Enhancing vocabulary mastery in senior high school students through short story reading: An experimental study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of short stories as a teaching tool to enhance vocabulary mastery among senior high school students. The research involved 33 eleventh-grade social studies students from a public high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, using a one-group pretest-posttest experimental design. Over four class sessions, students engaged with short stories to improve their vocabulary. Vocabulary proficiency was assessed through tests administered before and after the intervention, with data analyzed using SPSS version 25. The pretest revealed a moderate vocabulary level, with an average score of 54.42. Post-intervention results showed significant improvement, with the average score increasing to 85.39. Statistical analysis yielded a t-value of 39.689, exceeding the critical t-value of 2.042, thus supporting the hypothesis (H1) that short story reading significantly enhances vocabulary mastery in EFL students.

Keywords: *Vocabulary improvement; Short story; EFL; Story reading*

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1. Introduction

Reading plays a vital role in the educational setting, thus largely influencing cognitive and academic development among students. As Maharsi et al. (2019) have pointed out, mastering reading skills is absolutely essential for students in their endeavour to be successful in language learning. This important activity allows students to acquire new information and knowledge and is helpful in developing critical thinking and comprehension skills (Fhadillah, 2020). Khan et al. (2020) further emphasized the importance of reading skills in language acquisition and instruction, particularly in foreign language settings. Engaging with texts not only enhances vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and comprehension (Zur et al., 2022) but also cultivates a deeper understanding of various subjects. Often, good readers are also more successful academically, indicative of reading being an important foundation for intellectual development and building of students' vocabulary. This is another reason to include reading tasks in school curricula because it pays a way toward holistic language learning.

In this context, short stories emerge as a potent pedagogical tool for vocabulary development in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Scholars (e.g., Parvareshbar & Ghoorchaei, 2016) affirm that short stories are instrumental in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary. These narratives not only expand learners' vocabulary but also enrich their communication skills and cultural awareness (Arjmandi & Aladini, 2020). Additionally, according to Nazara (2019), using short stories for vocabulary learning creates dynamic contexts for students to practice language interaction, information sharing, and expressing opinions. Short stories as concise, engaging prose narratives that can be read quickly, making them an efficient educational medium (Rohimajaya & Zatnika, 2019). Most importantly, stories make foreign language learning more enjoyable, engaging, and memorable for students (González, 2010). Unfortunately, in reality, many English teachers do not use short stories other than to teach the materials stated in the curriculum or simply to do exercises in the workbooks. In many other cases, English teachers do not use short stories in the teaching learning process due to difficulties in finding short stories that fit their students' interests and language proficiency.

Given these advantages, reading short stories can significantly enhance students' vocabulary. Despite the recognized importance of vocabulary in language learning, there is a persistent need for innovative and engaging methods to stimulate students' interesting vocabulary acquisition. Using short stories as a tool for vocabulary acquisition offers a promising strategy to meet this need. Consequently, the study intends to explore the effectiveness of short stories in improving vocabulary mastery among senior high school students. In particular, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1 What does the pre-test reveal about the students' level of vocabulary mastery?
2 What does the post-test indicate about the students' vocabulary mastery?
3 Do the pre-test and post-test results show a significant difference in the students' vocabulary mastery?

It is expected that the results of this investigation will add to the area of English language learning with empirical proof in respect to how effective using short stories is as a means of vocabulary mastery. In addition, this study also informs the inclusion of more literacy texts into language classrooms, possibly enhancing appreciation of literature and dynamism in the classroom environment. Beyond these more immediate educational implications, it also furthers the general insight into the application of the narrative forms for improvement of the language skills and may in due time enlighten new teaching resources and pedagogical approaches within a wide range of language learning contexts. To achieve this, this study is designed to measure students' vocabulary master before and after short story instruction and to investigate whether this method yields significantly different results.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining short stories

Short stories are a notable genre within English literature, characterized by their brevity and ability to convey significant themes related to morality and human desires. These narratives offer authentic, context-specific, and realistic dialogues that can aid EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in mastering English usage while also applying these dialogues and structures in real-life situations. Some scholars (e.g., Pourkalhor & Kohan, 2013; Morsali, 2016; Irawati & Halim, 2018) have found that short stories can help develop vocabulary as well as promote reading comprehension, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among EFL students. Additionally, literature in the classroom can motivate students and heighten their awareness of the importance of learning a new language. Parvareshbar and Ghoorchaei (2016) highlight that short stories facilitate the integration of vocabulary instruction with other language skills, emphasizing in mastering the language and expanding students' vocabulary. Beno (2019) describes short stories as written prose fiction that can be completed in one sitting, with condensed narrative elements that are rich in meaning.

Short stories, by their very nature, provide a condensed yet impactful narrative that engages readers with minimal time investment (Segal, 2014). They are especially advantageous for language learners because their brevity allows for frequent, repeated exposure to new vocabulary in context (McDougal et al., 2021). Besides, because short stories are normally built around universal themes, such as morality and human experience are relevant (Hà & Bellot, 2020). In this sense, they are relatable and culturally rich, which can foster deeper engagement from learners Therefore, this genre's ability to provide life-like dialogue in manageable chunks makes it a practical tool for vocabulary enhancement and language immersion in both formal and informal educational contexts.

In addition to the foundational benefits of short stories, this current research offers practical insights into selecting specific types of stories tailored to diverse teaching contexts and teaching objectives based on the existing literature. For instance, traditional fables and fairy tales, characterized by their simple language and clear moral lessons, are

particularly effective for lower levels of English learners and younger learners, as stories under this category support basic vocabulary development and ethical reasoning (Wiysahnyuy & Valentine, 2023). With different functions, contemporary short stories that portray real-life scenarios and include colloquial expressions are well-suited for advanced learners, exposing them to authentic language use and complex syntactic structures (Spencer & Petersen, 2020). Moreover, incorporating culturally relevant stories that depict local contexts and students' experiences can bridge the gap between textbook language and everyday communication, thereby improving engagement and promoting deeper learning (Huang, 2019). Overall, as stated by (Ullah et al., 2021), by aligning short story selection with learners' proficiency levels and specific educational goals, teachers can implement targeted strategies for vocabulary development and broader language acquisition.

2.2. Advantages of using short stories

Short stories offer several linguistic advantages in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. As Pathan (2012) notes that the controlled length and carefully chosen vocabulary of short stories make them effective educational tools. Pourkalhor and Kohan (2013) also suggest that short stories, being universal, allow instructors to address human issues, thereby making them excellent for teaching English due to their brevity. The concise nature of short stories permits more focused learning on individual words and their meanings, facilitating a deeper understanding in less time. Furthermore, short stories are ideal for book clubs and learning circles due to their single-setting reading pattern, promoting collaborative learning and discussion.

The implementation of short stories in the ELT classroom promotes numerous pedagogical benefits, especially in supporting language acquisition through meaningful interaction (Rahmawati, 2020). Recent studies (e.g., Chandy et al., 2024; García-Cañarte & Ocaña, 2024) have shown evidence that the narrative structure of short stories provides learners with context-rich input, which improves their ability to internalize new language patterns and vocabulary. Short stories can be strategically selected to match the learners' proficiency levels, creating an optimal zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987) where learners are challenged but not overwhelmed. This careful selection process, coupled with targeted instructional strategies, ensures that the materials are both accessible and engaging, thereby maximizing their educational impact. Additionally, short stories stimulate imagination and critical thinking, which not only improves language skills but also encourages learners to engage more deeply with the content (Spencer & Petersen, 2020). By incorporating interactive activities such as group discussions, retelling, or dramatization, students practice various language skills while expanding their vocabulary mastery in an authentic and enjoyable manner. Furthermore, the inclusion of short stories in collaborative settings like learning circle creates a social learning environment, where students can share perspective (Mohammadnejad, 2018), thus fostering both language development and a sense of community.

2.3. Defining vocabulary

Vocabulary is a fundamental element of language mastery, alongside grammar and pronunciation. Al-Dersi (2013) defines vocabulary as the knowledge of both oral and written terms. Additionally, Rasinski (2004) adds that vocabulary mastery is essential for language comprehension. A robust vocabulary is pivotal for learners to effectively engage with speaking, listening, reading, and writing. On top of that, vocabulary mastery involves not just knowing word forms and definitions but also their correct usage in sentences, which is vital for developing language skills.

Vocabulary, as one of the core components of language learning and acquisition, extends beyond mere word recognition; it involves understanding how words function in different contexts (Ahsan et al., 2021). A well-developed vocabulary aids in comprehension, production and interaction in a second language, as it equips learners with the necessary tools to express nuanced meanings (Sidek & Rahim, 2015). In accordance with this, Laufer and Goldstein (2004) suggest that vocabulary acquisition is best achieved when learners are exposed to new words in context, as seen in short story reading, rather than through isolated word lists. The integration of vocabulary learning into meaningful reading tasks not only solidifies retention but also promotes more fluent language use.

Furthermore, in addition to contextualizing vocabulary acquisition within meaningful reading tasks, several effective strategies have emerged to promote vocabulary mastery through the use of short stories in the ELT classroom. Recent investigation (Pardede, 2021; Bhatti et al., 2022) indicates that repeated exposure to contextually embedded vocabulary in short stories significantly improves retention and facilitates the transfer of learned vocabulary to varied communicative contexts. Moreover, García-Cañarte and Ocaña (2024) suggest that combining short story reading with interactive classroom activities, such as guided discussions, dramatizations, and collaborative retelling, forces learners to actively involve in new vocabulary acquisition, improving both its breath and depth. These proactive strategies not only allow students to internalize new lexicons within a rich narrative framework but also improve critical thinking and active retrieval, especially fostering a stronger vocabulary repertoire essential for effective language learning.

2.4. Importance of vocabulary knowledge

Having a strong grasp of vocabulary is essential for effective communication in any foreign language, serving as the foundation for both comprehension and the clear expression of thoughts. Al-Dersi (2013) posits that vocabulary knowledge allows EFL learners to compare and contrast the target language with their mother tongue, aiding in the comprehension of linguistic similarities and differences. Vocabulary is the building block of language, enabling learners to express themselves effectively. A rich vocabulary enhances a learner's ability to communicate and explore the language's nuances, while a limited vocabulary can hinder communication and language acquisition.

Vocabulary knowledge is undeniably one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension and overall language proficiency (Santillan & Daenos, 2020). As noted by Schmitt (2010), without an adequate vocabulary, learners will struggle to make sense of both spoken and written discourse, impeding their ability to communicate effectively. The importance of vocabulary mastery cannot be overstated, as it influences learners' ability to perform in all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Arita & Zubaidah, 2019). Studies have shown that learners with a richer vocabulary are more capable of understanding complex texts and producing more articulate, nuanced responses (Santillan & Daenos, 2020). Therefore, developing a substantial vocabulary base is essential for learners aiming to achieve high levels of communicative competence in English.

2.5. Short stories as a means of expanding students' vocabulary

Using short stories in the EFL classroom can give learners a fun way of learning to improve their lexical repertoires (Irawati & Halim, 2018). Furthermore, selecting short stories is crucial when using them to teach English. Stories should be short enough to be completed within class hours, providing students with a sense of accomplishment and boosting their confidence (Bakhodirovna, 2015). Syafrizal and Syamsun (2022) emphasize that short stories for beginners should be simple, familiar, and suitable for their reading level to avoid confusion. The language and sentence structure or the short stories must match the students' proficiency level, avoiding archaic slang, regional dialects, and overly complex sentences. As stated by Rohimajaya and Zatnika (2019), teaching unfamiliar words before reading is one of the most effective ways to help students learn vocabulary. This preparatory step in teaching will let students be actively involved in a reading activity and acquire more vocabulary.

When it comes to vocabulary acquisition, short stories offer a dynamic and engaging medium that exposes students to authentic language use (Prinsloo, 2018). Short stories provide contextualized examples of how words are used in natural discourse, which promotes better retention and understanding of vocabulary (Truong et al., 2020). According to Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current proficiency level. Short stories can be chosen or adapted to meet this criterion, ensuring that students are consistently challenged to learn new words without feeling overwhelmed (Spencer & Petersen, 2020). Furthermore, repeated exposure to vocabulary through reading reinforces word retention and deepens understanding (Rahmawati, 2020), making short stories an ideal vehicle for vocabulary instruction in the EFL classroom.

To further enhance the pedagogical impact of short stories in vocabulary acquisition, recent studies emphasize the role of contextually rich and culturally relevant materials in fostering meaning learning experiences (Rahmawati, 2020; Truong et al., 2020). The integration of short stories in language instruction not only facilitates vocabulary retention but also creates opportunities for students to engage in critical

thinking and creative expression through narrative exploration. Using short stories as a medium also aligns with Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory, which highlights the importance of interaction and cultural tools in cognitive development. This approach provides an authentic linguistic environment that encourages learners to infer meaning, connect new vocabulary to existing knowledge, and apply language in varied contexts. Moreover, by exposing students to diverse cultural narratives, short stories contribute to a more holistic language learning experience, allowing learners to understand language nuances and cultural connotations that traditional vocabulary drills may overlook (Prinsloo, 2018). Such integration of language and culture not only enriches students' lexical knowledge but also fosters their intercultural competence, which is crucial in today's globalized world. This multidimensional benefit of short stories in ELT, supported by both theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, underscores their efficacy as a powerful tool for enhancing vocabulary mastery among EFL learners.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This current investigation utilized a quantitative approach, employing an experimental design to examine the significant difference of students' vocabulary mastery before and after being taught using short stories among senior high school students. As Long and Nelson (2013) stated, the quantitative approach to movement data is an active research subject with a lot of room for new ideas and methodologies.

The experimental research design was utilized to obtain data at a state high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Cohen et al. (2011) state that an experiment involves changing the value of one variable and observing the effect on another variable. They highlight that the key feature of an experimental study is the purposeful control and manipulation of conditions to determine the events, where this experimental research introduces an intervention and measures its impact.

This experimental design was chosen because it allowed the researchers to measure the development of students' vocabulary mastery before and after the treatment involving short story reading. By concentrating on the students' performance at both stages, the study could effectively evaluate the impact of using short stories as a tool for enhancing vocabulary.

3.2. Research site, population, and sample

The research was conducted at a state high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on the 2022/2023 academic year. The study targeted grade XI students, comprising a total population of 252 active students. From this population, a purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample of 33 students from the social II class. The class was chosen based on the English teacher's recommendation, as the students exhibited low motivation in learning English and had not previously been taught using short stories for vocabulary enhancement.

3.3. Instruments

The primary instrument for data collection was a vocabulary test administered as both a pre-test and post-test. The test considered thirty questions, each requiring translation of a vocabulary word from English to Indonesian. The vocabulary words were sourced from the short story "Jack and the Beanstalk" ("Short Stories and Classic Literature"). The choice taken in this story was grounded by several strategic considerations. First, Jack and the Beanstalk is a renowned tale that resonates with senior high school students, thereby reducing potential cultural or contextual barriers and allowing students to concentrate on the language itself (Nuspliger, 2020). Recent studies (e.g., Pardede, 2021; Bhatti et al., 2022) have indicated that familiar and engaging texts can significantly improve vocabulary retention and comprehension in secondary education. Moreover, the linguistic features and structures of this tale is appropriately aligned with the proficiency levels of the target students, as it includes a range of vocabulary that challenges and supports their current English abilities (Al Sulaiman, 2012). This alignment makes the story well-suited for this study since not only it reflects on the students' grade level but also provides a balanced mix of basic and advanced lexical items, making it an effective tool for assessing and fostering vocabulary mastery. Each correct response secured one point, and each incorrect response gained zero points. These analyses will allow the testing of hypotheses of significant changes in the mastery of vocabulary before and after intervention.

3.4. Validity and reliability

It is imperative to ensure the validity and reliability of research instruments to produce reliable results. Cohen et al. (2011) stated that validity is an important key to effective research. In this current study, the vocabulary test's validity was confirmed through expert judgment by three English lecturers and an English teacher from the research. They reviewed the test items and lesson plans used for the data collection process, ensuring they reflected the relevant vocabulary and were appropriate for the students' proficiency level. Their feedback was used to refine the test items and instructional activities to ensure content validity. Additionally, reliability was assessed through expert evaluation and a pilot test. The English teacher analyzed the test for ambiguities and inconsistencies, leading to revisions of unreliable items. A pilot test conducted with a similar group of students provided statistical measures of reliability, such as Cronbach's alpha, which confirmed the test's consistency across different administrations, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.85, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered by using written vocabulary tests and detailed lesson plans. The 33 students in the experimental group received both pre- and post-tests. Then, the researcher and the teacher of English checked and evaluated the test scoring system. After

scoring, the researcher analyzed the achievement levels of the students about their vocabulary. Students' vocabulary mastery levels were categorized as follows:

Table 1
Categorized of level.

Score	Category
81 – 100	Very good
61 – 80	Good
41 – 60	Moderate
21 – 40	Poor
≤20	Very poor

The analysis process involved several steps. First, the central tendency of the pre-test and post-test scores was calculated using descriptive statistics. This was followed by a normality test to check for the distribution of data. Finally, the paired samples t-test-an inferential statistic-was used to test the significance of the difference between the pre-test and post-test results. These steps add depth to the analysis and enable researchers to perform a robust assessment of the effect of the intervention on students' vocabulary mastery.

4. Findings and discussion

The experimental phase was implemented into four different sessions to maximize the pedagogical advantages of short story-based vocabulary instruction. In the initial session, the researchers introduced the lesson objectives, provided an overview of the materials and methods, and administered a pre-test to establish baseline vocabulary levels. In the second session, the focus changed to familiarizing students with the concept, purpose, and varieties of short stories; students then engaged in a 15-minutes silent reading of Jack and the Beanstalk, followed by a 45-minute exercise during which they translated the text into Indonesian and identified unfamiliar vocabulary. The third session was dedicated to consolidation, during which students discussed and analyzed the new vocabulary. In this step, the researchers facilitated this process by inviting students to write the words on the board and engage in matching exercises to reinforce learning. At last, the intervention concluded with a post-test administered under timed conditions to measure vocabulary enhancement. This sequential approach ensured that each step built upon the previous one, promoting gradual yet effective vocabulary learning through continuous engagement and active learning.

4.1. The students' vocabulary mastery level prior to reading short stories

The descriptive statistics of the pre-test scores, analyzed using SPSS version 25.0, revealed that the mean score was 54.42 (see Table 2). This indicates that the students were

at a moderate level of vocabulary mastery according to the categorized level (see Table 1).

Table 2

Descriptive statistic of pre-test.

Statistics

Mean pretest score

N	Valid	33
	Missing	**0**
Mean		54.42
Median		53.00
Minimum		36
Maximum		86
Sum		1796

4.2. The students' vocabulary mastery level subsequent to reading short stories

The post-test scores showed a significant improvement, with a mean score of 85.39, placing the students at a very good level of vocabulary mastery. This increase from the pre-test mean score of 54.42 to post-test mean score of 85.39 indicates substantial vocabulary through the use of short stories (see Table 3).

Table 3

Descriptive statistic of post-test.

Statistics

Posttest

N	Valid	33
	Missing	**0**
Mean		85.39
Median		86.00
Minimum		66
Maximum		100
Sum		2818

4.3. Hypothesis testing

The hypothesis was tested using a paired samples t-test. The results demonstrated a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. The t-value was 39.689, far exceeding the t-table value of 2.042 at a 95% confidence level, confirming that the alternative hypothesis (H1) is accepted. This indicates that reading short stories significantly improves senior high school students' vocabulary mastery (see Table 4).

Table 4. Paired Sample T-Test

			Paired Samples Test						
			Paired Differences						
		Mean	Std. Devi ation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest - posttest	-30.970	4.482	.780	-32.559	-29.380	-39.689	32	.000

4.4. The significant difference between reading short stories on students' vocabulary mastery

Reading is a cornerstone of knowledge acquisition and plays a critical role in language learning and vocabulary development. Short stories, as a literary medium, offer rich and engaging ways to enhance vocabulary mastery among EFL students. The compact and meaningful narratives in short stories make them an effective tool for vocabulary acquisition.

The findings of this study align with previous research. For instance, Astriana et al. (2020) who highlighted that stories are not only entertaining but also effective in helping students remember and understand new words. This study confirms that using short stories motivates students to read and expands their vocabulary, making it easier for them to learn English. Furthermore, the motivational aspect of using short stories cannot be overstated, if students lack motivation, their vocabulary mastery and overall language skills may suffer. The engaging nature of short stories can foster a positive learning environment and encourage students to actively participate in their learning process. This study corroborates the findings of Febriyanti and Riandi (2020), who found that short stories effectively stimulate interest and reduce fear of learning English among junior high school students. Similarly, Sariana et al. (2022) demonstrated that local short stories significantly improved vocabulary mastery in a junior high school setting.

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of short stories as a tool for enhancing vocabulary mastery among senior high school students. The notable improvement in students' vocabulary scores after the intervention demonstrates the potential of using short stories to improve language learning. This investigation adds to the increasing evidence that short stories are a beneficial resource in EFL classrooms, offering both motivation and vocabulary development for students.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of short stories in improving vocabulary mastery among senior high school students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Employing a one-group pretest-posttest experimental design, the research demonstrated a significant enhancement in students' vocabulary proficiency following the short story intervention. First, the pretest revealed a moderate vocabulary level, with a mean score

of 54.42. This baseline guided the development of a targeted lesson plan incorporating repeated short story reading over four sessions. The posttest showed a substantial increase in the mean score to 85.39. Statistical analysis confirmed the intervention's success, with a t-value of 39.689 far exceeding the critical t-table value of 2.042, indicating a significant improvement in students' vocabulary mastery.

Second, the study adopted a quantitative approach to collect and analyze data, ensuring precise measurement of the intervention's impact. Conducted at a public high school in Yogyakarta from January to February 2023, the research utilized a 30-item vocabulary test translated into Indonesian. Data analysis included descriptive and inferential statistics, such as mean score comparisons, normality and homogeneity tests, and a paired samples t-test.

Ultimately, the findings confirm that short stories are an effective tool for enhancing vocabulary mastery among students at the public high school in Yogyakarta. Beyond vocabulary improvement, this method fosters confidence and motivation in English language learning. These results encourage teachers to integrate short stories into their teaching strategies to creatively and effectively boost vocabulary. Furthermore, the study underlines the value of cultivating a reading culture to support students' language development.

5.2. Recommendations

This study suggests integrating short stories into teaching through creative, engaging methods to boost students' interest and vocabulary growth. Students are encouraged to read regularly, especially short stories, to enhance their language skills. Future research should use larger samples, control groups, and longer durations to improve validity and compare instructional approaches. The study's small sample size and limited scope—focused on senior high school students in Yogyakarta—may affect generalizability. Its short duration also limits insights into long-term vocabulary development. Addressing these gaps in future studies can offer a deeper understanding of the benefits of using short stories in language learning.

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