
Analysing the Readability Level of the Short Stories Used in the IEEL Course

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Abstract

The short story as a literary work has been ubiquitously used to teach language and literature. However, not all short stories are appropriate and suitable to be used in the language-learning classroom. One of the aspects that should be considered in choosing short stories to teach language and literature is the readability level. The matching of appropriate text difficulty level to the readers' reading ability is crucial to inculcate an interest in reading and elicit comprehension. Derived from this rationale, this study aimed to investigate the readability level of short stories used in the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course (IEEL). Moreover, this study also attempted to analyse the students' perceptions of the short stories assigned to them to read in the IEEL course. In measuring the readability level, document analysis utilizing the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Formula was employed. To strengthen the data and ensure triangulation, 5 participants were purposely selected to be interviewed to explore their perspectives after reading those short stories. The results showed that 3 short stories namely *The Birthday Party*, *The Dead Men's Path*, and *Turning Thirty* were categorized as standard (63.1), fairly easy (74.4), and easy level (83.7) respectively. Lastly, further inquiries through semi-structured interviews found that the 5 participants were reported to have positive viewpoints after reading those short stories.

Keywords: EFL, perception, readability level, literature, short story

INTRODUCTION

Literary works have been ubiquitously used in the realm of English Language Learning. Of various literary genres which are offered, the short story is one of them. Short stories are commonly shorter and have fewer characters than novels (Anggitasari et al., 2020). Although a short story is shorter than a novel, previous research found that some learners encountered difficulties when reading a short story (Fauzi & Pratama, 2021; Janssen & Braaksma, 2018). The level of difficulty of a literary work can be measured. The level of a text to be understood and read based

on its inimitable structure by the reader is called readability. According to (Rahmatika, 2018), readability is concerned with the problem of matching between reader and text. A high readability level indicates that the content is difficult, while a low readability level indicates that the content is easy to read (Gopal et al., 2021). Readability level can be measured using metrics to estimate a 'level' and/or a readability score in the number of syllables in a sentence or the diversity of words in a short story. Measuring the readability level of specific content brings an essential role, (Srisunakrua & Chumworatayee, 2019) mentions that readability is concerned with ensuring that reading

content is appropriate for the target audience. The measurement results can decide whether the reading is too easy or too difficult for them. Thus, the text will match the students' level.

Measuring readability for language teachers is essential to do (Crossley et al., 2017; Ellis, 2017). The reason is that when having too difficult texts, students tend to avoid them and eventually get lazy to read them (Forta et al., 2017; Muhlis, 2017). Furthermore, when the texts are too easy, there is a big chance that students are not getting the meaning and goal of the texts as they get bored easily (Amendum et al., 2018; Krashen, 1987). The knowledge of measuring the readability level of literary works or texts is fundamental things for English teachers. Considering the works of English teachers related to many types of texts and literary works, English teachers need to consider the readability level of literary works and texts before applying them in the teaching and learning process in class (Gallagher et al., 2017; Odo, 2018). Furthermore, the ranking based on the readability scores is important, especially in developing graded reading materials that are suitable for the student's reading proficiency. The studies about the use of short stories in the learning process showed a positive direction. Students reported that their vocabulary was improved (Pérez & Alvira, 2017), their knowledge of foreign cultures was widened (Ribeiro, 2016), boosted their reading skills (Nasution, 2017; Prahesti et al., 2020). However, students' perspectives of the readability level of the short stories are rarely examined (Barzani, 2020; Hidayatillah & Zainil, 2020). In this study, the researchers want to investigate the students' perspectives regarding the student's interest and reading frequency, motivations, difficulties, and performances.

Some research on readability has been conducted to explore the readability of textbooks, examination questions, and other similar texts. One of the examples was research conducted by (Lendo, Liando, & Olli, 2020) that analysed the text in English National Examination at the Junior High School level. Through the research of 8 texts in the English national examination, the researchers found that only 2 reading texts were suitable for them. Another research, conducted by (Mufida, Laksono, & Yuwana, 2018) investigated the readability level of Indonesian folklore with students in grade VI as the participants and concluded that there were only two stories that were considered readable and understandable for them. Another similar study was also conducted by (Sujatna, Risargarniwa, & Sopian, 2017) that

analysed the lexical density and grammatical intricacy of English textbooks for students in grade X. Furthermore, (Hakim, Setyaningsih, & Cahyaningrum, 2021) in their study suggested that teachers needed to double-check the reading appropriateness and levels for their students. From some of this previous research, there was still little research that analysed the readability level of a short story as a literary text.

There are a lot of readability formulas that can be utilized, one of which is the Flesch Reading Ease formula. The Flesch Reading Ease formula is a direct method for determining a reader's grade level and the difficulty level of a reading text written in English. It necessitates counting the number of words per phrase (in a sample of 100 words) and the number of syllables in one hundred words. It assigns a 100-point scale to texts, with the greater the score, the easier the material is to comprehend (DuBay, 2004). The results of the previous study showed the use of these readability formulas has the advantage of providing a solid figure on the text difficulty. Therefore, teaching and learning practices can be designed in a way that is appropriate to student's level of language ability, interests, prior knowledge, and cultural background to engage them during literature lessons (Gopal et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the readability level of the short stories also influences students' perceptions of those stories and their performance (Pardede, 2021). Perception can be defined as the process by which organisms interpret and organize sensations to produce a meaningful experience of the world (Lindsay & Norman, 1977). (Pardede, 2021) argued that there is a close link between students' perceptions and achievement since their perceptions will determine the amount of effort that they will invest which eventually lead to the quality of their performance. Previous research exploring students' perception of the use of short stories pinpoint that short stories enabled the students to have flexible, imaginative thinking as they were emotionally invested and were drawn to develop empathy with the characters of the story (Goldsmith, 2016). Furthermore, the use of short stories encouraged the students to build connectedness, enhance critical thinking, and improve metacognitive ability as they also learned how each character responded and solve problems (Rodríguez-Guardado & Gaeta, 2021). From the students' point of view, (Berrarbi & Bahous, 2018) found that positive attitudes were reported among the students as they developed positive cross-cultural awareness, feelings, and motivation in reading short stories. In conclusion,

the use of short stories is paramount for students to appreciate literary works, develop emotional and intellectual maturity, and acquire language proficiency.

Short stories as literary texts are used in one of the compulsory courses at a private university in Yogyakarta. The name of the course is Introduction to Educational English Literature. In this course, students are introduced to 3 different types of literary work, namely: poetry, drama, and prose in English. One of the prose categorizations is short stories. In this class, there are 3 short stories read by the students entitled *The Birthday Party* by Katherine Brush, *The Dead Men's Path* by Chinua Achebe, and *Turning Thirty* by Minfong Ho. By measuring the readability level, teachers and students will gain sufficient advantages from those three short stories. This action is related to the student's comprehension input in reading short stories (Krashen, 1987). Moreover, students' perceptions regarding the level of readability of the three short stories are crucial things to consider in choosing the appropriate and suitable learning materials. Therefore, the researchers try to formulate two research questions as follows: What are the readability levels of the short stories used in the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course?; How do the readability levels influence students' perception of the short stories used in the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course?

METHOD

In this study, three short stories used in the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course (IEELC) entitled *The Dead Men's Path* (1953) by Chinua Achebe, *The Birthday Party* (1946) by Katharine Brush, and *Turning Thirty* Story (2008) by Minfong Ho along with five undergraduate students enrolling in Educational English Literature Course academic year 2021/2022 were selected as the subjects of the research. Document analysis utilizing the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Formula (Kincaid et al., 1975 as stated in (DuBay, 2004) was used to analyse the readability level of the three short stories. Document analysis was employed as this research systematically analysed the contents of written documents to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, W. John & Creswell, 2018). Document analysis requires in-depth evaluation and interpretation to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Meanwhile, the semi-structured interview

adapted from (Barzani, 2020; Hidayatillah & Zainil, 2020) was used to explore students' perceptions of the short stories used in the EEL course. In analysing the data, this research used two readability formulas to identify the reading index of short stories. To begin, use the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease formula to determine readability (Kincaid et al., 1975, as stated in (DuBay, 2004) as follows:

$$206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right)$$

Next, the researcher used the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula. The Flesch Kincaid Grade Level is a well-known readability formula for determining a text's approximate reading grade level. The tests are based on the following mathematical formula:

$$0.39 \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$$

To acquire reliable results and eliminate human error, the researcher used Excel to count the two experiments. The researcher utilized an online counter to determine the total number of words, phrases, and syllables: The total words and sentences are tallied by www.textfixer.com, and the total syllables are counted by slylable-counter.net as a tool. The researcher contrasted the findings of computation with those acquired from the readability online counter after calculating the formulas. To test the accuracy of calculating the formula, the researcher used www.webfx.com. The calculation's findings will be compared to a table of the Flesch reading scores index.

Table 1. Flesch's Reading Ease Scores Index (adapted from (DuBay, 2004)

Reading ease	Score	Estimated reading grade
Very Easy	90 - 100	5th grade
Easy	80 - 89	6th grade
Fairly Easy	70 - 79	7th grade
Standard	60 - 69	8th and 9th grade
Fairly Difficult	50 - 59	10th - 12th grade
Difficult	30 - 49	13th - 16th grade
Very Difficult	0 - 29	College graduate

After eliciting the readability level of each short story, the researchers describe the results under descriptive qualitative. Furthermore, five undergraduate students consisting of four fema-

les and five females were selected using the purposive sampling method (Ary et al., 2010) to be interviewed. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and were analysed under the coding technique by identifying, coding, and interpreting the emergent salient themes (Creswell, 2002). Finally, the numerical and qualitative data were triangulated and elaborated to build robust and comprehensive findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Readability Levels of the Short Stories used in the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course

As mentioned by (DuBay, 2004) in his study about readability principles, a literary work can be examined based on its level of difficulty. In this part, the researchers would like to disclose three literary works' levels of difficulty based on the readability study. Those three literary works were in form of short stories. The short stories were entitled, *The Birthday Party* written by Katherine Brush, *The Dead Men's Path* written by Chinua Achebe, and *Turning Thirty* by Minfong Ho. As mentioned before in the method and data collection, these short stories were collected from the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course.

The analysis of three short stories began with retyping the short story in Microsoft Word. Those three short stories were retyped and from Microsoft Word, the researchers found the total words. Furthermore, according to (Gopal et al., 2021), there were three components that should be collected to conduct a readability level test and study of literary works using Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, those components were the words total, the sentences total, and the syllables total. Therefore, after gaining the total words from Microsoft Word, the researchers used <https://www.textfixer.com/tools/online-sentence-counter.php> as a tool to find out the sentences total from three short stories. Another website used for counting the syllables total was <https://syllablecounter.net/>. The results of the total of words, sentences, and syllables are shown in table 2.

Based on the word counting provided by Microsoft Word, the total number of words in *The Birthday Party* short story written by Katherine Brush are 318 words. Moreover, the total number of words in the short story *The Dead Man's Path* is 1219 words, and likewise, *Turning Thirty* by Minfong Ho has 5317 words. In addition, the total score as calculated by the online sentence counter showed 13 sentences in *The Birthday Party* short story, 87 sentences in *The Dead Man's Path*, and 350 sentences are located in *Turning Thirty* short story by Minfong Ho. In accordance with the total words and sentences, the total of syllables for the *Turning Thirty* short story has the greatest number of words which is 7100 total syllables. Furthermore, *The Dead Man's Path* has 1723 total syllables, and as expected the fewest syllables is *The Birthday Party* short story with 452 total syllables.

The next step is counting the readability level of those three short stories, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dead Man's Path*, and *Turning Thirty*. The result of the total number of words, sentences, and syllables above was used for examining the readability level of those three short stories using Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. To triangulate data on the readability level of those three short stories, the researchers did the test twice for each short story. For the first test, the researchers did the test manually using the Flesch Reading Ease formula from (DuBay, 2004). After that, the researchers checked the readability level using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level from (Gopal et al., 2021) to gain the readability level. The application of Microsoft Excel is used in order to ensure the credibility level of counting the readability score of all the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formulas.

Furthermore, the second test, readability test was conducted using an online platform to find out the readability score of those three short stories, namely the WebFX Readability Test. The result of the manual and online readability level scores can be seen in Table 3.

According to the manual and online count of readability level scores as presented in table 3, the Flesch Reading Ease for *The Birthday Party*

Table 2. The total number of words, sentences, and syllables

	Total words	Total sentences	Total syllables
Birthday Party	318	13	452
Dead Man's Path	1219	87	1723
Turning Thirty	5317	350	7100

short story has reading ease scores of 61.75 for the manual test and 63.1 using WebFX readability test scores. Moreover, *The Dead Men's Path* has 73.03 reading ease scores when counting manually and 74.4 when using the WebFX readability test. In addition, the reading ease score for *Turning Thirty* showed the highest score compared to those two short stories. *Turning Thirty* short stories has a 78.44 reading ease score when counting manually and 83.7 when counting using the online readability test WebFX.

The results for Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level as shown in table 3 above are as follows. The highest score for Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is the short story *The Birthday Party* which has a score of 10.72 in manually counting and 10.2 when counting using the online readability test WebFX. The second is *The Dead Men's Path* short story. This short story has scores of 6.55 and 6.3 for counting manually and by online readability test scores. The lowest score is from the *Turning Thirty* short story which has a score of 6.09 for manual counting and 4.5 as a result of the online readability test.

The reading ease and readability grade level results from table 3 can be described using the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level index as shown by (DuBay, 2004) and (Gopal et al., 2021) in their study. The result of the readability level from Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level from three short stories can be seen in table 4.

Table 4 provides the ease of readability and grade levels from the previous result of the readability level of the three short stories namely

The Birthday Party, *The Dead Men's Path*, and *Turning Thirty*. From table 4, it can be concluded that the ease of readability from *The Birthday Party* is the hardest since the short story is categorized as having standard difficulty. In addition, the grade level for *The Birthday Party* short story is suitable or intended to be read and comprehended by 8th and 9th-grade students. The second short story is *The Dead Men's Path*. This story has a fairly easy readability level and is appropriate to read by 7th-grade students. Moreover, the last story, *Turning Thirty*, based on the result in table 3, indicates that this short story has an easy to fairly easy level of readability. Therefore, the student's grade that fit this short story is in the range of 6th to 7th-grade students. Unfortunately, all the grades here are for US students. Consequently, further research is needed to compare US students' readability levels with Indonesian students' readability levels.

Students' Perception of the Short Stories Used In the Introduction to Educational English Literature Course

After analysing the readability levels of the three short stories, a further inquiry exploring students' perception of the short stories was conducted by interviewing the five participants enrolled in the Introduction to Educational English Literature course. The interview yielded the results that in general, the participants had positive perceptions of the three short stories offered in the IEEL course. Six salient themes emerged from the interview which depicted the participants' perceptions of the short stories used in the IEEL course, which are as follows:

Table 3. Manual and online count of readability level score

	Counting Manually		Counting by WebFx	
	Flesch Reading Ease	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	Flesch Reading Ease	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
The Birthday Party	61.75	10.72	63.1	10.2
The Dead Men's Path	73.03	6.55	74.4	6.3
Turning Thirty	78.44	6.09	83.7	4.5

Table 4. Readability level of three short stories

	Result of Flesch Reading Ease		Ease of Readability	Result of Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level		Grade Levels
	Manual	WebFX		Manual	WebFX	
The Birthday Party	61.75	63.1	Standard	10.72	10.2	8 th and 9 th grades
The Dead Men's Path	73.03	74.4	Fairly Easy	6.55	6.3	7 th grade
Turning Thirty	78.44	83.7	Fairly Easy - Easy	6.09	4.5	6 th -7 th grades

Students' Perception of the Readability Level

The readability level of the short stories also influences students' perceptions of those stories and their performance (Afdian & Wahyuni, 2020). Further investigation exploring students' perceptions revealed that in general, the three short stories were neither too hard nor too easy for them. One of them stated:

"Overall, the short stories are interesting and no one of them was neither too hard nor too easy..."(P4)

The present study found that based on the readability level test utilizing Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease Formula, *The Birthday Party* (63.1=Standard) became the most complex story followed by *The Dead Men's Path* (74.4=Fairly Easy), and *Turning Thirty* (83.7=Easy). However, when the five participants were asked to rate the difficulty levels of the short stories during the interview, their opinions varied. Two of them argued:

"The most difficult is *The Dead Men's Path* because I need to read it more than once and the plot of the story shows many cultural aspects which make it hard to understand. The second is *Turning Thirty*, and the last is *The Birthday Party* because it is the shortest one and it has only one setting" (P3)

"*Turning Thirty* and *Dead Men's Path* is more difficult than *The Birthday Party*. *The Birthday Party* is the shortest story, so the readers can read and understand it easily and quickly..." (P1)

From the interview result, all participants agreed that *The Birthday Party* became the easiest short story for them to read. The plausible explanation for this was that most participants perceived shorter texts to be easier to read, thus, failed to dive deeper beyond the surface level to grasp the hidden messages that the author tried to convey. Furthermore, cultural aspects that became an integral part of the story sometimes became a 'hindrance' for the readers to comprehend the story, especially for those with limited knowledge of a particular culture (Hişmanoğlu, 2005a). Cultural aspects became a strong influence that built *Turning Thirty* and *Dead Men's Path* stories as when the readers were not familiar with the background culture in those stories, full comprehension was difficult to attain.

Students' Enjoyment in Reading Short Story

The use of short stories as a literary work in the realm of English language teaching and learning is deemed beneficial as they can foster reading habits and facilitate the learners to develop reading for enjoyment (Pratiwi et al., 2020).

When learners enjoy the process of reading, they will gradually increase their self-efficacy and fluency in reading. This is supported by (Levine, Betzner, & Autry, 2016) who found that people who enjoy the process of reading are more likely to engage in effortful thought and complex cognitive processes that enable them to recall more information and gain deeper comprehension compared to those who do not. From the interview, it was found that all participants enjoy reading the three short stories offered in the IEEL class and they did not see that task as a burden. One of them argued:

"Overall, the three short stories that I read in the IEEL class are enjoyable and entertaining. I do not feel burdened at all. The three stories give me new insights and broaden my points of view. Through the characters, I also learn about life. So again, I really enjoy the three stories since each story gives different impressions and vibes" (P4).

Further inquiry exploring the possible contribution of readers' enjoyment in reading revealed that relevance and unexpected plot twists became the two aspects that made the story more enjoyable to read. One participant argued:

"Basically, all stories are interesting but I prefer reading *The Birthday Party* to the other three stories because the conflicts are more engaging and entertaining for me. The story is also more relatable since I can find similar conflicts happening in the real life. That is why I can easily understand the story. Despite its relevance, the vocabulary used in this short story is also not that difficult. Secondly, the plot twist at the end really makes the story becomes more interesting..."(P1)

The excerpt above highlighted that relevant or relatable conflicts and plots in the short story aided them to draw connections between the characters of the story and their real life. To make the readers enjoy the story, personal relevance is needed when they are familiar with the ideas, events, and sensations in the story which either constitute part of the readers' life experiences or "which they can enter into imaginatively; they are able to relate it to their own lives" (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Furthermore, an unexpected turn of events in a story can also intrigue readers' curiosity and make the story become more interesting to read as it evokes readers' enjoyment of thinking and needs for cognition (Levine et al., 2016b).

The result of this present study is in line with the study conducted by (Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016) which found that short stories were effective to engage students to read attentively for pleasure. Furthermore, the study also revealed that the students who were attentively

engaged in reading short stories as self-selected literature for pleasure were more likely to perform better in other subjects such as Math, English, Science, and History compared to their non-reading peers.

Motivation and Performance in Literature Class

A recent study investigating the relationship between intrinsic reading motivation and reading content found that motivation for leisure reading was greater than for academics (Locher et al., 2019). It correlates with how individuals get motivation through reading. In this research, the reading habits were partially constructed in a literature classroom. Moreover, from the interview, the participants felt the advantages of reading for academics. By knowing the advantages of reading short stories in English literature class, participants gained more motivation on that. Two of them mentioned:

“For me, reading short stories is effective for the beginner because the stories are shorter than a novel. The difficulty level (vocabulary) is average, although there are some difficulties. So, we should open the dictionary. I really love short stories as a medium for learning English.” (P3)

“Short stories are effective for learning English because we can learn grammar, and find unfamiliar vocabulary, especially for beginners.” (P4)

From the statements above, the participants stated their opinions on the effectiveness of using short stories in literature class. It can be interpreted that using short stories for second-semester students was the potential in helping them learn English. It is categorized as extrinsic motivation where lectures give assignments, scores, and grades to encourage students' participation in learning (Dakhi & Damanik, 2018). Three short stories that were used in IEEL class had an average level of vocabulary. Those boosted students' competence in learning grammar and vocabulary. Thus, students were extrinsically motivated to read short stories.

The main goals of this course were to make students understand and appreciate literary work. Providing students with various stories made students gain more perspective on short stories. From the three short stories provided by the lecturer, the participants had their favourite stories. There were 2 participants who mentioned *The Dead Men's Path* as their most favourite story, 2 participants were interested in *The Birthday Party* story, meanwhile, 1 participant enjoyed *Turning Thirty* the most. Most of the mentioned conflicts

and valuable life lessons are the contributing factors that made them feel motivated to read.

“For me, *The Dead Men's Path* is the most interesting story compared to *Turning Thirty* and *The Birthday Party*. What I really like about this story is the messages that are conveyed. This story makes me realize that in this life, we are given two options, namely to be good or to be bad. Furthermore, whatever choice we choose, will lead to consequences that involve the people around us. I find this story relatable since I have experienced a quite similar situation.”(P4)

According to the interview results, students got various knowledge and insight from both the lesson and the materials. Through reading and analysing short stories, students had the desire to know more about the stories. The extrinsic motivations constructed the students' competence in reading and mastering the stories. These results were in line with (Salikin, Bin-Tahir, Kusumaningputri, & Yuliandari, 2017) that teachers' role as extrinsic motivation played an essential role in applying the reading method. Thus, it helped students in knowing and performing the stories better.

Understanding the Culture of the Target Language

Recent perspectives on English Foreign Language Learning accentuate that the focus of EFL should not only accommodate learners to acquire English competence but also facilitate them to “establish intercultural communicative competence” in which the learners can use the language in the ways that are appropriate for both socially and culturally (Pardede, 2021). Language and culture are inseparable in a way that the choices of words in a short story portray the culture of the target language. From the interview, the five participants agreed that by reading the short story, they also gained knowledge about the culture. One of them argued:

“Each short story represents a different culture. It helps me to understand how it “feels” to live within a certain era with a particular culture and custom even though I do not experience it first-hand. For instance, one of the stories takes place in the post-war era which makes me aware of the living condition, customs, culture, and wisdom that are relevant to that era. Furthermore, the language and the vocabulary used in each story also represent the culture which becomes the background of the story” (P2)

From the excerpt above, it was apparent that participant 2 was aware of the cultural aspects that became an integral part of the story.

This showed that short stories raised students' cultural awareness and enabled them to be critical of the values and wisdom of a particular culture and respect the literary works of other cultures. (Hişmanoğlu, 2005) asserted that through short stories, EFL students will have the opportunity to gain new insights into the TL culture and the people involved in order to "develop their imaging and mental image abilities to realize for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy of semiotics." (p. 54). Furthermore, a similar result was also found in participant 1. She stated:

"Reading short stories also helps me to understand different cultures, especially the culture that becomes the background of each story. The culture is also manifested in the language as some of the stories contain foreign languages other than English which represents the culture of the story. Furthermore, the cultural aspects also build the plot and in some stories, cultural aspects become the "source of conflict" that the characters need to deal with. I also realize that without having sufficient understanding of the cultural background of the story, a deep and whole understanding cannot be attained" (P1).

The response from participant two represented her view on the importance of understanding the TL culture to attain a holistic and complete understanding of the short story. (Hişmanoğlu, 2005) stated that facilitating the students with the opportunity to learn about the cultural knowledge of the target language by providing the context enables the EFL students to have a better understanding of the short story. By exposing the students to the target culture along with the social problems of a particular community included in the short story, the students can go beyond what is written in the text and develop advanced-level readers' knowledge (Khan & Alasmari, 2018a).

Furthermore, the result of the present study was also in accordance with the research conducted by (Barzani, 2020) which found that the use of short stories as a portrayal of the TL culture enabled the EFL students to have cultural awareness and gain a deeper understanding of the story. Similar findings were also found in the study conducted by (Erkaya, 2005) which revealed that a nuanced and deeper understanding of the short stories was acquired through the TL culture by portraying it through "real-world experiences, relationships between society and people where the TL is spoken" (p. 8).

Increasing Students' Imaginative, Creative, and Critical Thinking

Through reading literary works, students

develop the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective and study human values and a different way of life while also learning about people from quite diverse countries (Mirshahidovna, 2022). Reading short stories gave some value to students in imagining the plot. Thus, the lecturer gave students space and time to discuss in the group regarding the endings of the story. Having this kind of activity, made the respondent say:

"... I also learn creativity from the story because I can imagine various possible endings from that."(P3)

"As a beginner, it is better to read stories rather than watch movies. Through reading out loud we can enrich our vocabulary, imagine the story, and improve reading comprehension. Through reading, I also learn synonyms, word order, and tenses. I learned tenses a lot through the story because it explains when the story happens. Short stories help me build my creative thinking which includes what the story is about, the main idea of the story, and how to analyse the story" (P2)

From the statements above, the participants mentioned the benefits of reading short stories. Furthermore, in the reading activity, students could not imagine the stories visually. However, through words, they could develop their imagination and creativity. Since they learned short stories, students had more chances to discuss the interpretation and the ending of the stories. The components of stories encourage students to identify the content and the interpretation (Sahibzada et al., 2020). Thus, these components would sharpen students' critical thinking. Furthermore, intriguing findings also emerged in the present study as participants' critical thinking was also developed through a reading story reading. The respondents in this research stated that:

"Those three short stories help me in building my critical thinking. My critical thinking increased after I analysed the plot."(P1)

".... I think reading stories is better than watching movies because I can have a different approach to understanding the characters' points of view. Through the characters, I also learned how to solve problems and conflicts. Thus, I can gain more perspective from that."(P4)

Having time and the opportunity to read aloud and discuss with friends allowed the students to think at their own pace. Based on the statements above, analysing the plot of the stories became an interesting aspect for them. It is in line with the research results from (Husna, 2019). She found an improvement in undergraduate

students' critical thinking after having a reading program. So, reading short stories can improve students' critical thinking.

Enhancing English Language Proficiency

Short stories have long been utilized as one of the tools to reinforce EFL students' English language proficiency. (Erkaya, 2005) accentuated that carefully selected and appropriately exploited short stories can provide good quality text content that will significantly "enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" (p. 3). The short story as a literary text provides useful language inputs in the form of figurative language and idiomatic expressions that help EFL students to build interpretation and comprehension beyond written texts (Khan & Alasmari, 2018b). In addition, a vast range of vocabulary and grammatical structures are also woven to help the EFL students learn the target language.

From the interview, all participants agreed that to some extent, the short stories offered in the IEEL class helped them to improve their language proficiency. Some of their excerpts were provided below:

"From the short stories given in this class, I found some new vocabulary that I can learn. It helps me as an ELESF student at the beginner level to learn English because the story is simple yet contains some new vocabulary. Thus I can learn the vocabulary and the appropriate use of part of speech in a story (for example, the changes from nouns, verbs, and adverbs)...." (P4)

The response given by participant 4 reflected the perceived benefit of short stories to enhance vocabulary mastery and grammar. (Hi□mano□lu, 2005) asserted that short stories with the appropriate level of difficulty facilitate the student with insights into the new vocabulary, language use, and rules of grammar. The result of the present study was in line with the study conducted by (Lasaiba, 2015) which found that short stories enriched students' vocabulary mastery as they gained some novel interest words related to the context of the short stories. In addition, her study also found that using short stories could promote an inductive approach to teaching rules of grammar. As the EFL students were getting familiar with the story, they could gradually detect and notice the patterns in how the words and sentences were ordered and put together (Rahman & Arju, 2013). Furthermore, participant 3 also gained some benefits from reading short stories in terms of developing reading comprehension skills. She argued:

"...I learned how to build the connection of the main ideas from one paragraph to another... That enables me to be a fluent reader"(P3)

The ability to connect the main ideas of each paragraph is essential for the readers to have a more nuanced and better understanding of the story. As the students have a broad range of vocabulary mastery and become more familiar with rules of grammar, they can eventually move to a comprehension level in which they are expected to draw connections among the ideas, plots, and conflicts of the story (Erkaya, 2005b). However, attaining full comprehension requires more than just linguistic knowledge. Cultural, linguistic, and general knowledge of the world were needed by advanced readers to reach full comprehension (Pourkalthor & Kohan, 2013). The result of the present study was congruent with the study conducted by (Magnusson, Roe, & Blikstad-Balas, 2019) which revealed that using short stories as one literary work was found to be effective to teach reading comprehension strategy for language arts students due to its short in length and uncomplicated nature.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to analyse the readability levels of the three short stories given in the IEEL course along with students' perceptions of those short stories. The results showed that based on the readability level test utilizing Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease Formula, *The Birthday Party* (63.1=Standard) became the most complex story followed by *The Dead Men's Path* (74.4=Fairly Easy), and *Turning Thirty* (83.7=Easy). Furthermore, in general, the participants had positive perceptions of those three short stories. Six salient themes emerged which encompassed: students' perception of the readability level; students' enjoyment in reading the short story; motivation and performance in literature class; understanding of the culture of the target language; increasing students' imaginative, creative, and critical thinking; and enhancing English language proficiency.

Undeniably, this research has some limitations as it involved only a small number of participants. Thus, the researchers recommend that future researchers can utilize the findings of this research as one of the references to conduct research on the readability level by involving a larger group of participants.

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