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Utilizing Short Stories As Authentic Materials In Teaching English Reading Comprehension To Eleventh-Grade Students: A Qualitative Classroom Study

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Abstract

This study describes how short stories were used as authentic materials in teaching English reading comprehension to eleventh-grade students at SMA Gajah Mada Bandar Lampung. It was designed as a qualitative classroom study. Twenty students (ten girls and ten boys) were selected through purposive sampling from 123 eleventh-grade students, because they were the high-achieving students in English according to the reading test results provided by their English teacher. Data were gathered through classroom observation over two meetings, using observation sheets, field notes, photographs, and video and voice recordings, and through a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire on the students' perceptions. The data were analyzed with the three-step model of Miles et al. (2014): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Methodological triangulation was used to check the trustworthiness of the findings.

The observations showed that the students became more attentive, curious, and active when they worked with audio-visual and printed short stories. They took part in pair and group discussions, worked out the meaning of unfamiliar words together, and answered comprehension questions about the plot, the characters' motives, and the moral of the story. The questionnaire supported these observations: across the 19 positively worded statements, about 94% of the responses on average were "agree" or "strongly agree", and 85% of the students disagreed that short stories make reading harder. The study concludes that short stories are a suitable form of authentic material for this class because they raise students'

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interest and support their understanding of English texts.

Keywords: authentic materials, short stories, reading comprehension, qualitative research, senior high school

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in English as a foreign language covers four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Hossain (2015) groups listening and reading as receptive skills, because language reaches learners through them, and speaking and writing as productive skills, because learners generate language through them. Reading usually means dealing with language messages in written or printed form, and it requires the reader to process those messages (Chou, 2012). In a reading class, students are therefore expected to understand a text, not merely to read it aloud. Cowell (2012) describes reading comprehension as a process of meaning construction in which readers draw on prior knowledge, information in the text, their stance toward it, and the immediate context.

In practice, many students show little interest in reading English materials. They open a book but do not really read it, or they can pronounce the words without getting any idea from the page. Teachers of reading therefore need to bring in other kinds of material that give students more varied experiences, create a comfortable atmosphere, and stimulate motivation, which is essential for learning to read.

Authentic materials are one such option. They present language in a realistic way, give students wider information about the world, and can raise interest because their topics are interesting (Rao, 2019). They also make learning more meaningful for students (Beresova, 2015). Short stories are a promising kind of authentic material: they are brief, usually built around one plot and a few characters, and appealing to language learners (Khatib, 2013; Dersi, 2013). Some earlier studies of authentic materials in Indonesian classrooms, however, used quantitative or mixed designs aimed at measuring improvement in reading scores (Desitarahmi, 2013; Wahyuni, 2013). A qualitative description of what happens in the classroom when short stories are used, and of how students perceive the experience, can add a more detailed picture.

This study addresses that gap with a qualitative approach. It asks one research question: *How are short stories used as authentic materials in teaching English reading comprehension at the eleventh grade of SMA Gajah Mada Bandar Lampung?* Its objective is to describe that use, and the study is limited to the use of short stories as authentic materials in teaching reading comprehension to eleventh-grade students at this school.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Authentic materials

Authentic texts are real-life texts that were not written for teaching purposes (Guo, 2012; Tomlinson, 2013). Photographs, video clips, and other resources not prepared for pedagogical use also count as authentic. Oura (2012) divides them into three groups: audio-visual materials (such as cartoons, news clips, and movies), visual materials (such as photographs and paintings), and printed materials (such as newspapers, song lyrics, comics, and storybooks).

Authentic materials are reported to have a positive effect on motivation, to provide genuine cultural information, to expose learners to real language, and to encourage a more creative approach to teaching (Rao, 2019; Beresova, 2015). They also have disadvantages: they may cover cultural contexts that not every student understands, and they are hard to follow if they do not match the topic being taught. Teachers therefore have to select them carefully.

2.2 Reading comprehension

Receptive skills, such as reading and listening, are skills of constructing meaning from discourse that is heard or seen (Harmer, 2014). Brown (2013) identifies four types of reading activity: perceptive, selective, interactive, and extensive reading. Short stories fit the last two: they can be used for interactive reading in class, and for extensive reading when longer texts are read outside class hours.

Reading comprehension itself has been classified by the reader's purpose into four types: literal comprehension (information stated explicitly), informational or inferential comprehension (information that must be inferred), critical or evaluative comprehension (comparing the text with one's own knowledge and values), and appreciative comprehension (gaining an emotional or other valued response) (Pourkalhor & Kohan, 2013).

2.3 Short stories in language learning

A short story is a work of fictional prose shorter than a novel. Its brevity, variety, and modernity make it appealing to language learners (Ghasemi, 2011), and it usually centers on one plot, one main character with a few minor ones, and one central theme (Khatib, 2013). Because students can finish a short story in one sitting or within one or two lessons, it is practical for classroom use, and literature in the form of short stories can make learning English enjoyable and attractive for EFL learners (Dersi, 2013; Irene, 2015). Adyana (2016) found that word selection improved most when short stories were used to develop students' vocabulary for writing narrative texts.

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2.4 Related studies

Desitarahmi (2013) found that authentic materials improved the reading comprehension of eighth-grade students, particularly when combined with authentic, communicative tasks; students became more focused and active, and were better at working out unfamiliar words. Wahyuni (2013) reported that authentic materials delivered through pictures on PowerPoint slides raised both reading comprehension and student involvement, with the mean score rising from 59.6 in the pre-test to 70 in the post-test. Kristianti (2017) found a significant difference between high- and low-proficiency students taught with authentic material, and positive perceptions of authentic material in both groups.

The present study differs from these three. Desitarahmi used mixed methods, Wahyuni a quantitative design, and Kristianti collected students' summaries on a theme drawn from objects around them. This study is purely qualitative and uses classroom observations and a questionnaire to describe how short stories were used and perceived.

RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research design

This study used a qualitative method, in which the inquirer makes knowledge claims based mainly on constructivist perspectives (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative design suited the aim of giving insight into the process of using short stories as authentic materials in a real classroom. The data were collected in a natural setting: observations took place in the classroom, where participants could behave naturally and interact with their classmates.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 20 eleventh-grade students (10 girls and 10 boys) of SMA Gajah Mada Bandar Lampung, selected from 123 eleventh-grade students. Purposive sampling was used, which means deliberately selecting individuals in order to understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The students were chosen because they performed well in English: the reading test results shown by their English teacher placed them highest of all the classes.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments were used.

- **Classroom observation** over two meetings, recorded with an observation sheet (a narrative summary of the main events), field notes, photographs, and video and voice

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recordings. The researcher acted as the observer and also taught the lessons, so the recordings allowed her to review each lesson repeatedly after the observation.

- **Questionnaire** of 20 statements on the students' perceptions of learning to read with short stories as authentic materials, scored on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA, 5), Agree (A, 4), Neutral (N, 3), Disagree (D, 2), and Strongly Disagree (SD, 1). Statement 6 was negatively worded, so its scoring was reversed.

3.4 Procedure

At the first meeting, the researcher introduced short stories as authentic material. She asked the students about their backgrounds and interests, explained authentic materials, and gave them short story texts. While the students read, she asked them about the verbs they found, checked the meanings in a dictionary, pronounced the words correctly with the class, and taught some cultural aspects of the target language through the stories. The material was an audio-visual short story, *Hansel and Gretel*.

At the second meeting, the researcher reviewed the short stories, their linguistic features and generic structure, and the aspects of reading comprehension. The students read a printed short story, *The Boy and the Wolves; or, The Broken Promise* (from *The Yellow Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang), and identified its generic structure and language features. Comprehension questions were displayed on a PowerPoint slide; the students wrote their answers on paper and discussed them in groups. Each group then read the text in front of the class and explained the characters, the events, and the conclusion of the story. The questionnaire was completed by the 20 students.

3.5 Data analysis and verification

The data were analyzed in three phases following Miles et al. (2014). In *data reduction*, the large and complex data from the observations and the questionnaire were selected and simplified with the research question in mind, and unrelated data were set aside. In *data display*, the reduced data were organized in descriptive form, so that conclusions could be drawn. In *conclusion drawing and verification*, tentative conclusions were drawn once the data had been collected and checked continuously for validity.

Trustworthiness was checked with methodological triangulation (Moleong, 2006): the findings of the classroom observations were compared with those of the questionnaire.

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FINDINGS

4.1 Classroom observations

First meeting. The researcher used an audio-visual short story as authentic material, chosen because it carried cultural information and included colloquial words that people use in real life. Although short stories are mostly fictional, they remain relevant to real life because their sources partly come from human experience. The lesson therefore concentrated on finding new words and words used in everyday society.

Second meeting. The students read a printed short story and answered four comprehension questions on paper before discussing them in groups. Four students' answers, one for each question, show the level of understanding they reached:

- *What was the story about?* Student 1 wrote a coherent summary in her or his own words: a gentle hunter, tired of the wickedness of people, moves with his family to a secluded place, and as he is dying asks his two eldest children never to abandon their youngest brother.
- *Why did they leave their tribe and live in the forest?* Student 2 explained that the hunter was tired of the betrayal and cruelty of people who had once been his friends, which shows an understanding of the characters' motive.
- *What happened to the younger brother left alone in the forest?* Student 3 followed the order of events with details from the story: the boy first survived on leftovers, then gathered berries and roots, hid in the trees when the snow came, and in the end made friends with the wolf.
- *What is the moral message of the story?* Student 4 wrote that the story teaches people how to be better persons, which goes beyond the plot and links the story to values.

The observations produced three findings.

1. **The stories attracted the students' attention to reading.** The students concentrated on the text and looked happy while reading. The class became quiet while they read and lively during discussion.
2. **The stories supported vocabulary learning.** In the first meeting the students still found it difficult to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. In the second meeting they discussed unfamiliar words in pairs and then shared their findings with the whole class. After repeating this activity, they remembered words commonly used in short stories more easily.
3. **The classroom became livelier.** Across the two meetings the students were more enthusiastic about reading, recognized the type of text they were reading more readily,

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and took an active part in class discussion. Almost all of them shared ideas and answered the researcher's questions with enthusiasm.

4.2 Questionnaire results

Table 1 reports the responses of the 20 students. Because there were 20 respondents, each student represents 5% of the responses.

Table 1. Students' responses to the questionnaire (% of 20 respondents).

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA + A
1	Using short stories as authentic materials improves my reading comprehension.	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%	100%
2	Short stories as authentic materials use informal words that can develop my new vocabulary in real life.	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%	100%
3	Using short stories as authentic materials makes it easier for me to learn English reading.	25%	65%	10%	0%	0%	90%
4	Using short stories as authentic materials, I find it easier to remember new vocabulary in reading activities.	10%	80%	10%	0%	0%	90%
5	The teacher gives short stories as authentic materials, which is fun.	10%	85%	5%	0%	0%	95%
6	Using short stories as authentic materials in reading makes learning to read difficult for me.	0%	10%	5%	80%	5%	–

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No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA + A
7	I agree that authentic materials should be used as a regular activity in classroom learning.	25%	60%	10%	5%	0%	85%
8	Reading short stories as authentic materials improves my reading comprehension.	30%	60%	10%	0%	0%	90%
9	Through authentic materials, it is easier for me to understand the contents of the short story text.	25%	70%	5%	0%	0%	95%
10	Using short stories as authentic materials in reading makes the classroom more enthusiastic.	15%	80%	5%	0%	0%	95%
11	Using authentic materials, I understand the contents of the text better because of the interesting topic of the story.	15%	85%	0%	0%	0%	100%
12	Reading short stories as authentic materials helps me practice reading skills such as scanning and skimming.	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%	100%
13	Using short stories as authentic materials makes me concentrate more on reading and analyzing the contents of the story.	20%	75%	5%	0%	0%	95%
14	Reading using short stories as authentic materials has a positive impact on the development of my reading skills.	15%	80%	5%	0%	0%	95%

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No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA + A
15	The activity of reading short stories as authentic materials creates fun, competitive, and memorable learning to read English.	45%	45%	10%	0%	0%	90%
16	Using authentic materials, I can easily understand the storyline.	30%	65%	5%	0%	0%	95%
17	The activity of reading short stories as authentic materials makes me even more enthusiastic about learning in class.	25%	65%	10%	0%	0%	90%
18	With the help of audio-visual elements in short stories as authentic materials, I feel excited about reading comprehension of the text.	35%	60%	5%	0%	0%	95%
19	Reading short stories as authentic materials enhances my enjoyment.	35%	60%	5%	0%	0%	95%
20	During the class process of reading short stories as authentic materials, I like and enjoy them.	50%	40%	5%	5%	0%	90%

Note. SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neutral, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree. Statement 6 is negatively worded, so disagreement (D + SD = 85%) is the favorable response.

Across the 19 positively worded statements, agreement (SA + A) ranged from 85% (Statement 7) to 100% (Statements 1, 2, 11, and 12), with an average of about 94%. The results group into four themes:

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- **Comprehension.** All students agreed that short stories improved their reading comprehension (Statement 1), and 90% to 95% agreed that the stories were easier to understand and that the storyline was easy to follow (Statements 3, 8, 9, and 16). All students also agreed that interesting topics helped them understand the text better (Statement 11).
- **Vocabulary and reading skills.** All students agreed that the informal, everyday wording helped them pick up vocabulary (Statement 2), and 90% found new words easier to remember (Statement 4), although only 10% agreed strongly. All students agreed that the stories gave practice in scanning and skimming (Statement 12), and 95% reported a positive impact on their reading skills (Statement 14).
- **Motivation and enjoyment.** Between 90% and 95% agreed that the lessons were fun, enthusiastic, and enjoyable (Statements 5, 10, 13, 15, 17, 19, and 20). Statements 15 and 20 drew the strongest agreement (45% and 50% strongly agreed), and 95% said the audio-visual elements made them more excited about reading (Statement 18).
- **Difficulty and regular use.** Eighty-five percent disagreed that short stories make learning to read difficult (Statement 6), while 10% agreed and 5% were neutral. The same share, 85%, supported making authentic materials a regular classroom activity (Statement 7); this was the lowest level of agreement, and one student disagreed.

DISCUSSION

The two sources of data point in the same direction. In the observations, the students became more attentive and active from the first meeting to the second: they read more willingly, discussed in pairs and groups, and answered questions about the plot, the characters' motives, and the moral of the story. In the questionnaire, the students themselves reported the same engagement, with an average of about 94% agreement across the positively worded statements. Because the two methods agree, the findings are more trustworthy, in line with the methodological triangulation described in the method section.

The findings are consistent with the benefits of authentic materials discussed in the literature. Authentic texts expose students to real language in a real context, which prepares them better for reading in the real world than the controlled language of a classroom text (Rao, 2019; Beresova, 2015). The students' report that the informal words in the stories helped them with vocabulary in real life (Statement 2) fits this view, and it agrees with Dersi (2013) and Adyana (2016), who connect short stories with vocabulary development. The practical length of the stories, which could be read and discussed within a lesson, also made them easy to use in

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class (Dersi, 2013; Irene, 2015).

The results also resemble those of earlier studies. Desitarahmi (2013) and Wahyuni (2013) found that authentic materials made students more active and more involved in reading lessons, and Kristianti (2017) found positive perceptions of learning through authentic material. The attention and enthusiasm observed here, and the positive perceptions reported in the questionnaire, are in line with those results. The audio-visual form of the first story seems to have added to the effect, since 95% of the students said it made them more excited about reading (Statement 18).

Several limits should be kept in mind. The study involved only 20 high-achieving students from one school, observed only two meetings, and relied on qualitative data and students' self-reports. It did not use a pre-test and post-test, so it describes how short stories worked in this particular class and cannot show that they improved students' reading scores. The findings should not be generalized without further research. In addition, the one negatively worded statement drew more varied answers than the others (10% agreed that short stories make reading difficult), and one student disagreed that authentic materials should become a regular activity (Statement 7). This suggests that a small number of students may need additional support when working with authentic texts.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Audio-visual and printed short stories suited this eleventh-grade class well as authentic materials. The observations showed that the students paid closer attention, took part more actively, and showed understanding of the plot, the characters' motives, and the moral value of the stories as the lessons went on. The questionnaire supported this: on average about 94% of the responses to the positively worded statements were "agree" or "strongly agree", and 85% of the students disagreed that short stories make learning to read difficult. Authentic materials also let students see the context in which a foreign language is used, and feel that they are part of the reality and culture of the language they are learning.

For English teachers. Authentic materials such as short stories are recommended for teaching short functional texts and improving students' reading comprehension, because they represent real language used in real life and attract students' interest. Teachers should choose materials that relate to students' daily lives, such as local materials, so that the texts are easier to understand, and should provide clear printed texts that students can read without difficulty.

For future researchers. Similar studies should select authentic materials carefully and match them to the students' level. They could include more meetings, participants of different

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proficiency levels, and a measure of reading achievement, so that the effect of short stories on reading comprehension can be examined more fully.

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