


## Teaching Short Stories in the EFL Classroom: Myanmar Context

Nilar Win<sup>1\*</sup> , Mary<sup>2</sup> , Htun Win<sup>3</sup> , Wilai Phiewma<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>1968nilarwin@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7011-460X>

<sup>2</sup>dawmary4@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6126-8030>

<sup>3</sup>tunwin.english@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6724-7487>

<sup>4</sup>Wilaiph@live.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2803-4523>

**\*Corresponding Author:** Nilar Win 



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### Abstract

This quantitative and qualitative research investigates the use of short stories in the EFL classroom. It examined students' general attitudes towards using short stories in the EFL classroom. Moreover, it evaluated if short stories enhance learners' language skills, develop their personal reflection and facilitate their cultural tolerance. The study included second year to fourth year students of English specialization enrolled in the academic year 2018-2019 in selected Universities. The number of the questionnaire filled was 135 students where eighty percent of the respondents are females and the rest are males. The results showed that students held positive attitudes towards using short stories in the EFL classes. In this research, students proved that they have neutral opinion on contribution of short story-based language teaching towards atmosphere of the classroom. It means that it may sooner or later change that short stories can be used for developing language

skills, cultural knowledge, and personal development. Teachers' responses to the interview questions also prove that using literature in the language classroom is vital and recommended. Thus, this research shows that using literature in language teaching is beneficial as it motivated students, enhanced critical thinking skills and led to developing linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness.

**Keywords:** EFL, Student's listening problems, Strategies for listening comprehension.

## Introduction

Teaching literary works in the language classroom have various valuable advantages to the EFL learners in relation to language, self-motivation, critical thinking and culture. Also, teaching literature can be encouraging, enjoyable and interesting to EFL learners. Learners, therefore, become more creative, tolerant to other culture and this led to their personal and intellectual round ability, and open-mindedness. According to Sage (1987: 43), the world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives. Teaching short fiction enhances the development of imagination, creativity and self-awareness among EFL students.

## Literature Review

### *1. Opportunities for Educational, Intellectual, Cultural and Linguistic Development by Using Short Stories in the EFL Classroom*

Using short stories in the EFL classroom exposes learners to distinctive opportunities for educational, intellectual, cultural and linguistic development. Short story is considered as one of the literary genres that can be used in the EFL classroom to enhance language skill, motivate students, and increase their cultural awareness and tolerance. King (2001) concludes that short stories can be utilized as engines, and a powerful and motivating

source for assisting learners consolidate and practice language (grammar, diction). Similarly, Ellis and Brewster (1991, pp. 1-2) emphasize that “as stories are motivating and fun, they can help students develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language and enrich their learning experiences”. Lazar (1993) believes that exposing learners to literature provides them with memorable syntactical or lexical items. Moreover, it also encourages learners to make predictions, inferences and draw conclusions about actions, behaviors of character and ends of literary works.

## *2. Benefits of Utilizing Short Stories in the Language Classroom*

Several studies discussed the importance of using literary genres in the EFL classroom. Khatib and Rahimi (2012) explore and illustrate the benefits of utilizing such genres in the language classroom such as authenticity, language enhancement, personal development, critical thinking and cultural awareness. Thiagarajan (2014, pp.5-6) stated that “Reading short stories motivates the students not only to develop their reading skill, but also their imaginative thinking skill.” He added that reading skill enables learners “to speak the language in a more imaginative way and to discuss everyone’s perspectives.” According to him, “reading of short stories not only mirrors and illuminates human lives but also improves the learners’ communicative competences”.

### *2.1 Language Enhancement*

Short stories are the best opportunities where learners are exposed to authentic material that is genuine and not distorted. As Collie and Slater (1987, p.6) explain that “students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on. Brumfit (1987, p.184) asserts that “literature provides us with a convenient source of content for a course in a foreign language”. According to him, it could provide motivational and communicative material. Tasneen (2010, p.2) explained that learners are exposed to real, authentic usage of language in literary

texts; these texts show them a variety of styles, registers and language learning materials at several stages of difficulty. Learners' exposure to great number of authentic materials increases their sensitivity to and competence in the target language. He added that popular materials such as short stories have been found most appealing because of their realistic, ready-to-use language and relevance to learners' mindsets and experiences. Learners' exposure to authentic material will prompt the process of natural language acquisition (Hwang, 2005). Literary texts contribute to language skills enhancement as they are ideal tools for intensive and extensive reading approaches. Collie and Slater (1987, p.7) mention certain benefits that learners can gain when tackling literary texts. For example, learners are exposed to "a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Moreover, learners can develop their "ability to make inferences from linguistic clues and deduce meaning from context". Learners' exposure to short stories will help them gain new vocabulary and encourage them to guess their meaning. Povey (1967, p.41) suggests that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax." McKay (1982, p.530) clarifies that "literature presents language in discourse in which the parameters of the setting and the role relationships are defined." She explains that since language is best understood within a social context, literature is the ideal environment for developing awareness for language use.

## *2.2 Personal Growth and Reflection*

Short stories play a vital role in the development and the growth of the personal experience of learners and their reflection on life through literature and through reading, analyzing, and appreciating. Carter & Long (1991) stated that literary genres encourage intellectual development and personal growth simultaneously. Tasneen (2010, p.2) testified that "reading literature is more likely to provide the students with opportunity for reflection and personal growth." Furthermore, Violetta-Irene (2015, p.3), noted that reading literature effectively will enhance the growth of learners in addition

to helping them in establishing stronger relationships with their surroundings. It is worth mentioning that personal growth of learners depends to a certain extent on the quality of the literary texts and the experience and depth of understanding from the side of the instructor. As Violetta-Irene (2015, p.3) mentioned in her article that encouraging individual growth necessitates that “the teacher has to select texts to which students can respond and to which they can use their ideas and imagination creatively.”

### *2.3 Cultural Enrichment*

Short stories enhance and enlighten learners' knowledge of the native culture of the learned stories. In order to get better understanding of this aspect, the literary text will not be a translation of a literary work into English. This genre provides the opportunity for learners to explore the various cultural aspects and to see the similarities as well as the differences between their culture and the cultures exposed through their reading. King (2001) believes that short stories are important as they enhance certain values and beliefs.

### *3. Statement of the Problems*

Some teachers decline teaching short stories because they believe that short stories may include linguistic difficulty or cultural complexity or both. This research aims to demonstrate that short stories have the potential of enriching students' language skills, enhancing their motivation, and increasing their cultural sensitivity and awareness. Furthermore, through using short stories, students are exposed to opportunities that enable them to express their thoughts and feelings, thus developing their personal reflection. The researchers' aim is to examine students' attitude towards using short stories and to explore with them how using short stories can achieve the above-mentioned points.

## Research Objectives

This quantitative and qualitative research aims to shed light on EFL learners' attitudes towards using short stories in EFL classroom and exploring certain practical applications for selected short stories in the classroom. The purposes of the study are as follows:

1. To Evaluate if short stories enhance learners' language skills, develop their personal reflection and facilitate their cultural tolerance, and
2. To examine teachers' general attitudes towards using short stories in the EFL classroom.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

This is a quantitative and qualitative study. The present section discusses the population, research instrument, procedure, developing the questionnaire and its reliability, selecting a short story and using it in a language classroom. Keeping in mind, that the length of the short story is suitable to be discussed in two class meetings.

### 2. Population and Samples

Table 1

*Demographic Data of English Teachers (n=33)*

SN	Variables	Number (%)
1. Gender	Male	26%
	Female	74%
2. Literature teaching experience	1 to 5 years	51%
	6 to 10 years	23%
	11+ years	26%

Table 1 shows that 74% of the teachers were females and the rest were males. Regarding literature teaching experience, around 51% of the teacher participants have 1 to 5 years, 23% 6 to 10 years and 26% of them have more than 11 years.

Table 2

*Demographic Data of English Specialization Students (n=135)*

SN	Variables		Number (%)
1.	Gender	Male	20%
		Female	80%
2.	Years of study	Second Year	32%
		Third Year	26%
		Fourth Year	42%

Second year to fourth year students of English specialization enrolled in the academic year 2018-2019 participated in this research. Table 2 shows that 80% of the students were females and the rest were males. Regarding their year of study, around 32% of the students were in their second year of study, 26% in their third year and 42% of them in their fourth year.

### *3. Research Instruments and Procedures*

Based on the literature review, the researchers developed a questionnaire with the aim of examining the learners' attitudes towards using short stories in the EFL classroom. The questionnaire comprised two parts: Part one covers demographic information: gender, and specialization; while the second part of the questionnaire includes 17 statements using Likert's 5-point scale, (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree).

### *4. Data Collection*

Students were advised to put a tick in the appropriate box which best represents their attitudes towards using short stories in the EFL class. The items were structured according to three dimensions: language skills, personal reflection and culture. Short story-based language teaching classroom that comprises of pre-reading, while-reading and post reading assignments for the students.

## 5. Data Analysis

The average scores of the factors and the problem criteria with five-rating Likert's scale were used to analyze the data as follows:

4.51	-	5.00	means	strongly agree
3.51	-	4.50	means	agree
2.51	-	3.50	means	neutral
1.51	-	2.50	means	disagree
1.00	-	1.50	means	strongly disagree

## Results

The purpose of this research is to focus on the effectiveness of using short stories in language instruction. Some English teachers may think that teaching EFL is just to focus on linguistic benefits only and eventually their learners will communicate in the target language. On the other hand, teachers who have tried to accumulate literature in the curricula have observed that literary texts add a new dimension to the teaching of EFL. Short stories, for example, come to a great help for learners to learn the four skills-reading, writing, speaking and listening. In addition, with short stories, teachers can motivate learners to learn some literary aspects, cultural awareness and can make them think critically.

### *1. Students' Responses towards Benefits of Utilizing Short Stories in the Language Classroom*

To see the attitudes of students pertaining to the use of the short stories and the development of the language skills, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to this issue.

#### *1.1 Language Enhancement*

It is important to point out that utilizing short stories in the EFL classroom enhances almost all the language skills of the learners. Research question



one: Can short stories develop learners' language skills, personal reflection and cultural understanding / tolerance?

Table 3

*The Students' General Attitude Towards the Use of Short Stories Due to Language Skills (Source: Hwang, 2005) (n=135)*

SN	Language Skills	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Meaning
1.	Short stories enhance reading skills.	135	3.87	1.15	Agree
2.	Short stories strengthen writing skills.	135	3.76	1.19	Agree
3.	Short stories improve speaking skills.	135	3.09	1.43	Neutral
4.	Short stories are one of the main resources of vocabulary acquisition.	135	2.89	1.51	Neutral
5.	Short stories enrich critical thinking skills.	135	3.52	1.32	Agree
6.	Short stories develop social/ communication skills.	135	3.08	1.44	Neutral
Average			3.37	1.34	Neutral

Based on table 3, respondents agree that the short stories enhance reading skills ( $M=3.87$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ), followed by strengthening writing skills ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) and critical thinking skills ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ), respectively. The findings show that the students' general attitude towards the use of short stories due to language skills is neutral level ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ). The data suggest that the activities that teachers develop help learners to acquire language unconsciously. Consequently, they state that stories are the most valuable resource for helping learners in acquiring a language as they offer them a world of supported meaning that they can relate to and can be used to help learners practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Table 3 presents the results arranged according to the highest means. The table reveals the items that are related to reading comprehension, vocabulary building, and enriching critical thinking skills got the highest means. One of the main advantages for using short stories is that they offer authentic material which appeals to the taste, interests, and liking of learners in the reading and discussion process (Shrestha, 2008). They discuss and reflect human experiences (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 15). One of the fundamental characteristics of the communicative approach is that learners should be exposed to authentic materials and extensive reading activities. Thus, "a literary text is authentic text, real language in context, to

which we can respond directly” (Brumfit & Carter, 1987, p. 15). They add that “Literary texts provide examples of language resources being used to the full, and the reader is placed in active interactional role working with and making sense of this language.” In this regard, learners respond to texts intended for native speakers and they are exposed to actual language samples of real-life experience, so they become familiar with many different linguistic approaches, communicative functions and meanings.

### *1.2 Personal Growth and Reflection*

To see the attitudes of students concerning the use of the short stories and the development of the personal reflections, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to this dimension. Table 3 illustrates the calculated mean of items and their standard deviation appears for the personal reflections subject.

Table 4

*The Students’ Responses Towards the Use of Short Stories Due to the Development of the Personal Reflections (Source: Hwang, 2005) (n=135)*

SN	Items on Questionnaire	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Meaning
1.	Short stories enhance imagination.	135	3.86	1.09	Agree
2.	Short stories make the learning process interesting.	135	3.34	1.30	Neutral
3.	Short stories enhance creativity.	135	3.28	1.26	Neutral
4.	Short stories motivate learners to reflect upon their views.	135	3.52	1.28	Agree
5.	Short stories make the learning process authentic.	135	3.05	1.21	Neutral
6.	Short stories enhance empathy.	135	2.97	1.17	Neutral
7.	Short stories enhance self-esteem.	135	2.73	1.17	Neutral
	Average		3.34	1.22	Neutral

From the table 4, the findings reveal that the students’ responses towards the use of short stories due to the enhancing imagination are (M=3.86, SD= 1.09) which indicated positive level. The short stories can make the students interested in their learning process (M=3.34, SD=1.30) but highly motivate to reflect upon their views (M=3.52, SD= 1.28). Table 4 presents the results

arranged according to the highest means. As the table reveals the items that are related to enhancing imagination, making the learning process interesting and enhancing creativity got the highest means within the personal reflection's domain. It should be noted that item number 1, enhancing imagination, has the highest mean score within the whole questionnaire. It is worth noting the learners can benefit to a large extent in relationship to their personal reflection when using short stories and literature in general. This is in line with several studies (Tasneen, 2010; Violetta-Irene, 2015). Literature helps students write more effectively and creatively. On the other hand, the items that are related to enhancing empathy and self-esteem got the least mean score within the personal reflection framework.

### *1.3 Cultural Understanding/ Tolerance*

To see the attitudes of the students pertaining to the use of the short stories and the development of the Cultural Understanding/tolerance, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to this dimension: Table 4 reveals the calculated mean of items and their standard deviation which appear for the cultural understanding/tolerance perception.

Table 5

*The Students' Responses Towards the Use of Short Stories Due to Cultural Understanding/ Tolerance (Source: Hwang, 2005) (n=135)*

SN	Items on Questionnaire	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Meaning
1.	Short stories enlighten students' knowledge about other cultures.	135	3.66	1.20	Agree
2.	Short stories assist students to accept different backgrounds and cultures.	135	3.22	1.29	Neutral
3.	Short stories encourage students to tolerate cultural differences.	135	3.48	1.35	Neutral
4.	Short stories help the development of intercultural sensitivity.	135	3.19	1.22	Neutral
Average			3.39	1.26	Neutral

For the overall mean of table 5, the students' responses towards the use of short stories due to cultural understanding / tolerance is neutral level ( $M=3.48$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ). They highly agree ( $M=3.66$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) that short stories enlighten students' knowledge about other cultures. Their responses show about acceptance of different backgrounds and cultures ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ) and the development of intercultural sensitivity ( $M=3.19$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ). Table 5 presents the results arranged according to the highest means. As the table reveals, item number 1 (Short stories enlighten students' knowledge about other cultures) got the highest means within the cultural understanding/tolerance domain. It is vital to point out that learners are positive recipient to cultural differences and understanding through using short stories. This is in an agreement with several studies that suggested that the primary appeal of using short stories and the major value lie in its cultural content. On the other hand, item number 4 (Short stories help the development of intercultural sensitivity) got the least score within the cultural/tolerance issue.

## *2. The General Attitude of Language Teachers towards Short Stories*

The study was conducted on a course of "literature in the language classroom" during the academic year 2018-2019. One of the objectives of this course is to expose enrolled students to reading, understanding and analyzing short stories in order to enhance their interpretative skills and to improve their language and to expose them to other cultures. In order to demonstrate how short stories can be used in the EFL classroom, students were given in class and out of class assignment to work on over a period of one week. Students were divided into groups; each group has five students. They were given a short story. The researcher chose this story as it has a universal theme that can help students to reflect on the events and to relate on their own experiences. The aim was to encourage students to develop their own response, while enjoying reading the story.

Research question two: What is the general attitude of language teachers pertaining to the use of the short stories in the EFL classrooms?

In order to obtain teachers' opinion concerning the use of short story, each participant was interviewed to confirm the findings obtained from the student questionnaire. Content analysis of responses revealed that the use of short stories acted as a useful vehicle to practice specific language, both grammar and vocabulary, effectively and meaningfully. Below are teachers' response excerpts: (slightly edited for grammatical correctness).

### *2.1 Teacher Interview (n=33)*

According to King (2001) using short stories may offer solution to such problems, it provides a relax atmosphere and creates enjoyment as well as fun. Hence, in the present study, data collection tools were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data in order to address the research questions.

Table 6

*Interview Responses of the Teacher Participants on Contribution of Short Story-Based Language Teaching Towards Atmosphere of the Classroom (Source: King, 2001) (n=33)*

SN	Discussion Items	Sample Responses
(i)	Can short stories develop learners' language skills?	<p>These activities help students develop their language skills, critical thinking skills and cultural awareness as they read and interact with the story. Students will also become more familiar with the major features of short stories as a literary form.</p> <p>Although the use of literature is beneficial to students, some objections may be raised against its use due to overcrowded classes, overloaded syllabus and limited time. These are, of course, important problems met in Myanmar. Nevertheless, literary works should be included in the syllabus of teaching English when we think of the advantages of using literature in classroom.</p>
(ii)	Can short stories develop learners' personal growth and reflection?	<p>Since it is short, and aims at giving a 'single effect', there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. So, it is easy for the students to follow the story line of the work. The aim of using short story in teaching English is to encourage the students to use what they have previously learnt, and therefore, it is a student-centered teaching.</p> <p>Among literary forms, short story seems to be the most suitable one to develop learners' personal growth and reflection by using in the classroom.</p>

Table 6 (Continued)

(iii) Can short stories develop learners' cultural understanding/tolerance?	<p>Culture seeks to represent how the world is constructed and makes sense of its construction and language is the most signifying system that vehicles this representation. Thus, language and stories are worth studying in culture studies.</p> <hr/> <p>We have the responsibility to help students to develop cognitive skills because everyone needs to “make judgments, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, evaluate, predict, and apply knowledge.”</p> <hr/> <p>Stories are an opportunity to explore the norms, values and customs of a society, they lead us to grasp how any society makes sense of the world and shape meaning through language and narratives.</p>
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Teachers' interview responses confirm that as stories are motivating and fun, they can help students develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language and enrich their learning experiences. Furthermore, stories encourage participation and student-centered learning; students may interact with each story through a series of activities. Finally, stories are flexible in that they may be suitable for all types and different levels of students.

## Discussion

Learners like short stories. There is a rationale for teaching them to develop language skills and cultural knowledge. According to Cameron, (2001, p.159) short stories offer “holistic approach to language teaching and learning that places a high premium on children's involvement with rich, authentic uses of the foreign language.” The results of this study revealed that students believe that using short stories in the EFL classroom is beneficial in enhancing the language skills, personal development and reflection and cultural understanding and tolerance. Moreover, it is demonstrated through this study how short stories can be used in the language classroom.

According to the students' use of short stories, it can be proved that they have neutral opinion on contribution of short story-based language teaching

towards atmosphere of the classroom. It means that it may sooner or later change that short stories can be used for developing language skills, cultural knowledge, and personal development. It is apparent, in this research that participants reacted positively to the story in their response. Teachers' responses to the interview questions prove that using literature in the language classroom is vital and recommended. According to them, integration of literature into the curriculum is advocated to improve students' language skills, their communicative and cultural competence, and enhance their personal growth and reflection. Thus, this research shows that using literature in language teaching is beneficial as it motivated students, enhanced critical thinking skills and led to developing linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness.

## Recommendations

This research will have invaluable benefits to several beneficiaries. First, Myanmar HEIs certainly will be informed and invited to share the discussion of the recommendations of this research and is encouraged to apply the findings in its institutions. In addition, graduate students whose research and goal are to be future university instructors will be given the opportunity to attend the discussion and the recommendation. The final target beneficiaries are university language teachers of different Myanmar universities.

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