

Advantages of Using Short-stories in ELT Classroom and the Libyan EFL Learners' Perceptions towards them for Developing Reading Comprehension Skill

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Abstract

Short-stories have been the center of attraction for centuries for various people for various reasons but mainly due to fascinating pedagogical aspects embedded in them. For many ELT professionals and pedagogues, they have been important topics of debate and discussion in the recent years due to numerous pedagogical benefits and implications for developing language skills of EFL learners. The advocates of the use of the short-stories for developing language skills argue that the use of short –stories offers the material which is real, creative and rich in language selection, as well as is amusing and motivational in nature. It is also considered as a highly effective approach for teaching and learning of foreign language like English and is recommended for the same reasons by eminent intellectuals. In the background of this effectiveness of the use of short-stories for developing language skills in EFL classrooms, the present paper investigates the attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill. The present status of the use of short-stories in the Libyan EFL classrooms and the researcher's perspective on the use of short-stories in the Libyan context also form an important part of the discussion in the paper.

Keywords: Short-stories, ELT, advantages, implications, EFL teachers and learners, learners' perceptions

1. Introduction

The role of short-stories, in developing reading comprehension skill, has been acknowledged for centuries by many ELT professionals and pedagogues. This use of short-stories has been widely discussed and recommended, particularly, in places where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. This is because of the fact that learning and mastering foreign language skills pose many problems and difficulties for EFL learners due to various reasons including the lack of target language exposure, inappropriate methodology, boring teaching and learning material used inside the classroom for developing the language skills and negative perceptions of teachers and / or learners towards any material or methodology. Therefore, scholars like Brumfit and Carter (1986) advocate the use of short-stories as one of the best methods in ELT, which a teacher can use, because of various educational aspects. According to them, short-stories help to develop the language skills of the students more effectively. They are easy to finish in a class and definite to understand. Stories also attract the students' attention more than any other normal passage. Keeping in mind the importance of such views about the use of short-stories in ELT classrooms for developing language skills, the present paper attempts to investigate the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards this use of short-stories as the learners, and their perceptions towards the use of any material or methodology, determine the success of that material and methodology in the classroom. The paper also focuses on the current status of the use of short-stories in the Libyan EFL classroom and offers the researcher's perspective about the use of short-stories in the Libyan EFL classroom for developing reading comprehension skill.

2. Background to the study

English is a foreign language in Libya, Arabic being the only official language. It is taught as an optional subject in colleges where the focus of teaching and learning it remains on language, linguistics and translation studies. Therefore, it is not surprising that literature forms very insignificant place in the ELT curriculums. The major subjects studied by B. A. students, specializing in English, include: four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing), Introduction to Linguistics, Levels of Linguistic Analysis, Major Branches of Linguistics, Introduction to Literature, Introduction to Teaching Methods and Theories and Practices in Translation .

In the first four semesters, of the eight semesters B. A. English Course, the focus remains on developing language skills which include: Listening Comprehension, Spoken English, Reading Comprehension Skill and Writing Skill; whereas in the later four semesters, they are taught other subjects, mentioned above, with just one course in Introduction to Literature. Lack of appreciation for literature, on the part of language teachers, in general, due to traditional teaching methods and the stigma attached to it as being a difficult subject, leads both teachers and students to the alienation from literature.

The materials and methodology used for teaching language skills, specially reading comprehension skill, vary from teacher to teacher as there are no prescribed text-books. This gives freedom of material selection to the course teachers. The reading comprehension skill course teachers often use a variety of texts for teaching reading comprehension skill which include: news paper articles, informative passages and varied essays and articles from various sources. It is important to note here that authentic short-stories, by distinguished English writers or writers in English, do not form a significant place in these materials selected by the course teachers. This leads many Libyan EFL learners to develop a negative attitude towards learning of

English in general. Most of them regard it as a very boring and difficult language due to the uninteresting material used. This also makes the learners dependent on the course teachers for all the activities in the class. Today the role of the communicative approach in foreign language teaching is highly recommended as it promotes learner-centered teaching, making the learners more independent, critical, logical and analytical in their thinking under minimum supervision. However, that does not seem to be the case in the Libyan ELT classrooms as neither the communicative approach is adopted nor are the learners encouraged to be self-dependent, while developing their language skills, especially reading comprehension skill.

On the one side we find the continuing debates, and research studies, recommending the use of literature, in general, and short stories, in particular, in second and foreign language education and on the other side, we find the lack of appreciation for literature on the part of the Libyan EFL teachers due to traditional teaching methods and the stigma attached to it as being a difficult subject. With this background, this paper attempts to investigate the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards literature, in general, and short stories, in particular, for developing their reading comprehension skill. It also discusses the advantages of the use of short-stories in ELT classrooms for developing the reading comprehension skill and the implications of this use of short-stories both for the Libyan EFL teachers and learners.

3. Short-stories in ELT Classroom for Developing Language Skills: Advantages and Implications

Many scholars (Bretz, 1990; Kelly, and Krishnan, 1995; Gilroy, and Parkinson, 1997; Belcher, and Hirvela, 2000; and Kim, 2004) have discussed the use of literature, in general, and short-stories, in particular, in ELT classrooms for developing language skills and recommended the use of short-stories in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Such debates and discussions, on the role and use of short-stories in ELT classroom, have often concluded on recommending storytelling as a holistic approach to language teaching and learning. Such recommendations, according to Mourão (2009) are founded on the understanding that ‘learners need to interact with rich, authentic examples of the foreign language’ (p.17).

The use of short-stories in ELT classroom for developing language skills has many advantages and implications. Bretz (1990), while discussing the importance of the use of short-stories in foreign language teaching, illustrates that stories help to improve communicative competence by providing ‘a springboard for the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation’ (P.338). Wright (2003), another champion of the use of short-stories, argues that ‘in using stories in language teaching, we are using something much bigger and more important than language teaching itself’ (p.7). Pathan (2013) classifies various benefits of the use of short-stories in EFL classroom under different categories such as: linguistic, socio-cultural, personal and emotional and discusses them in detail focusing on their possible implications for EFL teachers and learners. Mourão (2009) also offers a list of thirty advantages of the use of short-stories in ELT classrooms. According to Lazar (1993), the use of short-stories in ELT classroom offers the teaching and learning material which is motivating, authentic and has great educational value. Stories help students to understand another culture and work as a stimulus for language acquisition. They also develop students’ interpretative abilities and help in expanding their language awareness. Stories also encourage students to express their opinions and feelings and make language learning fun by bringing a bit of excitement to a classroom which can work as a change of routine and a new recipe. This is why scholars like Garvie (1990) propose that foreign language learning be led by story.

Short-stories are filled with many linguistic advantages such as simplicity of sentence structures and vocabulary used in context and make learning of foreign language skills easy and simple. They help to improve EFL learners' vocabulary and motivate them to learn the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing more effectively. Elaborating on this linguistic aspect, Murdoch (2002) argues that stories allow instructors to teach the four language skills to all levels of language proficiency, and if selected and exploited appropriately, 'short-stories provide quality text-content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency'(p.9).

The controlled length of short-stories with the concise writing, with carefully selected vocabulary and lexis, is another linguistic benefit that short-stories can offer in ELT classrooms. Stories contain authentic, contextualized, natural and simple dialogues which can help EFL learners not only in understanding the usage of English in a better way but also in using these dialogues and important structures in their own life. In foreign language teaching situations like Libya, where learners often have negative attitudes towards reading in English, short-stories, quite readily, can lend themselves to capturing and holding the attention spans of learners and can help in transforming these negative attitudes into positive ones.

Collie and Slater (1991) also strongly advocate the use of short-stories in ELT classroom for developing reading comprehension skill due to various practical benefits. They also offer practical techniques and strategies for incorporating short-stories in ELT classroom in an effective and interesting way. According to them, short-stories are practical in ELT classroom as their length is long enough to cover entirely in one or two class sessions. They are not complicated for students to work with on their own and can help develop their self-dependency while learning a foreign language like English. They have a variety of choice for different interests and tastes and can be used with all levels (beginner to advanced), all ages (young learners to adults), and all classes (summer courses to evening classes).

The use of short-stories has many socio-cultural benefits as well. In the culturally sensitive contexts like Libya, they can also be the best method of inculcating cultural and moral values as stories have been the best method of transmitting values, principles, and common sense for centuries. In this regard, Kirschenbaum (1995) asserts that storytelling is 'one of the effective tools for inculcating morality, especially for the youth, as stories contain powerful images and symbols and operate on both conscious and unconscious levels, conveying intellectual and emotional meaning' (p.68). Pathan (2013) also elaborates this argument for the use of short-stories and stresses that 'in the modern, culturally barren, world of today, where cultural values are degrading everyday and many evils and tribulations are infecting our young generation with unthinkable bad habits, immoral deeds, immodest behavior and horrific crimes in their early tender age, stories can be the best method of inculcating healing cultural and moral values' (p.24).

The stories from the Holy Quran and other Islamic stories, about the life of the Holy Prophet [peace and blessing be upon him], and his companions as well as other religious and moral stories, can be highly effective for this purpose with the Libyan Arab EFL learners. The Libyan Arab EFL learners' familiarity, with these stories, will not only make their learning of English easy but will rejuvenate their cultural and moral values as well. Thus, stories will not only help them in developing their foreign language skills but also their moral character.

The use of short-stories has emotional benefits also for EFL learners. Stories provide language learners a picture of people, through the characters, while they are struggling and suffering which can prepare young learners to cope with the conflicts in their own life. Stories also help language

learners to release their own feeling, which is considered to be very essential for a healthy development. The use of short-stories can also help them in strengthening their creative impulses, particularly in the area of writing.

With such advantages, there is no doubt that if rightly used; short-stories will help the Libyan EFL learners in developing not only their language skills but their character as well. However, as the learners and their perceptions determine the success of any material used in the classroom; their attitudes need to be investigated before making the decision about that material. Therefore, the following section of the paper investigates the Libyan EFL learners' perceptions towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill before recommending this use for them.

4. Libyan EFL Learners' Perceptions towards the Use of Short-stories

4.1 Participants and Methodology

To investigate the Libyan EFL learners' attitudes and perceptions towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill, various methods were adopted to suit the purpose of this study. 50 third semester Libyan EFL students [both male and female], doing their B. A. in English, were selected for the study. The reason, behind selecting the third semester students, was to avoid selecting only the beginners or advanced students. These students were given questionnaires to find out their initial opinions about-a) learning of English, in general, and reading comprehension skill, in particular, b) kind of material used by their course teachers to teach reading comprehension skill, and c) their perceptions towards literature, in general, and short stories, in particular, for developing reading comprehension skill.

After analyzing and understanding their initial perceptions, these selected participants were taught by the researcher using short-stories as the main teaching and learning material for three months. The short-stories were selected following various criteria. They were neither too simple nor too complex for the learners; they were written both by English writers as well as by the writers in English, they were about various topics and did not go against any cultural or religious values of the Libyan Arab society.

After teaching reading comprehension skill using short-stories, following various techniques and strategies proposed by Lazar (1993) and Collie and Slater (1991), these participants were offered another questionnaire to find out-a) their attitudes towards reading comprehension skill and b) the use of short-stories for teaching reading comprehension skill in the classrooms.

The data collected from both the questionnaires, offered prior and after the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill, were classified in the line with the aims of the study and analyzed to find out the results of the study and draw the appropriate conclusions. The following section of the paper focuses on this analysis, discussion and the results of the study.

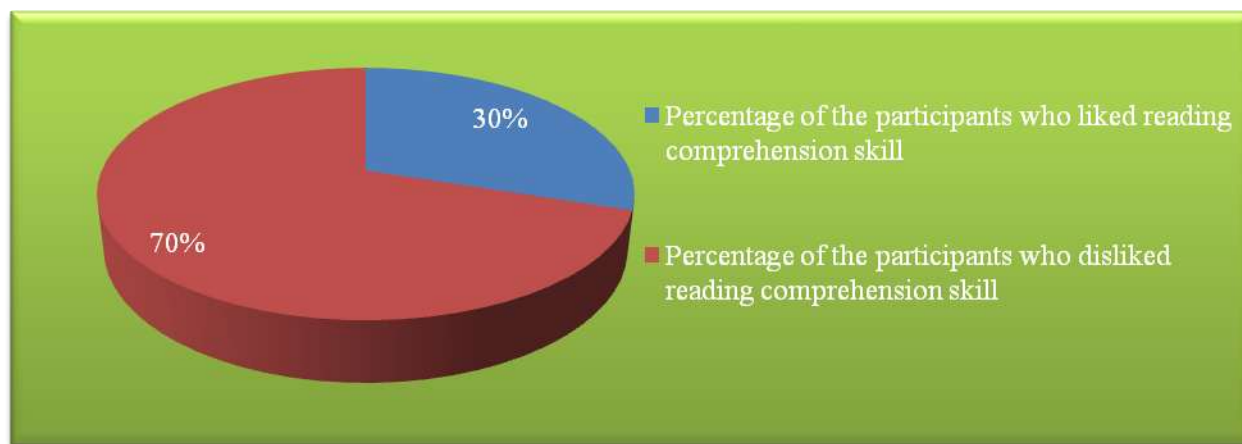
4.2 Data Analysis, Discussion and Results

4.2.1 Analysis and discussion of the data of the questionnaires offered prior to the use of short-stories

The questionnaires, answered by the participants, were classified in the line with the aims of the study and their responses were analyzed to find out the details about the specified aims. The responses of the participants to the questions asked varied.

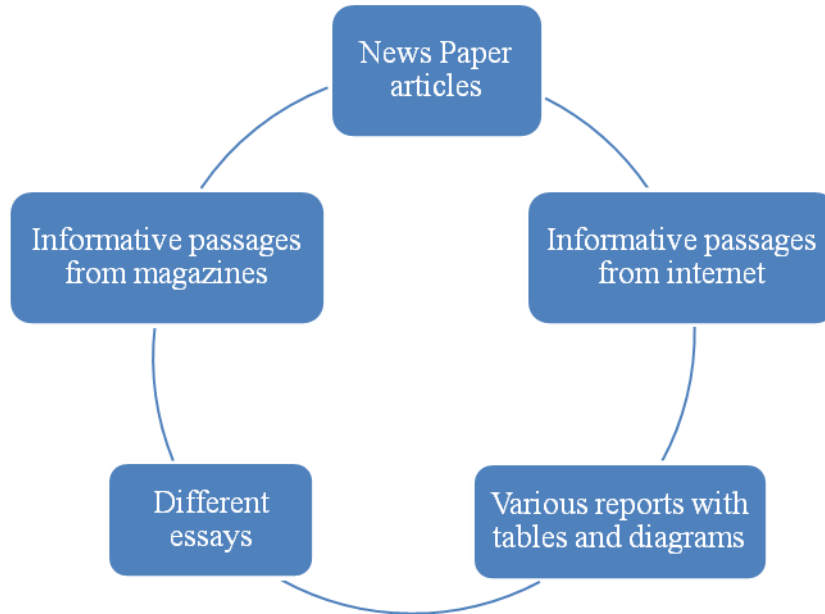
First, they were asked if they liked studying English language. To this question, almost 30 participants (60%) replied positively. They were further asked about their views about reading in English, in general, and reading comprehension skill, in particular to which only 15 participants (30%) replied positively saying that they felt comfortable with this important skill in English. The remaining 35 participants (70%) had negative attitudes towards reading comprehension skill due to various reasons. Some regarded it as the most difficult skill whereas some regarded it as a boring course. This question was essential for the purpose of the study as it aimed at investigating the initial attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill. The following chart reveals these initial attitudes, before the use of short-stories, of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill.

Figure: 1 *Initial attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill*



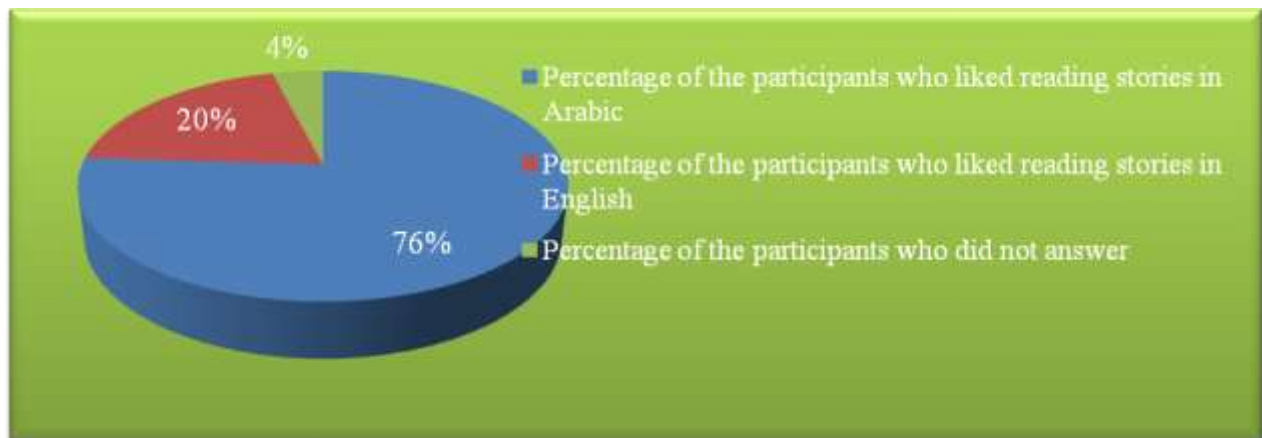
The next question was about the teaching material used by their course teachers in reading comprehension skill class. The participants replied that their course teachers used various types of material including- various reports, news paper articles as well as other informative passages from magazines and internet, and essays etc. None of the participants mentioned the use of authentic short-stories as the teaching and learning material to develop reading comprehension skill in the Libyan EFL classrooms. These responses of the participants, thus, reveal the status of the use of short-stories in the Libyan EFL classrooms. An overview of these teaching and learning materials used in reading comprehension skill class is presented in the following figure.

Figure: 2 *Types of teaching material used by the Libyan EFL teachers in reading comprehension skill class*



They were further asked about their perceptions towards literature, in general, and short-stories, in particular. It was clear from their responses that most of them had negative attitudes towards literature, in general. They regarded it as ‘a very difficult subject’ and the subject that required ‘a lot of study’. However, most of them liked reading stories. Of the 50 selected participants, 38 participants (76%) replied that they liked to read stories but in their mother tongue Arabic only and not in English as they assumed that stories in English would be very difficult for them. 10 participants (20%) liked reading short-stories in English as well but could not find enough in the library. 2 participants (4%) did not answer. These opinions of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading stories in general are presented in the following figure.

Figure: 3 *Libyan EFL learners’ perceptions towards reading short-stories*



The data obtained and analyzed from the questionnaires, administered to the Libyan EFL learners prior to the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill, offer the insight into the Libyan EFL teachers' and learners' general perceptions towards use of literature in general and short-stories in particular. The data also help in understanding the present status of the use of short-stories in the Libyan ELT classrooms for developing reading comprehension skill. The main findings of the analysis of the data are presented below.

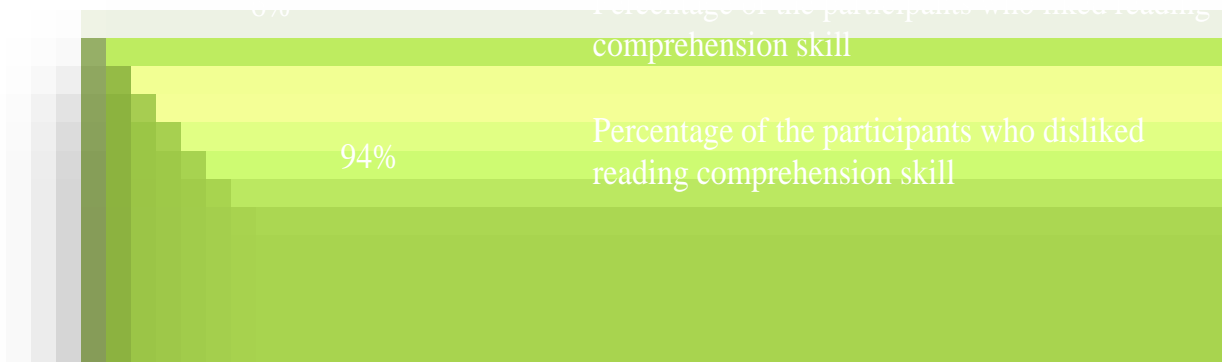
1. Most of the Libyan EFL learners regard reading comprehension skill as a difficult and boring course.
2. Literature, in general, and short-stories in particular, do not form the part of teaching and learning material of reading comprehension skill.
3. Most of the Libyan EFL learners like reading stories but in their mother tongue Arabic only as they assume that stories in English are very difficult and require great proficiency on the part of learners to read them.

4.2.2 Analysis and discussion of the data of the questionnaires offered after the use of short-stories.

The selected students were offered another questionnaire after they had been taught reading comprehension skill by using short-stories. The aim of this questionnaire was to check if the initial perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards- a) learning English, in general, and reading comprehension, skill, in particular and b) the use of short-stories for teaching, learning and developing reading comprehension skill were the same as before or had changed after the use of short-stories in the classroom. Their responses were classified and analyzed. The data revealed quite interesting facts about the use of short-stories in the Libyan ELT classroom for developing reading comprehension skill.

The first question, in the questionnaire, was about their perception towards the reading comprehension skill, after they had studied this skill with the use of short-stories as the main teaching and learning material. They were asked what they felt about reading comprehension skill after studying it with the use of short-stories. To this question, 47 students (94%) replied positively saying that they enjoyed reading because of the stories used in the classroom. 03 students (6%) replied negatively. The following chart shows these perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill after studying it with the use of short-stories.

Figure: 4 Perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill after studying it with the use of short-stories



These perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners, if compared with their initial attitudes towards reading comprehension skill (as specified in **Figure: 1**) speak a lot about the role of short-stories in transforming the negative attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners into positive ones. This also proves that short-stories can play a very important role in arousing love and liking for reading among EFL learners who often dislike this important language skill and have negative attitudes.

They were further asked if they liked to be taught reading comprehension skill by using such stories by their course teachers and if so, why. They were asked to give as many reasons as possible based on the benefits they experienced from the use of short-stories in their reading comprehension skill class. Their responses to this question were positive and the reasons varied. They reported that the use of short-stories not only developed liking for reading comprehension skill among them but also helped them in guessing the meaning of the difficult words from the context as it was quite easy compared to other informative texts their teachers used. Some believed that the use of short-stories was and could be the best method to learn a foreign language like English as through stories, they could learn how the characters in the stories used English for various purposes and thus understood the usage of English in a better way. They also reported that the dialogues and narratives of the characters in the stories helped them in learning and mastering not only essential, selective vocabulary and structures but also idiomatic expressions which they needed in day to day life. Some also stressed that the use of short-stories provided them the much needed target language exposure. They believed that by reading stories in English they could overcome the problem of lack of exposure of target language in Libya as English is taught and learned here as a foreign language.

The participants also wanted the use of stories in their reading comprehension skill class because they believed that the stories they studied taught them many lessons, through the characters. The characters struggling with many conflicts and problems in their life, in the stories they studied, helped them in learning and understanding many problems in their own life in a better way. Thus, they contributed in their personal growth as they felt quite motivated after reading the stories.

They also replied that while reading stories, they imagined themselves with the characters and got involved in the stories emotionally. Sometimes they laughed and sometimes they cried with the characters in the stories as they made emotional appeal to them and helped them to release

their own emotions with the characters and for the characters. Sometimes certain conflicts in the stories made them think that they were their own stories depicting their own emotional, personal, psychological, social, religious and political conflicts. And through stories, they learned how to face and overcome such conflicts and problems in their own life.

These various benefits experienced and reported by the Libyan EFL learners in support of the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill were classified under different categories. The details of these categories, the number of the participants, who reported these benefits of the use of short-stories, along with their percentage are tabulated below:

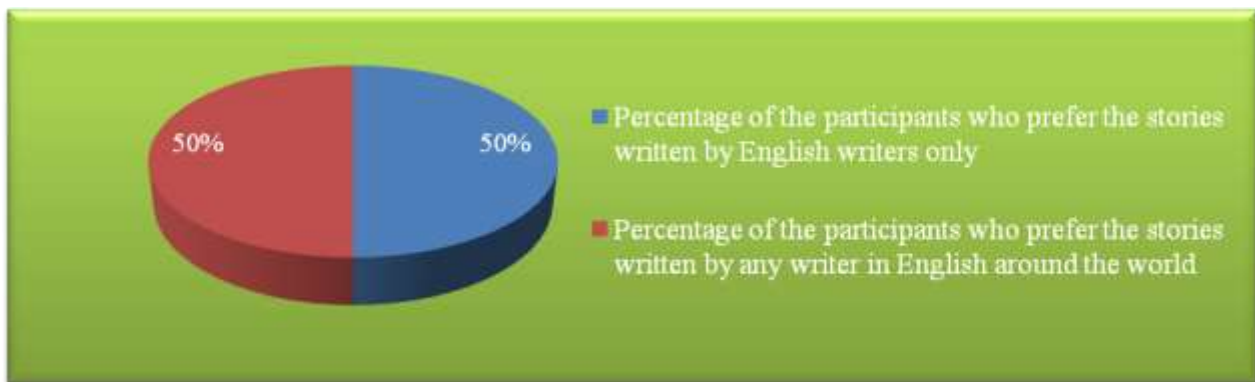
Table: 1 Various benefits of the use of short-stories reported by the Libyan EFL learners in support of the use of short-stories along with the number and percentage of the participants who reported these benefits

Sr. No.	Category	Details of the benefits of the use of short-stories experienced by the participants	Number of the participants	Percentage
1.	Linguistic benefits	Stories helped in developing liking for learning English in general and reading comprehension skill in particular	38	76%
		Stories helped in guessing the meaning of the difficult words from context and in improving essential vocabulary		
		Stories helped in understanding the usage of English		
		Stories helped in learning and understanding idiomatic expressions as well as most required structures in English		
		Stories offered the much needed exposure to the target language		
		Stories made learning English a fun		
2.	Personal benefits	Stories motivated significantly	05	10%
		Stories helped in understanding problems and conflicts in life in better way		
		Stories helped in facing the problems in life and overcoming them successfully		
3.	Emotional benefits	Stories helped releasing emotions with and for the characters in stories	04	08%
		Stories helped in establishing emotional and cognitive balance		
Total number and the percentage of the participants who favoured the use of short-stories in reading comprehension skill because of various benefits they experienced			47	94%

These reasons given by the Libyan EFL learners, in support of the use of short-stories in their EFL classroom, strengthen the arguments, presented in the section 3 of this paper, of various scholars in support of the use of short-stories.

The participants were further asked about the types of stories and the writers they preferred. They replied that they wanted their teachers to use all types of stories such as personal, social, religious, moral, historical etc. as they enjoyed the mixture rather than using just one type of the stories. Regarding the question about the writers, their opinions were divided. Half of the participants preferred the stories only by English writers as they believed that through the stories by native speakers of English they would learn ‘real’ English, whereas the others preferred stories written by any writer in English around the globe. According to them, stories written by various writers in English around the globe would offer them window into various cultures and not just the English culture. Thus, the stories written by writers in English around the globe would offer them opportunities to understand various cultures, and the world at large, in a better way. These divided opinions of the Libyan EFL learners are shown in the following chart.

Figure: 5 Preferences of the Libyan EFL learners for the writers of short-stories to be selected for reading comprehension skill class



The discussion of the data, about the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill, offers the following results:

1. The Libyan EFL learners develop liking for reading comprehension skill with the use of short-stories in the classroom.
2. They experienced and enjoy various linguistic, personal and emotional benefits with the use of short-stories which significantly contributed in their learning and mastering of English as a foreign language.
3. They prefer the use of short-stories in their classroom from their course teachers for developing reading comprehension skill.
3. They prefer various types of short-stories, written by both English writers and any other writer in English around the world, to be taught in their reading comprehension skill class.
4. They believe that short-stories not only make their learning English, in general, and reading comprehension in particular, a fun but also contribute in developing them into ‘a complete person’.

5. Conclusion

The use of short-stories in ELT classroom has always been recommended by the pundits in the field for developing reading comprehension skill as stories offer infinite linguistic as well as personal, socio-cultural, cognitive and emotional benefits for the language learners. Being the product of creative writers who have better command over language, stories are considered to be rich in language and amusing in nature and help in overcoming the problem of negative attitudes of EFL learners towards reading comprehension skill. Stories expose EFL learners to the functional, situational and idiomatic use of language and thus, help in understanding and mastering the intricacies and nuances of a foreign language like English.

However, as the learners and their perceptions determine the success of any material used for developing language skills, it was essential to investigate the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill. From the investigation, it was observed that the Libyan EFL learners have positive attitudes towards the use of short-stories. Their initial negative perceptions towards reading comprehension skill and literature, in general, were due to an inappropriate material used in the classroom and because of their misconceptions about literature, in general, and short-stories, in particular. With the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill, these misconceptions, however, were cleared up and they were offered an alternative learning material which is considered to be rich not only linguistically but from many other perspectives. This learning material, presented in the form of short-stories, helped in transforming their initial negative attitudes towards reading comprehension skill into positive ones and also contributed significantly to easy fostering of their other related language skills.

Therefore, to conclude, if foreign language teachers and learners in Libya come out of their misconceptions and stigma towards the use of short-stories in ELT classroom, they can equip themselves with what is regarded as one of the best methods of teaching English as a foreign language in an authentic context. And, if selected and taught appropriately, understanding the levels and perceptions of the learners, short-stories can create miracles not only in developing language skill like reading comprehension but also in developing socio-cultural, moral and other personal traits of the Libyan EFL learners.

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Appendix: A Questionnaire offered prior to the use of the short-stories

Dear Student,

This questionnaire aims to collect the data about the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill. Kindly return this questionnaire by answering all the questions in it. Your cooperation is highly appreciated.

1. Do you like studying English language?
.....
2. Do you like reading in English in general and reading comprehension skill in particular?
.....
3. What materials do your course teachers use to teach reading comprehension skill?
.....
4. Do you find these materials interesting or boring? Why?
.....
5. What is your view about literature in general and the use of literature in reading comprehension skill class?
Please specify your answer.
.....
6. Do you like reading short-stories? Please specify the type of short-stories you read.
.....
7. What do you think about the use of various types of short-stories in your reading comprehension skill class as the main learning material? Please specify your answer.
.....

Appendix: B Questionnaire offered after the use of the short-stories

Dear Student,

This questionnaire aims to collect the data about the perceptions of the Libyan EFL learners towards the use of short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill. Kindly return this questionnaire by answering all the questions in it. Your cooperation is highly appreciated.

1. What is your opinion now about reading comprehension skill after studying the skill with the use of short-stories?
.....
2. What is your opinion now about the literature in general and short-stories in particular?
.....
3. Did you enjoy the use of short-stories in your reading comprehension skill class for developing the skill? Why?
.....
4. Would you like to be taught the reading comprehension skill by using short-stories? Why? Please specify your answer.
.....
5. Do you think the use of the short-stories has benefits for the EFL learners like you? Please mention any many benefits as possible which you experienced with the use of short-stories in reading comprehension skill class.
.....
6. Do you like your teachers to use just one type of short-stories or different types of stories in reading comprehension skill class? Why? Please specify your answer.
.....
7. Do you prefer the stories written by English writers or any writer in English around the world? Why? Please specify your answer.
.....