Students' Perceptions of their Improvement in English Language Skills through Short Stories: A Case of the College of Business and Economics, University of Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Using short stories has proven effective in second language learning and teaching. This study investigated the students' perceptions of the use of short stories and their English proficiency. It was intended to identify the students' benefits from using short stories and the challenges they encountered, as well as solutions to address them. The study targeted 1050 first-year students at the University of Rwanda, College of Business and Economics. The sample size was 222 students from the departments of Business and Information Technology (BIT) and Applied Statistics. This study was supported by the constructivism theory. The study adopted a descriptive approach, and data were collected through a questionnaire and focus group interviews. The questionnaire yielded quantitative data, whereas the focus group interviews generated qualitative data. Findings revealed that using short stories enabled students to develop the English language's four macro-skills, namely listening (94.6%), speaking (95.5%), reading (98.2%), and writing (95.9%). The findings also disclosed that short stories helped to increase students' vocabulary (98.2%). However, the findings indicated that students had difficulties grasping conveyed messages because of limited vocabulary, spelling difficulties, and little knowledge of English tenses, and that they lacked confidence to present their stories in front of colleagues. They could overcome these challenges, though, by looking up the meanings of new words and scaffolding each other's learning. The study concluded that short stories might be useful language materials and recommended them as adequate materials to mediate second language learning.

Keywords: *English Language Skills, Language Proficiency, Short Stories*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reading can help develop one's language skills if it is practiced regularly. In fact, research has shown that regular reading, be it extensive or intensive, can enhance learners' proficiency in a given language. For example, Samaraweera (2023, p. 158) contends that 'exposure to the target language through meaning-focused reading plays a significant role in enhancing vocabulary knowledge among adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.' Alzu'bi (2014) holds that extensive reading can develop students' language proficiency in reading, vocabulary, and grammar. Furthermore, extensive reading can be employed as a part of teaching activities to improve learners' reading ability and self-directed learning skills (Nutalak, 2019). As for Kim (2012), he asserts that extensive reading may enhance the participants' reading comprehension and reading rates. According to Numan Khazaal (2019), intensive reading may increase learners' vocabulary significantly. Intensive reading can also promote students' reading comprehension (Andrés, 2020). Ansarey (2016) and Kenjali and Abduramanova (2022) maintain that vocabulary development through reading is an effective technique that may develop learners' speaking skills. Nevertheless, according to Maipoka and Soontornwipast (2021) and Tuğrul Mart (2015), extensive and intensive reading in the language classroom should be combined for more language gains.

As English is both the medium of instruction and the official language in Rwanda, students have to devise appropriate strategies that can help them boost their proficiency in this language. Reading is one of the techniques that they should adopt for the incidental acquisition of English skills and subskills to take place, considering that the linguistic landscape in the country is not conducive to the learning of this target language. Lecturers of English also ought to motivate their students to read and give them regular reading activities so as to help them acquire the habit of reading. At the University of Rwanda, English is taught for the first three years. In this regard, the modules English for General Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, and English for Academic Purposes are respectively taught in years one, two, and three (University of Rwanda, 2019), and they all tackle different language skills. The objective of introducing these modules was to help students cope with content subjects that are taught in English and allow the

country to integrate regionally and internationally (Rwanda's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs [MINICAAF], 2008; Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2010; Karasenga and Nzanana, 2022).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although reading is considered an effective way to boost English skills, there is a lack of reading culture in Rwanda (Nzeyimana & Bazimaziki, 2020; Ruterana, 2012). The same applies for university students, our target population, which constitutes a barrier to the development of their proficiency in English. Indeed, most students nowadays do not devote time to reading materials that can help uplift their communication skills in English (Manirakiza, 2022); they have instead become addicted to using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and so on. In addition, although lecturers of English endeavour to provide reading materials that they believe may help boost their students' English proficiency, they rarely incorporate short stories. Indeed, lecturers hardly ever request their students to write short stories or to read these narratives and present them. Short stories are, nevertheless, assumed to trigger the students' motivation to read as they find them interesting and engaging (Bartan, 2017; Jan & Aziz, 2022; Ompusunggu, 2018; Pardede, 2021). This is, hence, the reason why the researchers embarked on exploring first-year students' perceptions of the use of short stories and their effect on their English proficiency. In other words, this study aims at identifying the benefits the students may gain from short stories and the challenges they may encounter. It also intends to propose solutions to address these challenges.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study objectives were:
(1) To analyse the students' perceptions of the impact of short stories on their English language skills;
(2) To identify the challenges students encountered while using short stories; and
(3) To propose solutions to address these challenges.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is supported by the constructivism theory pioneered by Jean Piaget (Gao, 2021; Mascolo & Fischer, 2005). The theory stipulates that students' knowledge derives from how they can build it on their own and that it is constructed individually or socially (Suhendi et al., 2021). According to the constructivism theory, "learning is a process by which the learner constructs new knowledge based on their current knowledge by integrating income information" (Behrens, 2021, p. 959). This study is consistent with the constructivism theory because students did various activities such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing through short stories, thereby obtaining input to develop the four English macroskills. The study provides students' perceptions of how short stories affected their language skills and the challenges they faced in the process.

2.2 Empirical Review
2.2.1 Benefits of Using Short Stories in Language Classes

A short story is defined as an imaginative narrative (Esenwein, 2022) that is shorter than a novel and can range from 1,000 to 20,000 words (Raval, 2019). Presently, short stories are considered to be among the most effective literary genres to integrate into EFL/ESL classrooms (Kurdi & Nizam, 2022; Pardede, 2021), as they can help enhance students' English language skills. For example, short story use significantly contributes to the improvement of students' speaking skills (Ali Mansoor et al., 2022; Ompusunggu, 2018; Rodriguez, 2017) and promotes their creative writing skills (Jan & Aziz, 2022), as well as their gain in and retention of vocabulary and expressions encountered (Ali Mansoor et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2017). Through the use of literary texts like short stories in language classrooms, students acquire deep knowledge of the native speakers' lifestyle (Habibullayevna, 2023), knowledge of the language, and ways in which it is used in real contexts (Küçükoğlu, 2023). According to Perdede (2011), it is necessary to use short stories because of their ability to provide an authentic language.

Different studies have highlighted the importance of using short stories to enhance language skills. In this regard, Akar's (2020) study on the use of short stories in teaching vocabulary revealed an improvement in vocabulary among students. Reading short stories improves students' grammar (Behzadi & Masoudzade, 2022; Sarojini & Revathi, 2021) and vocabulary (Behzadi & Masoudzade, 2022). In addition, Pratiwi et al.'s (2020) study revealed that short stories triggered students' motivation to read. These findings corroborate the argument that short stories motivate students (Bayram & Nejat Töngür, 2020) and that they improve students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Perdede, 2011). Zainal et al. (2021) conducted a study on the influence of short stories on language learning and noted that this genre could have a considerable effect on students' speaking skills. Likewise, Khosravani et al.

(2014) investigated the role of reading short stories and realized that they increased students' listening and speaking skills.

2.2.2 Challenges of Short Stories Use in English Language Classrooms

Scholars have identified challenges related to the use of short stories in language classrooms. For example, in their study on teachers' and students' challenges and perceptions of the use of short stories in the English classroom, Gebeyehu et al. (2019) found that language teachers held negative views of this teaching strategy due to their lack of knowledge of appropriate techniques to promote interaction between them and their students. Upreti (2012) holds that teachers have difficulties using short stories due to long structures and difficult vocabulary within the story. In addition, some language teachers focused on narrating the plot of a story rather than engaging students in brainstorming their views, which hampered their creativity and comprehension skills (Cremin, 2006).

Apart from inadequate teaching strategies, other factors hindering the learning process were observed. For instance, Gebeyehu et al.'s (2019)' results revealed that the interference of students' mother tongue and lack of acquaintance with short story-based dialogues hindered the teaching and learning process. According to Mohammed (2021), students' lack of vocabulary, influence of their own culture and social norms, and use of inadequate learning strategies prevented them from reading and analyzing short stories effectively. He adds that class, country, and age-related cultural patterns may prevent students from understanding the meaning of short stories used in classroom settings, and this results in ineffective reading and anxiety. Anxiety among students learning short stories may also arise from their inability to interpret the idea given in the literary text due to a lack of literary competence (Saka, 2014).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Study Design, Population and Sample

The study used a descriptive research design. This consists of mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) or collecting qualitative and quantitative data to find answers to research questions (Creswell, 2014). The purpose was to combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative designs (Khaldi, 2017) and address the weaknesses that might result from using only one design (Jokonya, 2016; Khaldi, 2017). The study was inquiry-based learning (IBL) by nature. This is a learner-centered instructional practice where students take responsibility for their own learning (Caswell & LaBrie, 2017). According to Gholam (2019), IBL involves students' engagement in the learning process, learning maximization, and students' knowledge construction rather than teachers' delivery.

The study population was 1050 first-year students who were taking English for General Purposes (EGP) in the College of Business and Economics in the 2021–2022 academic year. These students were from the Schools of Business, comprising the departments of Accounting, Business and Information Technology (BIT), and Finance, and the School of Economics, which has two departments: the department of Applied Statistics and the department of Economics. Since the study could not involve all the students in these departments, only the department of applied statistics and the department of business and information technology were conveniently selected as one of the researchers was teaching them. So, it was easier to collect the data together with other researchers. In these two departments, there were 272 students. These students represented others who were taking the same module. For the sake of ethics, students were explained the purpose of the research before data collection. After collecting the data, only 222 questionnaires were considered for data entry and analysis. The remaining questionnaires had not been returned, while others were incomplete.

3.2 Inquiry-Based Learning Procedures and Data Collection Tools

At the beginning of trimester 1 of the academic year 2021-2022, students were given a collection of short stories to read. Every student had to choose a short story of his or her interest, read it, learn new vocabulary, and summarize it. Then, the student had to tell the story summary to the class and present some of the new vocabulary he or she had learned. After the student had presented, classmates could ask him or her some questions about the story. These could be about the story settings, characters, the moral lesson from the story, and so on. The same procedure was used in trimester 2 for students to get familiar with reading short stories and presenting them. This time, they were asked to pick different stories. In Trimester 3, students were asked to write their own short stories and present them to the class. The purpose was to enhance students' innovative and creative writing in English, the medium of instruction. In the end, the students filled out a questionnaire expressing how they benefited in terms of language skills, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame them. After that, two focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted. FGIs involved students from the departments of Business and Information Technology and Applied Statistics, and

they were carried out on March 8, 2023, and April 28, 2023, respectively. During FGIs, students expressed their views on how short stories had affected their English language skills.

3.3 Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. A questionnaire distributed to the respondents generated quantitative data that was then analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. With the software, researchers used descriptive statistics to run frequencies and percentages of the students' perceptions of their English skills improvement as a result of using short stories. Similarly, qualitative data were collected using FGIs and analyzed thematically. To do this, the data was grouped into themes according to their similarities and differences.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Response Rate

This section presents findings emerging from both qualitative and quantitative data. Students' perceptions of short stories are displayed in Figure 1 prior to the presentation of the identified themes, which are the development of the four English language macroskills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and vocabulary and the acquisition of cultural values.

Table 1
Response Rate

Sampled number of students	Answered questionnaires	Response rate
272	222	81.6%

Table 1 presents the response rate from the administered questionnaires. According to the table, 272 questionnaires were distributed, but only 222 of them were entirely filled; the remaining 50 questionnaires were either not completed or partially completed, and the researchers decided not to consider them for the study. Therefore, the response rate was 81.6%.
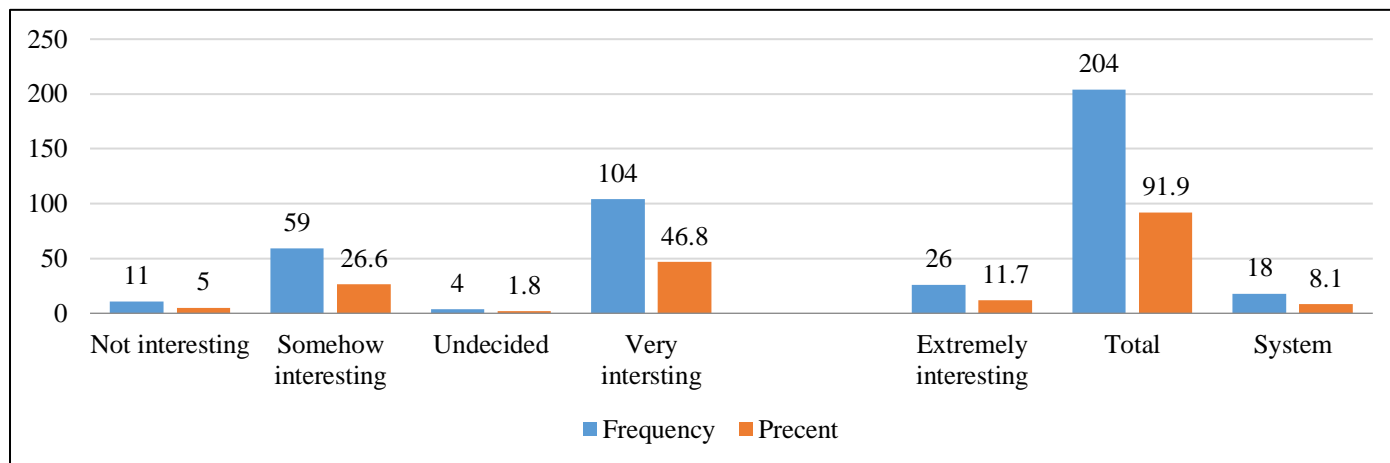

Figure 1
Perceptions of Short Story Reading Activities in Class

Figure 1 indicates that 59 (26.6%) respondents were somehow interested. In addition, 11 (5%) student respondents were not interested in short stories, while 4 (1.8) did not reveal their stand at all. Although these respondents gave little value to the usage of short stories in language classrooms, Luís (2020) argues that short stories are more interesting, suitable, and engaging than scientific and historical texts and that teachers should provide students with such genres. Figure 1 also shows that 104 (46.8%) and 26 (11.7%) respondents were very and extremely interested in short stories, respectively. This category of respondents considered short stories as a motivation to learn the target language in that they helped them to upgrade their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and vocabulary, and to gain knowledge of cultural values. This finding corroborates Perdede's (2011) assertion that short stories are authentic materials for language teaching. Perdede's claim is consistent with the views of Bayram and Nejat Töngür's (2020) and Zainal et al.'s (2021), who contend that short stories increase students' language skills. Short stories were also considered an invaluable literary genre to apply in foreign language classrooms (Kurdi & Nizam, 2022; Perdede, 2011).

Evidently, through reading short stories, first-year students at the University of Rwanda might have acquired several language skills as they performed different tasks. Doing different language tasks supports the constructivism theory as language learners build their knowledge from the information they read (Behrens, 2021). Indeed, the knowledge that respective students obtained from reading short stories was also shared with others in a kind of social environment (Suhendi et al., 2021). Figure 2 presents findings regarding the development of language skills.
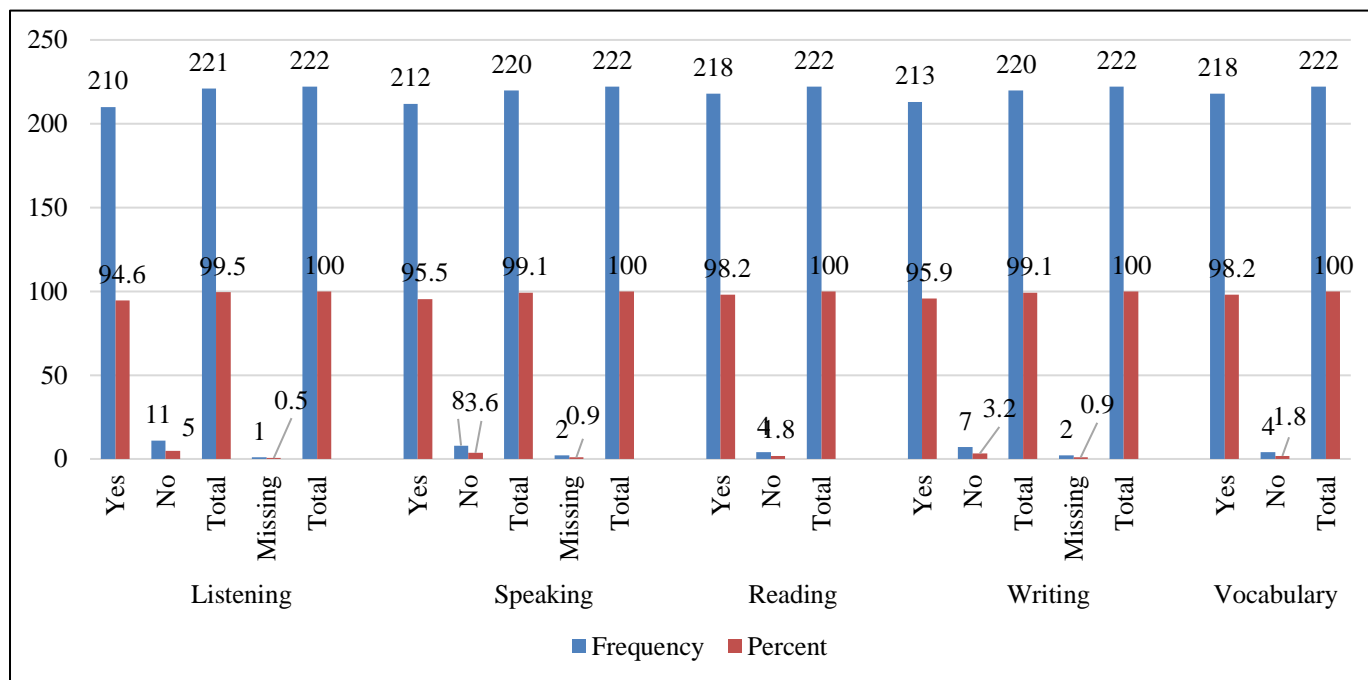

Figure 2
Development of Language Skills

Figure 2 shows that student respondents improved the four language macromodalities and enriched their vocabulary. These skills are discussed in the order in which they appear.

4.2 Development of Listening Skills

Figure 2 demonstrates that 210 (94.6%) student respondents enhanced their listening skills while 11 (5%) did not. Results from open-ended questions showed that respondents who acknowledged the role of short stories in improving their listening skills evoked ways in which they were helpful. As an illustration, a member of FG1 stated that he attentively listened to others' stories during presentations and that this helped him increase his listening skills. Another respondent from FG2 confessed that her peers' presentations contributed to the improvement of her English accent. Respondents attested to their improvement in listening skills in these words. One student said, "*Short stories increased my listening skills because I got used to listening to others present.*" Another respondent said, "*I was used to listening to stories and conversations in Kinyarwanda only, but now I can listen to somebody speaking English.*" This complies with Luis's (2020) view that listening involves hearing sounds, intonation, stress, and different accents. The research team also believes that the more students listen to short stories, the more they improve their accent and pronunciation. Further to this, half of the FG 3 members declared that listening to short stories opened up their minds. In other words, these students' levels of understanding and/or ways of thinking developed. According to Ceylan (2016), short stories enable teachers to broaden their students' perspectives and to think more about the root causes of a problem than its effect. Obviously, short stories effectively engage students in listening practices and positively improve their listening skills (Rahmawati & Rakhmawati, 2022).

4.3 Development of Speaking Skills

Figure 2 indicates that 212 (95.5%) student respondents benefited from the use of short stories in that they improved their speaking skills while the remaining 8 (3.6%) did not. The majority of respondents reported that the presentation of short stories removed their fear of speaking in front of a big audience.
The following extracts from interviews with students show that short stories helped to boost their speaking proficiency:

"*Before the incorporation of short stories, I was afraid of standing in front of people. I was also scared of talking to many people. However, I gradually became self-confident thanks to presentations of short stories.*"

S35: "*It is always difficult for people who are not familiar with reading books in English to present in front of people. In most cases, we understand the content we read from books but we fail to present it with ease. However, the more we and colleagues present, the more we acquire presentation skills.*"

S16: "*While reading short stories, I acquire a lot of vocabulary and values such as zealousness, politeness, patience and tolerance.*"

The extracts above have two implications. Firstly, students gained presentation skills and became confident. In line with this, short stories reduce students' speaking anxiety (Kasap & Sari, 2022). Clearly, in addition to promoting students' confidence, short stories may enhance active participation in lessons and the language competence needed in real-life situations. Secondly, the provided extracts highlight that, through short stories, students gain values related to real life. This confirms Pardede's (2021) view that short stories present human experiences pertaining to real life and help students discover exemplary human values that they might adopt for the betterment of their own lives. Similarly, Bayram and Nejat Töngür (2020) contend that short stories encompass different values that enhance an individual's personal development. Kurdi and Nizam (2022) also argue that short stories give students exposure to cultural diversity that can shape their lifestyles. Manifestly, short stories add value to cultural norms acquired from parents' upbringing and from society. They can thus be an invaluable tool for cultivating sound behaviour among students.

4.4 Development of Reading Skills

Figure 2 shows that 218 (98.2%) student respondents developed their reading skills through reading short stories while 4 (1.8%) did not. Many respondents reported that they managed to know how to read different words and increase comprehension and reading habits. The following excerpt from S16 illustrates this:

S16: "*Through reading, you improve many skills including confidence, pronunciation, reading culture and critical reading. Sometimes one may neglect reading English saying I do not know it but since s/he has to present, s/he takes the responsibility to do it. In the first trimester, I was not interested in reading but in the second one, I was very excited about it. The time I devoted to reading something other than the notes increased.*"

The excerpt indicates that reading short stories helped students in a number of ways, such as becoming self-confident, improving their pronunciation and critical thinking skills, and developing a reading culture. With regard to the reading culture, Ceylan (2016) asserts that reading short stories in classroom settings increases students' appreciation for literature and makes them read more short stories. Aprinoto Hebri (2022) also holds that the use of short stories as a teaching strategy enables students to boost their reading comprehension abilities. In addition, Ceylan (2016) is of the view that short stories make students think more about the reasons than the results. In other words, this author argues that short stories help increase students' critical thinking abilities. In accordance with our findings, Rodríguez's (2017) study revealed that students significantly improved their vocabulary and oral competence and gained new expressions.

In addition, the incorporation of short stories in English courses instilled the reading culture that students did not have before. For example, S16 and S68 respectively affirmed:

"*Even though reading is a difficult practice, it is good to get familiar with it. Sometimes one may belittle one's English but because I had to present, I had to do the assigned task because I did not have any other choice. Anyway, I acquired some reading skills and somehow became familiar with reading.*"

"*I found the reading of short stories to be an issue. I thought our lecturer was giving us hard time and that he hated us but I later on realised he used a useful strategy that helped us in the course of our studies.*"

The first two extracts show that the students complained about the reading activity incorporated in their language classroom as they found it to be a difficult task. However, the research team considers their claim irrelevant since at university level, students are assumed to be familiar with varieties of reading materials and to be equipped with different reading strategies. This aligns with Akinola's (2021) view that reading is an intellectual practice that starts from individuals' childhood and serves as the foundation of education. From what they observed, the research team also believes that reading helps students to upgrade their proficiency in English in several ways. Therefore, the reading culture should be cultivated from home and instilled in children at an early age even though 26.6% of student respondents seemed not to be very much interested in short stories, and 5% were not interested at all.

4.5 Development of Writing Skills

According to Figure 2, 213 (95.9%) student respondents improved their writing skills through writing their own short stories and 7 (3.2%) did not. These results support findings from the interviews which revealed that short

stories enhanced creativity. To illustrate this S47 stated, "*I knew how to write the words whose spelling was strange to me and this helped to present without any fear. While presenting a story from your own imagination, we were confident enough. It was easier than presenting a story that you have read from another source.*"

The implication from this excerpt is that students presented short stories they had written on their own. Their creativity had increased to the extent that they were able to write short stories and present them confidently. This agrees with Boubekeur's (2021) findings which showed that through short story usage, students' thinking and writing skills were improved and their creativity was boosted. Similarly, El-Mahdy et al. (2019) explain that using short stories develop students' creative skills. This is emphasised by Jan and Aziz (2022) who state that short stories enable students to "develop their imaginations, thoughts, ideas and opinions as well as their literature and cultural knowledge" (p.23). Furthermore, the above extract implies that students learnt how to write words appropriately. This is confirmed by S70's claim that the use of short stories enabled him to write different words correctly.

Visibly, the use of short stories in classroom settings allowed students to improve their spelling of English words. In this regard, Zainal et al. (2021) maintain that reading short stories results in word recognition, fluency and word knowledge. Not only did short stories contribute to students' spelling skills, but they also raised their awareness of verb conjugation and sentence construction. To illustrate this, S43 asserted, "*Writing short stories helped me to learn verb conjugation and produce reasonable sentences.*" These results comply with findings that the incorporation of short stories in language classes can improve the students' knowledge of grammar (Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020). The inclusion of motivational resources such as short stories into language classrooms is reported to develop students' sentence construction and composition skills (Mclean & Buzacott, 2022).

4.6 Development of Vocabulary Skills

Figure 2 demonstrates that 218 (98.2%) student respondents improved their vocabulary through short story reading and that only 4 (1.8%) did not. For example, S12 stated she could not skip a single difficult word without understanding its meaning. Similarly, S80 affirmed that he managed to comprehend words that were initially complicated and to recall them whenever he came across them again while reading. The following extracts from interviews with students highlight the importance of reading short stories in boosting vocabulary.

S10: "*Personally, I gained a lot of things including vocabulary items. Whenever I encountered difficult words, I was compelled to look them up in the dictionary. I also gained a lot of important information from short stories.*"

S80: "*I can testify that somebody cannot forget what s/he read from a short story and that s/he ends up understanding the meanings of difficult vocabulary items s/he was struggling with. S/he also recalls the meaning of these words whenever s/he comes across them again. Moreover, I noticed that the more one reads short stories, the more s/he improves on her/his English skills.*"

The above extracts lead to a number of implications. Firstly, they show that reading was considered a daunting exercise, but that with the incorporation of short stories in language classrooms, students without previous reading culture increased their vocabulary and dictionary skills. Secondly, the extracts indicate that the reading of short stories made students familiar with reading skills and acquired new vocabulary items. Students considered reading short stories a scaffold for understanding the meaning of English words and recognising them whenever they were reading. In short, the more short stories they read, the more new English vocabulary items they gained. In agreement with this, short stories are an important strategy for teaching vocabulary (Hassan & Erteme, 2020; Mohamed, 2022; Jeni, 2020; Sulfikar et al., 2019). Khamroeva (2021) also asserts that through short stories, students unknowingly memorise words and phrases, guess their meanings or check them in dictionaries, and use the gained vocabulary to ensure their knowledge lasts longer. The above-mentioned authors go on to say that story-based activities for vocabulary development allow teachers to promote their students' productive skills (speaking and writing).

4.7 Challenges Encountered while Using Short Stories
4.7.1 Limited English Skills

The findings revealed that students' proficiency in the English language was, in general, very limited in terms of spelling, tense, vocabulary, and writing. For example, they showed that the majority of respondents encountered difficult words whose meaning they barely understood while reading short stories. According to S22, the short stories she read comprised some old English words that made them difficult to understand. This is in accordance with Mohammed's (2021) findings that disclosed students' inability to comprehend the vocabulary embedded in short stories. This led the researchers to assume that complicated vocabulary items are likely to slow down students' reading activity and prevent them from interacting with the authors of the reading material and the reading material itself.

However, the findings also revealed that students had difficulty producing their own short stories due to their limited vocabulary. For example, S54 confessed, "*I had several ideas that I wanted to jot down, but I could not because of my lack of acquaintance with English vocabulary or my lack of translation skills.*" In the same vein, S51

stated, *"Sometimes I had a flow of ideas in Kinyarwanda, but it was too difficult for me to translate them into English."* Obviously, both respondents had a flow of ideas in their mother tongue, but they could not express them in written form in English. This corroborates Nazara's (2019) view that vocabulary knowledge is the cornerstone of effective communication. In contrast, findings indicated that some students knew English words but could not write them properly. As an illustration, S49 asserted, *"While writing, I knew some words but did not know how to write them in English. I was also challenged by tenses."* As can be noted, in addition to limited spelling skills, students lacked mastery of English tenses. This might be another contributing factor to some students' failure to write their own short stories. This aligns with Wilkins's (1972) argument that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111).

4.7.2 Lack of Confidence

The findings indicated that some students were afraid of presenting short stories that they had either read or produced. For example, S41 stated that she was afraid of mispronouncing words and providing irrelevant ideas while presenting short stories in front of her classmates and avoiding being laughed at. S66 also attested that she wondered how she could stand in front of people, telling them a story for the very first time, as she did not know the right vocabulary to use and dreaded being mocked by colleagues. The above claims imply that students had limited pronunciation skills and lacked vocabulary that could enable them to communicate with their audience effectively. This was a real issue, as students had preconceived ideas that their colleagues would laugh at them. In line with this, S38 stated that he misspelt words he knew very well due to fear of being judged by his classmates during the presentation. In his study on 'Obstacles encountered while integrating literature in teaching English', Yulnetri's (2018) findings indicated that lack of vocabulary, appropriate pronunciation, and limited confidence were common problems among Indonesian students he researched. Satriani's (2019) study on 'Storytelling in Teaching Literacy: Benefits and Challenges' also revealed that students had limited vocabulary and pronunciation skills.

4.7 Solutions

While asked ways in which they surmounted the identified challenges, student respondents revealed a number of remedies. One of the solutions is mutual support. For example, S15 and S29 declared that students who were more knowledgeable explained complicated vocabulary to their peers. As for S15, he confessed that whenever he encountered a new word, he asked classmates for its correct spelling. Another solution was to revise tenses and use dictionaries to work on stories. To illustrate this, S26 and S28 admitted that they downloaded grammar books in order to comprehend and revise all the tenses and acquire knowledge of time sequences. S22 stated, "*I found that the solution would be to learn tenses as early as possible in order to write correctly.*" S26 acknowledged, "*I asked my colleagues, 'which tense can I use to express this?'*" Likewise, S25, S31, and S55 explained that they looked up difficult words in dictionaries or used the internet to grasp their meanings.

As far as the lack of confidence was concerned, students admitted that the more they presented, the more they became confident enough to speak in front of their colleagues. In this regard, S16 affirmed that since she had to present the story in front of others, she made efforts to understand it. Similarly, S35 and S39 declared they overcame the fear of speaking in public. S34 avowed, "*Standing in front of people was challenging, but we improved as time went on.*".

These findings indicate that students applied different strategies in order to learn different skills through short stories. This validates the views of different scholars. For example, Al-Dersi (2013) contends that using short stories in foreign language learning is another way to develop students' vocabulary in a natural and enjoyable way. In a similar vein, Sarojini and Revathi (2021) argue that language learners develop speaking skills through the use of short stories. As for Anuradha and Rengaraj (2019), they assert that short stories enhance language learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and grammar.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study aimed to explore University of Rwanda year-one students' perceptions of the impact of short stories on their English proficiency. According to the findings, students reported that the use of short stories helped them improve their English language macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and vocabulary. They asserted that they improved their intonation and accent, gained confidence to speak in public, developed reading and writing skills, and increased their vocabulary. In addition, students indicated that they gained much of cultural values that were worth adopting in their everyday life such as love, patriotism, courage, patience, and so on.

The findings from this study are consistent with the Constructivism Theory that highlights the learners' engagement in actively creating knowledge in a social situation. In fact, students developed different language skills

through short story reading. For them, in addition to reading, short stories were an excellent opportunity to listen to their colleagues presenting, to speak in front of others and to write their own stories. According to the Constructivism theory, one's activities yield knowledge, and new knowledge is obtained by incorporating new information into the existing knowledge. In our context, students gained new information from their own reading and socially supported it with that from others' short stories.

However, the findings also indicate that students' low English proficiency constitutes a hindrance to the effective use of short stories as they may do badly because of lack of confidence, difficulties understanding while listening to or reading short stories or when requested to write their own short stories. To overcome these challenges, students resorted to seeking guidance from their peers and looking for English books to revise some language notions that they had not mastered well or forgotten. They also reported that using short stories gradually helped them to build their confidence.

Briefly, reading is one of the techniques that has proven to boost second/foreign language learners' language proficiency. It is also assumed that using short stories in language classrooms is highly effective as these learning materials are interesting and engaging to the students. Nevertheless, not many lecturers of English have recourse to this literary genre.

5.2 Recommendations

As a recommendation, lecturers of English have to devise appropriate strategies to enhance their students' English proficiency, considering that the Rwandan linguistic environment is not conducive to the learning of English, the medium of instruction. They also ought to adapt the available short stories to suit their students' interests, which will likely lead to effective learning. Moreover, students should feel responsible for their own learning and adopt short stories to upgrade their English language skills. The researchers also recommend that curriculum designers in Rwanda include short stories among teaching and learning materials, for these are believed to stimulate the students' motivation to learn.

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