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# Students' intrinsic perspectives on the diverse functions of short stories beyond language learning<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The short story as literary genre has been used productively for language learning, and much pedagogic research has emphasized the language learning functions of short stories in English foreign language (EFL) contexts. While the language learning function appears to be a natural extension of reading short stories, they may also perform other functions in English language teaching (ELT). The objective of this study was to establish what functions EFL students intrinsically (i.e., without pedagogic intervention) attributed to short stories when the stories were assigned as supplementary reading to the main language-teaching syllabus. To support the objective, a qualitative survey was conducted to collect rich data from a total population purposive sample (N = 55). Through a thematic analysis, the following four principal themes were identified that account for the functions of short stories: language, thinking, gratification, and pedagogy. Subthemes illuminated the nature of the main themes and provided possible causes and effects of their intrinsic recognition by EFL students. The main contributions include the expansion of existing theory regarding the use of short stories for ELT and a conceptualization of literature-based actualization as plausible pedagogic paradigm. The study concludes with a reflection on methodological lucidity and future research directions.

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## 1. Introduction

Literature (i.e., poetry, fiction, prose, and drama) has long been appropriated for language instruction as its diachronic roots can be traced to classical pedagogy and the teaching of Greek and Latin. Since the beginning of the 19th century, the use of literary texts for language teaching has come to be associated with the grammar translation method (Celce-Murcia, 2001) that involves the translation of literary texts from the target language to the first language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Because grammar translation restricts language performance to the accurate reproduction of a literary text through the application of syntactical rules, language competence is limited to reading and writing skills; however, some language learning and intellectual growth through translation cannot be denied (Brown, 2007; Cook, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Over the years, the use of literary texts has become less prominent in English language teaching (ELT) because of (1) the limitations of the grammar translation method as a non-communicative pedagogy (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011); (2) the notion that literature is especially convoluted and thus inaccessible to language learners (Savvidou, 2004); and (3) the proliferation of alternative contemporary pedagogic approaches, such as the direct method and

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the communicative approach (Celce-Murcia, 2001). The unremitting emphasis on functionality and efficiency may have displaced literary texts in language pedagogy during the 1940s through 1960s (Carter, 2007); however, the survival of the use of literature in ELT during the proliferation of communicative language pedagogy in the 1970s through 1980s signifies that literary texts may extend beyond the application of methods and approaches and that the benefits of using short stories today are indeed recognized as functional and efficient.

The present study endeavors to consider the functionality of short stories relatively independent from the diachronic pedagogic influences on ELT. This is achieved through a research objective that determines what functions English foreign language (EFL) students intrinsically attribute to short stories. These intrinsic attributions manifested in the absence of explicit pedagogic instruction because short stories were assigned merely as supplementary reading to the main language-teaching syllabus. In light of the diachronic overview and research objective, a focused research question was formulated: What functions do EFL students attribute to reading short stories in the language-learning context when ELT is not emphasized through the teaching methodology?

The conceptualization of the research question was significantly influenced by pedagogic assumptions and methodological choices of previous research studies conducted in comparable EFL contexts. A brief reflective analysis of these pedagogic assumptions and methodological choices motivates and justifies the conceptualization of the present study and its research design.

Firstly, ELT scholarship commonly investigates the benefits of short stories when they are used for explicit pedagogic purposes and/or when they are an integral part of the syllabus (see Kim & Na, 2015; Mason & Krashen, 1997). Shukri and Mukundan (2015) suggest that short stories are successful at instilling critical awareness in EFL students; however, the stories should be facilitated through effective questioning strategies, a variety of instructional approaches, learner motivation, and classroom interaction. It seems, therefore, that the benefits of short stories in ELT are profoundly dependent on the operationalization of efficient pedagogic approaches and teaching methodologies as conduits of teaching and learning. The present study challenges this claim as it involved short stories indirectly in the course only as supplementary reading with no explicit instruction, negligible student accountability, and no assumption of the benefits and disadvantages that students would attribute to or garner from reading short stories.

The second justification consists of three examples that emanate from the methodological choices of scholarship on the use of literary texts for ELT. Such choices do not always seem to support their research claims, or they predetermine research outcomes and thus distort the validity of findings. For example, Tseng's (2010) instructional method was teacher-moderated and included whole-class discussions that would have influenced individual student perspectives collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire. Consequently, how valid is the claim of presenting students' perceptions when the teacher partially moderated these perceptions? The present study attempted to circumvent this challenge through a non-interventionist teaching methodology to elicit students' unfettered responses.

In a second example, Kim and Na (2015) give voice to their students through an extensive, trustworthy qualitative method that involved recorded class discussions, reflective journals, and interviews. As a result, students' overwhelming positive response to short stories would also have been altered by virtue of their involved classroom teaching and mediating method. In addition, Kim and Na (2015) claim that students in their sample became more concerned with gender issues, especially women's inequalities, thus demonstrating critical literacy development. However, the short stories in their syllabus prioritize gender issues as six out of the seven stories address female inequality thus predetermining students' critical literary for gender issues (Kim & Na, 2015).

Finally, in another prominent example, Lao and Krashen (2000, p. 261) claim that EFL students majoring in translation in a "[...] popular literature class that emphasized reading for content and enjoyment, including some self-selected reading, made superior gains on measures of vocabulary and reading rate, when compared to [social science] students enrolled in a traditional academic skills class." While the benefits of reading popular literature and the quantitative method are credible, the findings of "superior gains" of the popular literature class in comparison with a traditional academic skills class are questioned. The characteristics of each class (i.e., literature versus academic skills) are methodologically predetermined to affirm the claim thus casting doubt on the validity of the findings on which the initial claim is based. The qualitative research design of the present study prioritized individual students' intrinsic perspectives on the functions of short stories with a non-interventionist teaching methodology and open-ended qualitative survey to circumvent a predetermined research outcome. While the pedagogic assumptions and methodological choices reviewed here motivate and justify the conceptualization of the present study, the literature review informs the theoretical underpinnings.

## 2. Review of the literature

To theorize the use of literature for pedagogic purposes, Carter and Long (1991) propose a renowned three-prong model consisting of cultural, personal growth, and language tenets. While the model is presented here as theoretical underpinning, it is also integrated with relevant ELT scholarship. In particular, attention is devoted to research stemming from EFL contexts to enlighten the present research context as the study unfolds.

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