



## The use of short stories in English language Teaching (ELT): A pedagogical overview

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### Abstract

Short stories offer a dynamic and engaging resource in English Language Teaching (ELT), bridging literary appreciation with language acquisition. This pedagogical overview explores their multifaceted role in fostering reading comprehension, vocabulary expansion, cultural awareness, and critical thinking among diverse learners. Unlike traditional textbooks, short stories provide authentic, context-rich narratives that motivate intrinsic reading while exposing students to idiomatic expressions, varied sentence structures, and pragmatic nuances. Drawing on theories from Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, the paper outlines practical strategies for integration, including pre-reading activities, interactive discussions, creative writing extensions, and multimodal adaptations (e.g., audio books or digital storytelling). Empirical studies, such as those by Collie and Slater (1987) <sup>[1]</sup> and recent meta-analyses, demonstrate measurable gains in fluency, motivation, and retention, particularly for intermediate to advanced learners. Challenges like text complexity and cultural sensitivity are addressed with selection criteria and scaffolding techniques. Ultimately, short stories transform ELT classrooms into immersive environments, enhancing holistic proficiency and lifelong reading habits.

**Keywords:** Short stories, ELT, pedagogy, literature-based teaching, language acquisition meta-analyses, hypothesis, pragmatic

### Introduction

Short stories occupy a significant place in English Language Teaching (ELT) because of their linguistic richness, brevity, and cultural depth. As a pedagogical tool, short stories effectively integrate language skills, literary appreciation, and critical thinking, making them highly suitable for diverse classroom contexts.

### Linguistic Benefits

Short stories expose learners to authentic language use in meaningful contexts. They offer significant linguistic benefits in English language teaching by providing authentic, contextualized language exposure that enhances vocabulary, grammar, and overall proficiency.

**Grammar Improvement:** Short stories expose learners to grammar structures in natural contexts, leading to measurable gains in accuracy and retention, as shown in experimental studies with beginner students. They reinforce rules through repeated, meaningful patterns without rote memorization. The simple sentence structures and idiomatic expressions in short stories reinforce grammar rules implicitly, leading to measurable gains in accuracy during experimental teaching phases. Narratives demonstrate grammar in action, making abstract rules more tangible and easier to apply in speaking and writing.

**Vocabulary Acquisition:** Stories present new words in engaging narratives, boosting retrieval and memorization—studies report up to 80% success in recall after short-term use. Contextual clues help learners infer meanings, expanding active vocabulary more effectively than isolated lists.

**Skill Integration:** Short stories develop reading comprehension, speaking fluency, and writing creativity by encouraging discussion and retelling. Their concise length

suits classroom time, fostering cultural awareness and critical thinking alongside linguistic growth.

**Vocabulary Gains:** Short stories expose learners to new words in natural contexts, aiding retention and proper usage through repeated encounters within narratives. This contextual learning helps students infer meanings without rote memorization, improving long-term recall, of participants remembered story-specific vocabulary effectively.

**Vocabulary in context:** It is a reading strategy where learners infer the meaning of unfamiliar words using surrounding text clues, rather than relying solely on dictionaries. This approach enhances comprehension and builds vocabulary naturally during reading. Common clue types include definitions, synonyms, antonyms, examples, and general knowledge from the passage. For example, a definition clue explains the word directly, like "Pollination occurs when a pollen grain lands on the stigma," defining the term through description. Synonym clues restate the word similarly such as "compassion, or pity," while antonym clues contrast it, like "meticulous" paired with "no inaccuracy." Using context aids reading fluency and retention, especially in expository texts with richer clues than narratives. Research shows explicit teaching improves students' ability to guess meanings accurately, though it works best with prior knowledge.

### Development of Language Skills

Short stories effectively enhance English language skills by providing authentic, contextual language exposure in engaging narratives. They support reading comprehension, vocabulary building, grammar acquisition, speaking, writing, and listening through interactive activities. Short stories present vocabulary and grammar in natural contexts, aiding retention and inference of meanings over rote

memorization. They boost motivation and critical thinking, as learners discuss plots, characters, and themes. Research indicates improvements in all four skills - reading, writing, speaking, and listening - with noticeable gains in grammar knowledge.

Short stories support the integration of the four language skills: They are one of the most effective "bridges" in language teaching because they provide a complete, manageable narrative that requires the use of all four language skills—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW)—in a natural, integrated flow.

Instead of teaching these skills in isolation, short stories create a "contextual loop" where one skill feeds into the next.

### 1. Reading: The "Input" Foundation

Reading is usually the starting point. Short stories are ideal because they are brief enough to be finished in one or two sittings, preventing "reading fatigue."

**Vocabulary in Context:** Learners see how words and idioms work within a plot, rather than in a list.

**Critical Analysis:** It encourages "reading between the lines" to understand character motives or themes.

### 2. Listening: Transitioning to Sound

Short stories support listening through "Storytelling" or "Audio-assisted Reading."

**Active Listening:** When a teacher reads a story aloud, students must listen for specific cues, tone, and pronunciation.

**Dictation & Cloze Tasks:** Teachers can play an audio version of the story and have students fill in missing words, merging reading and listening.

### 3. Speaking: Turning Input into Output

Because stories are inherently social, they naturally spark conversation.

**Role-Playing:** Students act out dialogues between characters, practicing oral fluency and "natural" speech patterns.

**Discussion & Debate:** Questions like "Why did the character make that choice?" force students to formulate opinions and speak spontaneously.

**Retelling:** Summarizing the story orally helps with sequencing and memory.

### 4. Writing: The Creative Extension

Writing is often the final stage where students consolidate what they have learned.

**Alternative Endings:** Students write a different conclusion to the story, which requires them to understand the existing plot (reading) and use their own voice (writing).

**Character Journals:** Writing from a character's perspective helps practice different "voices" and tenses.

Summarizing or condensing the story into a paragraph builds the ability to identify main ideas.

## Motivation and Learner Engagement

Short stories are powerful tools for motivation and engagement because they satisfy the human brain's natural craving for narrative. Unlike textbooks, which can feel like a series of "tasks," a short story is an experience.

### Here is how they specifically drive learner engagement and motivation:

#### 1. The "Hook" of Narrative Tension

Human curiosity is a massive driver for learning. Short stories often present a conflict or a mystery early on.

**Need for Closure:** Once a student starts a story, they have an intrinsic desire to reach the "resolution." This keeps them focused on the text longer than they would be on a standard grammar exercise.

**Predictive Engagement:** Students naturally try to guess what happens next. This active mental processing is the definition of high engagement.

#### 2. Manageability and "The Finish Line"

Psychologically, finishing a task provides a dopamine hit that boosts motivation.

**Avoids "Novel Fatigue":** Long novels can be intimidating for language learners. A short story offers a visible "finish line." Completing a whole story in one or two sittings gives learners a sense of academic mastery and self-confidence.

**Low Barrier to Entry:** Because they are condensed, the cognitive load is manageable, making the target language feel "reachable" rather than overwhelming.

#### 3. Emotional and Personal Connection

Engagement is highest when a student feels something about what they are learning.

**Empathy:** Stories allow students to walk in someone else's shoes. When they care about a character, the language used to describe that character's struggle becomes more "sticky" in their memory.

**Reliability:** Many short stories deal with universal human themes (love, loss, bravery). When a student sees their own experiences reflected in the target language, it validates their effort to learn it.

#### 4. Authenticity vs. Artificiality

Textbooks often use "controlled" language that can feel dry or robotic.

**Real-World Feel:** Short stories provides authentic input. Students feel they are interacting with the "real" language used by native speakers, which is more motivating than "See Spot Run" style sentences.

**Cultural Curiosity:** Stories act as a cultural window. Learning about how people in other countries live, think, and solve problems keeps the learner's curiosity alive.

#### 5. Higher-Order Thinking (The "Aha!" Moment)

Short stories often use metaphors or have "twist" endings.

**Intellectual Challenge:** Deciphering a story's hidden meaning or a character's true motive provides a "puzzle-solving" element to the lesson.

**Active Participation:** Students aren't just receiving information; they are interpreting it. This shifts them from "passive listeners" to "active thinkers."

### Cultural and Moral Awareness

Short stories foster cultural and moral awareness by embedding universal values and diverse traditions into relatable narratives, prompting readers to reflect on ethics and societal norms. Characters' dilemmas and resolutions highlight virtues like honesty or empathy while showcasing customs from various backgrounds.

Stories use vivid scenarios to mirror real-life choices, such as a boy learning trust through repeated lies in "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," teaching consequences without direct preaching. Cultural elements appear through settings and motifs, like indigenous wisdom in tales of nature-listening owls, bridging global perspectives. Narratives spark discussions on fairness or perseverance, as in fables where animals embody human flaws, making abstract morals accessible across ages and heritages.

### Examples

**Chinese Farmer Story:** Events like a lost horse returning with others illustrate neutral perspectives on fortune, rooted in Zen philosophy.

**The Snowy Day:** Follows an African-American child's urban adventure, promoting diversity appreciation.  
**The Brave Little Fish:** Tackles environmental courage, drawing from ocean folklore for cross-cultural relevance.

### Enhancement of Critical and Creative Thinking

Short stories are uniquely suited for developing Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) because they are "open-ended" by nature. Unlike a factual paragraph, a story requires the learner to interpret, speculate, and create. Here are how short stories enhance both critical and creative thinking

#### 1. Enhancement of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information. Short stories provide a "laboratory" for these mental processes:

**Inference and "Gap-Filling":** Short stories often leave details unsaid (e.g., why a character is angry). Learners must use clues to "read between the lines," which hones their ability to make logical inferences.

**Analysis of Cause and Effect:** By looking at a character's choices and the resulting consequences, learners practice identifying complex cause-and-effect chains rather than simple linear facts.

**Evaluation of Perspectives:** Stories introduce diverse viewpoints. Comparing how two different characters view the same event forces learners to evaluate the bias, reliability, and motives of different sources.

**Problem Solving:** Most stories revolve around a conflict. Asking students, "How else could the protagonist have solved this?" requires them to apply analytical thinking to a complex situation.

#### 2. Enhancement of Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is about generating new ideas and looking at things in unconventional ways. Short stories act as a "springboard" for imagination:

**The "What If?" Technique:** Short stories are perfect for "What If" scenarios. What if the story took place in the year 3000? What if the hero was actually the villain? This pushes learners to think beyond the provided text.

**Divergent Thinking:** Unlike a multiple-choice quiz, a story has no single "correct" interpretation. Learners are encouraged to come up with multiple unique explanations for a character's behavior or a symbol's meaning.

#### Creative Writing Extensions

**Alternative Endings:** Students must maintain the story's logic while inventing a brand-new conclusion.

**Perspective Shifting:** Writing a scene from the perspective of a minor character or even an inanimate object in the story requires a high level of creative empathy.

**Visualization:** Because short stories use descriptive language, learners must build the "mental cinema" of the setting and characters, which strengthens visual imagination.

#### Flexibility in Teaching Methodology

Short stories provide flexibility in teaching methodology by allowing educators to adapt lessons quickly to diverse learners, classroom dynamics, and objectives without the commitment of longer texts. Their brevity enables varied approaches like close reading, discussions, or creative extensions in a single session. Teachers cover complete narratives in class, facilitating real-time adjustments based on student engagement and comprehension, unlike novels requiring extended assignments. Reader-response methods encourage personal connections, shifting from teacher-led analysis to student-driven explorations of themes. Pairing stories for contrasts, such as irony in one followed by satire in another, reinforces skills iteratively while fitting tight schedules. Short stories support multiple skills - vocabulary via context, critical thinking through inference, or writing via retellings - letting instructors pivot from grammar drills to affective discussions on ethics. This suits ESL, history, or literature classes, promoting active participation over rote learning.

#### Classroom Activities Using Short Stories

To make short stories effective in the classroom, activities should move beyond simple comprehension questions. The goal is to get students to "manipulate" the text through different mediums.

**Here are several classroom activities categorized by the primary skill or thinking process they target:**

##### 1. Collaborative & Speaking Activities

These activities turn the solitary act of reading into a social experience.

**Jigsaw Reading:** Divide a story into four parts. Give each group one part to read. Groups must then come together and communicate to piece the entire plot together in the correct order.

**The "Hot Seat":** One student sits in the "hot seat" acting as a character from the story. The rest of the class interviews them. The student must answer in character, using the vocabulary and personality traits established in the text.

**Literary Speed Dating:** Students pair up for 2 minutes to discuss a specific question (e.g., "Who is the most relatable character?"). When the buzzer rings, they rotate to a new partner with a new question.

## 2. Critical & Analytical Activities

These tasks require students to deconstruct the "mechanics" of the story.

**Plot Mapping:** Students create a visual timeline of the story. This helps them identify the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

**Character Social Media Profile:** Ask students to create a mock "Instagram" or "LinkedIn" profile for a character. What would their bio say? What photos would they post? This forces students to analyze character traits and motivations.

**The Trial:** If a character did something controversial, turn the classroom into a courtroom. Assign roles (Judge, Jury, Defense, Prosecution) and have them argue the character's "guilt" based on evidence from the text.

## 3. Creative & Writing Activities

These activities use the story as a "launchpad" for original student production.

**Story Mash-up:** Take a character from the short story and place them into a completely different setting (e.g., "How would Cinderella survive in a sci-fi space station?").

**The "Lost" Scene:** Have students write a scene that happened before the story started or after it ended. This encourages them to maintain the author's tone while being creative.

**Six-Word Memoirs:** Challenge students to summarize the entire story or a specific character's life in exactly six words (e.g., for *The Great Gatsby*: "Green light, big dreams, tragic end").

## Assessment and Evaluation

Short stories are highly effective for assessment and evaluation because they provide a complete, contained data set that reflects a learner's true language proficiency. Unlike a grammar quiz, which evaluates isolated knowledge, a short story assessment evaluates application in context.

Here is how they provide scope for different types of assessment:

### 1. Assessment of the Four Core Skills

Because short stories integrate all skills, they allow for a "360-degree" evaluation of a learner's ability.

**Reading Comprehension:** Beyond literal "what happened" questions, stories allow for evaluating inference (guessing hidden meanings) and skimming/scanning skills.

**Writing Proficiency:** Teachers can assess creative writing (sequels), formal writing (literary analysis), or functional writing (writing a letter to a character).

**Listening Accuracy:** The use audio versions of stories, teachers can assess note-taking skills or the ability to identify emotional tone and emphasis.

**Speaking Fluency:** The oral presentation or role-play activities provide measurable data on pronunciation, intonation, and spontaneous speech.

### 2. Evaluation of Higher-Order Thinking (HOTS)

Short stories move the evaluation from "Remembering" to "Creating" on Bloom's Taxonomy.

### 3. Formative vs. Summative Scope

Short stories are flexible enough to be used for both "check-ins" and final grades.

#### Formative (Ongoing)

**The "One-Sentence Summary":** A quick way to see if students understood the day's reading.

**Thought Bubbles:** Teacher asks students to draw what a character is thinking during a scene provides a quick "window" into their comprehension.

#### Summative (Final)

**Portfolio Assessment:** A collection of different responses to a story (a map, a letter, an essay) provides a holistic view of progress.

**Comparative Essays:** Comparing two different short stories evaluates the student's ability to synthesize complex themes.

### 4. Use of Detailed Rubrics

Because story-based tasks are subjective, they provide an excellent opportunity to use rubrics. This makes evaluation transparent and helps students understand where they need to improve.

#### Example Evaluation Criteria for a Story Activity:

**Comprehension:** Did the student identify the climax correctly?

**Language Use:** Did they use the past tense correctly in their retelling?

**Vocabulary:** Did they incorporate at least 5 new words from the story?

**Critical Insight:** Did they identify the theme or "moral" of the story?

### 5. Self and Peer Assessment

Short stories are "social texts." This makes them perfect for peer evaluation.

**Peer Review:** Students read each other's "Alternative Endings" and provide feedback based on whether the ending stayed "true" to the original character's personality.

**Self-Reflection:** Students can write about how their own perspective changed after reading the story, allowing the teacher to evaluate affective growth (changes in attitude and empathy).

## Conclusion

Short stories are powerful pedagogical tools in ELT as they combine language learning with literary enjoyment. Their adaptability, cultural relevance, and linguistic value make them ideal for developing communicative competence and critical thinking skills in learners.

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