experimental group and (Σy^2) of 41,021 for the control group. Based on these calculations, the obtained t-value was 0.21. The degrees of freedom were calculated as $df = Nx + Ny - 2 = 30 + 30 - 2 = 58$. At the 0.05 significance level, the critical t-value was 2.002. Since the obtained t-value (0.21) was lower than the critical t-value (2.002), the null hypothesis (H_0) was accepted, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was rejected. These findings indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in the post-test reading comprehension scores between the experimental and control groups. However, because the experimental group had a higher initial pre-test score than the control group, the post-test scores alone were insufficient to reflect the actual learning improvement. Normalized Gain (N-Gain) analysis based on Hake's formula was conducted to evaluate students' proportional learning improvement regardless of their initial level of achievement.

Table 3. Normalized Gain Score Results Summary

Group	Pre-test Average	Post-test Average	N- Gain Score	Criteria
Experimental (XI E)	83.13	92.53	0.55	Medium
Control (XI D)	74.27	81.13	0.27	Low

As presented in Table 3, the experimental group achieved an N-Gain score of 0.55, which falls into the medium category ($0.3 \leq g \leq 0.7$). In contrast, the control group achieved an N-Gain score of 0.27, which falls into the low category ($g < 0.3$). These findings indicate that the use of short stories resulted in greater proportional learning improvement than conventional instruction. The findings reveal an interesting pedagogical phenomenon. Based on the independent-samples t-test, the difference in post-test scores between the two groups was not statistically significant ($t = 0.21 < 2.002$). However, relying solely on the t-test results may overlook the actual learning improvement achieved during the intervention. The N-Gain analysis showed that the experimental group achieved a medium gain (0.55), whereas the control group achieved a low gain (0.27). This result suggests that students who learned through short stories demonstrated greater proportional improvement in reading comprehension than those who received conventional instruction, despite the absence of a statistically significant difference in the post-test scores.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the use of short stories contributed positively to students' reading comprehension, although the independent-samples t-test did not reveal a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups. Nevertheless, the N-Gain analysis demonstrated that the experimental group achieved greater proportional learning improvement than the control group. This finding suggests that students who learned through short stories benefited from the instructional intervention by improving their understanding of narrative texts through vocabulary exploration, collaborative discussion, and active engagement during reading activities. These findings are consistent with Snow (2010) and Duke et al. (2021), who argued that reading comprehension is an active and multidimensional process in which learners construct meaning through interaction with texts and contextual vocabulary development rather than through passive reading activities. Therefore, although the statistical evidence was limited, the instructional use of short stories demonstrated meaningful pedagogical value in supporting students' reading comprehension.

Several factors may explain why the independent-samples t-test did not identify a statistically significant difference between the two groups. First, the experimental group entered the study with a relatively high pre-test mean score, leaving limited room for measurable improvement. According to Alderson (2000), when learners already possess relatively high language proficiency, post-test differences often become smaller, making actual learning progress more difficult to detect. Second, the intervention was conducted over only six instructional sessions, which may not have provided sufficient time to produce stronger statistical evidence. Duke and Del Nero (2011) argued that reading comprehension develops gradually through sustained literacy instruction and repeated opportunities to engage with meaningful texts. Despite these limitations, the greater proportional learning improvement observed in the experimental group indicates that short stories supported students' learning throughout the intervention. Furthermore, the use of flash fiction with a maximum length of 750 words helped reduce students' cognitive load, enabling

them to focus on understanding narrative structures, identifying unfamiliar vocabulary, and interpreting the meaning of the texts more effectively. This finding supports Sweller's (2011) Cognitive Load Theory, which explains that reducing unnecessary cognitive demands allows learners to allocate more working memory to comprehension processes.

The findings of this study provide important pedagogical implications for English language teaching, particularly in EFL classrooms. Short stories can serve as meaningful supplementary instructional materials because their concise and engaging narratives encourage students to participate actively in reading, discussion, and collaborative learning. The collaborative retelling activities implemented during the intervention enabled students to identify unfamiliar vocabulary, analyze narrative structures, and construct meaning collectively, supporting the constructivist perspective proposed by Snow (2010) and Duke et al. (2021). In addition, the manageable length of flash fiction helped reduce students' cognitive burden while maintaining their engagement throughout the learning process, as suggested by Sweller (2011). These findings also support the study of Anjani and Fathurrahman (2025), who reported that integrating interactive reading media can enhance students' engagement and motivation in EFL classrooms. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to integrate short stories into reading instruction as an alternative or complementary resource to conventional textbook-based materials. Combining short stories with interactive learning strategies or digital reading platforms may further enhance students' reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and classroom participation.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of using short stories, particularly flash fiction, on the reading comprehension of eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. The findings suggest that the use of short stories contributed positively to students' reading comprehension by creating a more engaging and meaningful learning environment. Through vocabulary exploration, collaborative discussion, and the analysis of narrative texts, students participated more actively in the learning process and demonstrated meaningful learning progress. Although the statistical analysis did not confirm a significant difference between the experimental and control groups, the findings suggest that short stories remain a valuable supplementary instructional medium for supporting reading comprehension in EFL classrooms.

Several factors may have influenced the research outcomes, including the relatively high initial reading ability of the experimental group, the limited number of participants, and the short duration of the instructional intervention. These conditions may have reduced the opportunity to observe bigger statistical differences while still allowing students to benefit from the learning activities. The findings imply that integrating short stories into English reading instruction can promote students' engagement, vocabulary development, and comprehension of narrative texts. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to use short stories as

complementary learning materials to create more interactive, meaningful, and student-centered reading instruction in secondary school EFL classrooms.

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