

# **A Study On Second Language Learners' Perception Of Using Short Story In Learning English**

Tina Absullah & Noor Azma Binti Abu Bakar  
Fakulti Pendidikan  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

**Abstract :** This study generally attempts to investigate second language learners' perception on the use of short stories in learning the English language. The study also attempts to determine students' level of interest in reading short stories, the problems faced by the students and also the possible solution to problems faced by students when short stories are used in the English language classroom. Questionnaires were distributed to second language learners taking Reading for Specific Purposes elective course in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor. All the ninety two respondents were from three different sections from three different faculties and were from the engineering field. The methodologies used for this study were questionnaire and interview. The interview results were used to support the findings. Observations were also used in this study for designing questionnaire and also to determine the respondents for interview sessions. The findings showed positive patterns which indicated that the respondents have positive perception towards the use of short stories to learn English language and the students are interested in the lessons that used short stories. In addition, the problems faced by the students, the strategies used by the students to deal with the problems and also the possible suggestions addressed to solve problems faced by the students were also identified. One of the major finding was students were interested to read short stories according to the theme that they preferred. Another major finding was that the main problem faced by the students was the problem of participation where they did not participate actively in the lessons that used short stories. This was due to low proficiency level and the theme of the short stories did not suit students' interest. The students also suggested that short story should be assigned to be read before coming to class. In a conclusion, short stories should be used to learn English language as it enhances students' language proficiency. The instructor should choose short stories that suits students' interest in order to make the students participate in the lessons that used short stories.

*Keywords :* second language, learner's perception, short story

## **Introduction**

There are a lot of languages in this world and every language is important. When two people who speak two different languages want to interact with each other, they will certainly need to use one language that both of them can understand. Then, there is a need to have a language that can be used by all people around the world. English has become the *lingua franca* of the world where English is used in most situations. Everybody is urged to learn the language. This statement is being supported by Sundaram (2006) who states that English is the most popular language compared to other languages and it is one of the common languages that many people can understand.

Hines (2005) states that it is better to use literature rather than a communicative textbook as it can change the learning approach from focusing on grammar to creative thinking. He believes that literature-based programs focus on the interpretation of the language and this allows students to experiment with the language. It can be assumed that literature allows the students to be creative in their thinking and also gives the students a platform to use the language. In

addition, Rosli Talif (1995:15) states that "...language is inseparable from literature and vice versa." We cannot run away from learning the language when literary text is used. Students learn the language unconsciously when they read literary text. Rosli Talif (1995:17) also believes that "language is the material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of pictures, or sounds of music". To make a literary piece, the writer will need to use the language. Literature cannot be made by itself; there is the material known as language that makes it known as literature. Therefore, it can be concluded that literature and language cannot be separated.

### **Statement Of The Problem**

There have been a number of studies to investigate the use of literary texts in learning the English language and most of them focused on secondary school students and the actual happening in schools. Apart from research conducted, there have been very little studies that focused on the use of literature at tertiary level.

Another example of a study was on young adults' response to nine young adult storybooks by Too (2004). Too (2004) in Too (2006:13) in Too & Vethamani (Eds.) states that "the most frequent reason for young adult readers to enjoy reading these nine stories was that the stories were all about young adults". The other reason was that the language used in story is interesting and uses real life expressions. However, there were few students who didn't enjoy the story as they thought that it was not interesting, the setting of the story is unfamiliar to them and there is no message in the story.

Carroli (2002:113) states that "there is a need for qualitative studies, focused on learners, to explore the relationship between literature, language and students". This is important for the students to acquire the language. Students need to enjoy learning the language as when there is "a mental block, caused by affective factors ... that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device" (Krashen, 1985:100), students will not receive the input fully and the learning process cannot be optimized. It is important to see what are the students' perception rather than focusing on the teachers or instructors alone. Therefore, this research attempts to explore the perception of second language learners on the use of short stories in learning English at tertiary level.

This study will also look at the problems faced by the students and how does short stories help students in learning the English language. Erkaya (2005) adds that when using short stories, teachers can teach higher order thinking because short stories promote the use of all the four skills namely the listening, speaking, reading and writing and short stories are embedded with motivational benefits. When using short stories, the students will learn all the four skills at the same time. All these skills are needed for language learning and it is important for them to learn the skills.

### **Objectives Of The Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (i) To investigate second language learners' perception on the use of short stories in their English language classroom.
- (ii) To determine students' level of interest in reading short stories.
- (iii) To identify the possible problems faced by the students when reading short stories used in classroom.

- (iv) To determine the possible solution to the problems faced by the students when short stories are used in the English language classroom.

### **Significance Of The Study**

Generally, this study will be useful for the English lecturers in UTM as this study will focus on the use of short stories in teaching the English language among second language learners in UTM. Through this study, the lecturers will have a better picture of the students' perception of the use of short stories and problems that students encounter in reading them. At the same time, this study would be able to show students' perception on the use of short stories and how this helps them teach the language.

This study will also benefit researchers within the area as they can use the findings as a reference or for future research. They can use this study as a guideline to improve on the use of literature in English language teaching within one context.

Since literature does not only enhance the four language skills, it could also develop skills that are important for tertiary students' attributes. Reading for Specific Purposes committees will also benefit from this study in knowing whether short stories can be used to enhanced second language learning.

### **Respondents of the Study**

The respondents of the study consisted of third year and final year undergraduate second language learners from UTM who took Reading for Specific Purposes elective course. Three sections from three different faculties were chosen and each section has approximately forty students. This was because there were only three faculties that offered this course during this study was conducted. The respondents of the study were from different educational background. Some of them had completed a diploma, some came in after STPM while most of them were from Matriculation Colleges all over Malaysia. The questionnaires were distributed to the students randomly and were collected after their UHB 3032 (Reading for Specific Purposes) class.

Krejcie & Morgan (1970) in Azizi Yahaya et al. (2006) show how sample size of a particular study can be calculated. In fact, a table is also provided that shows the sample size needed. According to the table, the researcher needed to get ninety two samples if the population of the students for the three sections are hundred and twenty. Krejcie & Morgan (1970) in Azizi Yahaya et al. (2006) reported that the National Education Association uses the same equation to determine the sample size. The sample that is determined from the equation is very accurate and will exactly represent the population (Azizi Yahaya et al., 2006).

The equation (Krejcie & Morgan (1970) in Azizi Yahaya et al., 2006) is:

$$S = \frac{X^2 NP(1-P)}{D(N-1) + X^2 P(1-P)}$$

S = sample size

X = chi-square value at 1 degree of freedom at the confidence level needed 0.05 (3.841)

N = population size

P = population ratio (approximately 0.50 to give a maximum sample size)

d = the fixed degree is being noted as ratio 0.05

According to the equation, the sample size is:

$$S = \frac{X^2 NP(1-P)}{D(N-1) + X^2 P(1-P)}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
& D^2 (N-1) + X^2 P(1-P) \\
= & \frac{3.841 \times 120 \times (1-0.5)}{[0.05^2 (120-1)] + [3.841 \times 0.5(1-0.5)]} \\
= & 92 \text{ samples}
\end{aligned}$$

## Research Instruments

With the intention of gaining qualitative and quantitative information from the respondents, a set of questionnaires was used as the instrument to collect data and two appointments with the students taking Reading for Specific Purposes were made. Azizi Yahaya et al. (2006) mentions that qualitative approach gives a clear confidence on the validity, the results and also the facts.

According to Munn & Drever (1993), questionnaires have their own limitation. The information collected from questionnaires “tend to describe rather than explain why things are the way they are” (Munn & Drever, 1993:5). Therefore, the qualitative data from the interviews is needed to back up the quantitative data from the questionnaires in the findings.

Questionnaire was used to gain quantitative information as it “enables the researcher to collect data in field settings and the data themselves are more amenable to quantification than discursive data such as free-form fieldnotes, participations observers’ journals, the transcript of oral language” (Nunan, 1992:143). Munn & Drever (1993) add that, using questionnaire saves time, the respondents of the study can remain anonymous, possibility of a high return rate and the questions are standardized.

Interview was used to get the qualitative data as it has been used widely in research. Nunan (1992:149) states that it is used in research as it “has been used by second language acquisition researches seeking data on stages and processes of acquisition...”. Therefore, this study used interview as a method of collecting qualitative data. A semi-structured interview was used as it “...gives the interviewee a degree of power and control over the course of interview” (Nunan, 1992:150). It also gives flexibility for the interviewer in conducting the interview. The interview was utilized to confirm the findings from the questionnaire. The interview also explores the relationship of using short story in language learning classroom and the second language learners’ perception about it.

## Pilot Study

Before the actual data collection period, a pilot study was conducted. A pilot study is needed to guarantee the validity and the reliability of the items in the questionnaires. It is important to conduct a pilot study as “you want to find out roughly how long the questionnaire takes to answer and if there is any features of it that are likely to put people off and so reduce the likely response rate...you want to ‘de-bug’ the questions. Is the wording clear, using terms familiar and unambiguous?” (Munn & Drever, 1993:31). Therefore, the researcher had conducted a pilot study on the second language learners who are taking Reading for Specific Purposes, elective course. Munn & Drever (1993:31) mention that in picking the pilots, “avoid anyone to whom it will be sent in the study itself.” Therefore, the respondents for the pilot study will not be from the targeted respondents. The respondent for the pilot study were those who had taken Reading for Specific Purposes elective course.

The respondents for the pilot study were identified first. The respondents were those who have taken the course before because they have some background knowledge of what is being asked in the questionnaires and they are familiar with the terms being used in it. They were asked to answer the questionnaire and identify problems like what are the words that seems unclear,

words that they do not understand, instruction that is confusing and any sentences that they think is not suitable. The respondents went through the questionnaire and after that discuss any problems that they encounter while they went through with the text. The pilot study will be conducted after the questionnaire is being designed.

### Analysis Data

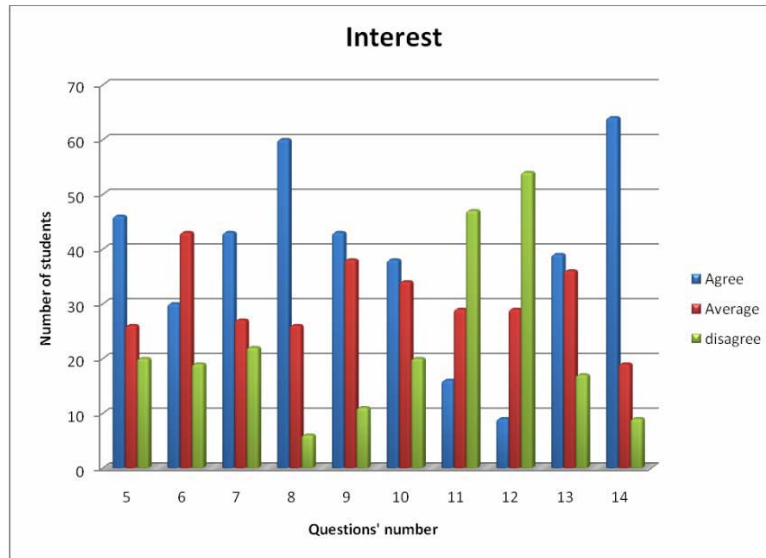


Figure 1: Students' Interest Towards Reading Short Stories in an English Language Classroom.

Figure 1 shows respondents' interest towards reading short stories based on statements number 5 to 14. Based on statement number 14, sixty four respondents were interested to read short stories according to theme that they preferred. This makes number 14 had the highest number of students that agreed with the statement.

The second highest number of statement that the respondents agreed with was number 8. Sixty respondents agreed that they preferred to read a simplified version of short stories rather than the original text. When comparing whether the students preferred reading the original short stories (number 9) or the simplified version (number 8), it is obvious that they preferred reading the simplified version compared to the original version. Other than prefer reading the abridged version or original version and read the short stories according to theme, some other statements that had a high number of respondents that chose agree rather than others as their answer were number 5 where they read the short stories for leisure, number 7 where they chose short stories that they found interesting, number 10 where they enjoyed short stories outside classroom and also number 13 where they relate the short stories with other things in their life.

A large number of respondents disagreed with statements number 11 and 12. Forty seven respondents disagreed that they discussed the short stories after reading it and fifty four respondents disagreed with the statement where when reading short stories, they wrote their reaction to it.

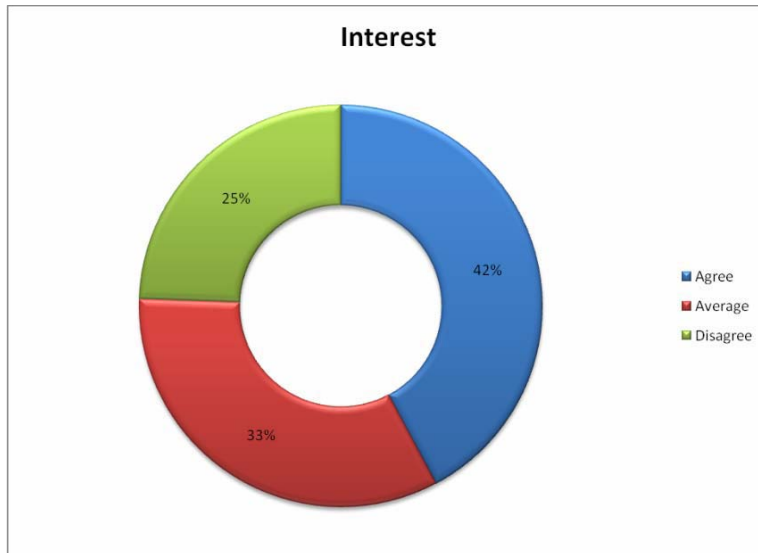


Figure 2: Students' Overall Interest Towards Reading Short Stories

The overall results for students' interest in reading short stories is shown by Figure 2. Forty two percent of the respondents agreed with most of the statements. Only thirty three percent of the respondents had an average interest towards short stories while twenty five percent were not interested. All of the statements from number 5 to number 14 described how the respondents showed their interest in short stories and that they extend their reading after class hours. Based on the respondents' answers, it showed that the students' level of interest in reading short stories are high.

### Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study show the desired results to find out the perception of second language learners on the use of short story to learn English. From all the hundred and twenty questionnaires, ninety three were answered and ninety two were selected. One questionnaire was answered only half way through and therefore is not selected for this study.

The findings of this study showed that the respondents had a positive perception towards the use of short story to learn English language. They agreed that by using short stories to learn English, it can expand their language awareness and vocabulary, motivate them to learn the language and enhance their language proficiency. The respondents were interested in reading short stories where they extend their reading outside class hours. They preferred to read simplified version rather than the authentic text and they read short stories according to the theme that they prefer the most. The respondents extended their reading outside classroom when they stated that they read more short stories and read it for a few times to overcome the problem related to the use of short story. This also shows that the use of short story promotes reading.

The respondents did not really face much problem. The main problem that they faced was the participation where they do not participate actively in the lesson. The respondents only participate when being asked or being pointed by the instructor. Only a few students participated and based on the findings, this was due to the learners' level of proficiency. Students with low proficiency were shy to participate because they are afraid others would make fun of them and this makes the respondents remain quiet most of the time. Another reason was the theme of the short stories being used did not suit their interest.

In dealing with the problems that were faced by them when short stories were used in the English language classroom, they used dictionary, contextual clues and read the short stories for few times to understand it. These were the reading strategies that they have applied when having problems in understanding the short story. This shows that students do put some effort in improving their language proficiency and their reading skills. The respondents also discuss the short story with friends and instructor. Instructor will guide those who have problems. Peer tutoring is also important as the students will learn from each other and will extend their knowledge from the discussion itself. Some students were shy to get help from instructor and therefore, discussing with friends was an alternative.

The respondents suggested that the reading task and explanation of the short story should be done in class by the instructor, the short story should be assigned to read individually before coming to class, there should be guided questions together with the short story and there should also be more language games based on the short story. They also stated that they use short story to improve grammar, knowledge, English proficiency, writing style.

Based on the findings, short stories can be used to teach English grammar and structure where short stories show good samples of language use as described by Fakrul Alam (2002:129) it serves as "specimen of real language use". It is also suggested that the instructor use literature circle in the language classroom because it promotes peer tutoring for discussions, students get to pick their own preferable books, the students get to learn to be responsible with their own learning, students' comprehension and attitudes towards reading can also be improved (Daniels, 2006).

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