

# Fostering critical literacy in secondary education through short stories in English

## *Fomento de la literacidad crítica en la educación secundaria mediante historias cortas en inglés*

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### Abstract

The present study focused on the use of short stories as a pedagogical tool to cultivate critical literacy in secondary school students learning English as a foreign language, it was carried out in a public institution in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia. Its main objective was to describe short stories as a pedagogical tool to foster critical literacy in the teaching of English. This qualitative research was based on the sociocritical paradigm with an inductive method and a spiral design, using participatory action approach. A lesson plan was developed and executed that strategically incorporated short stories, assessing their impact through observations in field notes, recordings, and focus group discussions. The results highlighted the advantages of short stories in education: as a powerful pedagogical resource to foster critical perspectives on social and cultural reality, and as a useful tool to improve linguistic aspects. The short stories also proved to be motivating, enriching English learning and promoting a meaningful educational experience. In summary, the study underlined the effectiveness of short stories in boosting critical literacy and improving language skills, advocating for the exploration of critical literacy practices throughout secondary education and their integration from primary education.

**Key words:** Short stories; Critical literacy; and Language learning.

### Resumen

El presente estudio se centró en el uso de historias cortas como herramienta pedagógica para cultivar la literacidad crítica en estudiantes de educación secundaria que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera, se llevó a cabo en una institución pública en Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia. Su objetivo principal fue describir las historias cortas como instrumento pedagógico para fomentar la literacidad crítica en la enseñanza del inglés. Esta investigación de carácter cualitativa, se basó en el paradigma sociocrítico con un método inductivo y un diseño en espiral, utilizando el enfoque de investigación-acción participativa. Se elaboró y se ejecutó un plan de clases que estratégicamente incorporó historias cortas, evaluando su impacto mediante observaciones en notas de campo, grabaciones y discusiones en grupos focales. Los resultados resaltaron las ventajas de las historias cortas en la educación: como recurso pedagógico potente para fomentar perspectivas críticas sobre la realidad social y cultural, y como herramienta útil para mejorar aspectos lingüísticos. Las historias cortas además demostraron ser motivadoras, enriqueciendo el aprendizaje del inglés y promoviendo una experiencia educativa significativa. En resumen, el estudio subrayó la efectividad de las historias cortas para impulsar la literacidad crítica y mejorar las habilidades lingüísticas, abogando por la exploración de prácticas de literacidad crítica a lo largo de la educación secundaria y su integración desde la educación primaria.

**Palabras clave:** Historias cortas; Literacidad crítica; Aprendizaje de idiomas.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two centuries, English has emerged as a pivotal global language, facilitating communication and international relations. Its role as a lingua franca enhances economic integration and opens employment opportunities (Gómez Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019). However, the dominant approach to English instruction faces criticism, highlighting the necessity for a more expansive perspective that fosters critical and social competencies (Janks, 2014; Luke, 2012; Mora, 2014). In this context, critical literacy emerges as a vital educational framework to address these issues. It encompasses not merely the acquisition of linguistic skills but also the understanding and interrogation of the social and power structures that underpin language use (Pennycook, 2004). Thus, this article advocates for the incorporation of short stories as a pedagogical strategy to enhance critical literacy among secondary school students in the context of teaching English as a foreign language.

To grasp the objectives of this study, the subsequent review of the literature lays a solid ground-work for comprehending the nexus between the utilization of short stories and the cultivation of critical literacy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Various research endeavors explore this linkage across diverse educational settings and from manifold perspectives. Highlighted below are pivotal findings and prevalent trends.

On one side, Halimah & Damaianti (2018) conducted research at Pendidikan University in Indonesia involving 170 students. A critical literacy framework was employed with Indonesian short stories to enhance critical thinking and literacy skills. The findings indicate marked improvements in the experimental group relative to the control group, which received traditional expository teaching. This methodology has proven to be efficacious within the Indonesian educational landscape, promoting critical faculties through the dissection of short stories.

Moreover, Gustine & Insani (2019) undertook a study on critical literacy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Pendidikan University, employing the four-resource critical literacy model on 18 eighth-grade students in Indonesia. A significant enhancement in critical

literacy was noted, particularly in aspects of meaning creation, interrogation, critique, and textual transformation.

Conversely, Kurniawati et al. (2020) implemented a critical literacy initiative for Indonesian EFL students at Gunung Djati Bandung University in Sunan. Utilizing Critical Literacy Pedagogy (CLP) with 29 eleventh-grade science and social studies students led to notable advancements in recognizing the author's intent and the logical contextualization of texts.

Similarly, Papelexatou (2021) carried out research in Greece aimed at augmenting the critical literacy abilities of sixth-year high school students via short stories and instructional activities. While the students developed a critical perspective towards their family environments, the study underscored the necessity for increased focus and implementation in Greece to foster the development of critical literacy and linguistic competencies.

Additionally, Al-Munawwarah et al. (2019) conducted research on the impact of digital advancements in short stories on enhancing the critical literacy skills of eleventh-grade students at Pendidikan University in Indonesia. The findings highlight effective collaboration and a deeper comprehension of the texts. Based on these results, it is recommended that EFL teachers employ critical questioning techniques to foster reflective reading via digital enhancements in short stories.

Conversely, Novianti (2021) explored the application of critical literacy among prospective English teachers at the University of Tasmania using traditional short stories to advocate for societal change. This investigation underscores the significance of action research in integrating critical literacy instruction into the education of future EFL teachers.

King (2022) conducted a study at a Missouri-Columbia university, examining the influence of future educators' personal short stories on their literacy and children's literature teaching practices from a critical standpoint, within a "stories to live by" framework (Clandinin et al., 1999). The study identified varying perspectives among four participants—three in primary education and one in early childhood education. Conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the

research stresses the importance of embedding critical literacy in the teaching of varied children's literature and the necessity for ongoing research into the individual trajectories of future teachers.

In a similar vein, but within the national context, Chaves & Chapetón (2019) conducted a study centered on establishing a reading club with a critical orientation to foster literacy through the exploration of short stories at the National Pedagogical University in Bogotá. The sessions delved into stories resonant with the students' adolescent experiences. It was discovered that critical literacy empowered them to interpret their own realities, engage with language in a critical manner, and partake in meaningful dialogues with their peers, thereby enhancing their literacy and critical literacy skills.

The research reviewed highlights that, from 2019 to the present, there has been only one study addressing the topic in question within the national context, yet these findings align with international research in underscoring the efficacy of employing short stories to foster critical literacy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. These narratives bolster critical thinking abilities and empower learners to scrutinize social and power structures. Through deliberate pedagogical strategies, critical literacy can be effectively nurtured, contributing to the development of more knowledgeable and proactive global citizens.

This investigation seeks to address a specific issue: the lack of targeted educational practices utilizing short stories as a pedagogical tool within the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) to enhance critical literacy among tenth-grade students at the San Francisco de Sales public school in Cúcuta, Norte de Santander department, Colombia.

Consequently, the study poses the research question: How does integrating short stories as practices of English critical literacy affect the critical literacy skills of tenth-grade English learners in a public school in Cúcuta?

The conducted research underscores the use of short stories in education by highlighting several key advantages. Firstly, they serve as a potent pedagogical tool that fosters a critical view of the social and cultural dimensions of reality. Secondly, stories are instrumental in reinforcing linguistic

elements of the target language. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that short stories act as a motivational strategy that enriches the English learning experience, offering a significant and meaningful experience.

These benefits are incorporated into the use of short stories, rendering them an invaluable educational resource that enables students to expand and refine their English language proficiency while fostering a critical stance through the process of learning a foreign language.

The primary aim of this study is to enhance critical literacy among tenth-grade students in English classes by employing short stories as a pedagogical instrument. To this end, three specific objectives are set forth: to devise a structured lesson plan that integrates short stories into the English curriculum to facilitate critical analysis, to actively utilize these narratives in the educational setting to encourage reflective student engagement, and to assess students' perceptions of the impact of short stories on their critical literacy using suitable measures.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was situated within the sociocritical paradigm, aiming for social transformation and emancipation from oppression. It was underpinned by crucial principles such as a comprehensive view of the educational landscape and a democratic stance towards knowledge dissemination (Escudero, 1987). The inductive method facilitated the reasoning process, allowing for the derivation of broadly applicable conclusions from specifically validated facts (research outcomes) (Bernal, 2016).

Moreover, the methodological framework employed a qualitative approach, aiming to comprehend reality through the varied perspectives, logics, and viewpoints of the social actors involved in constructing and interpreting said reality (Galeano, 2004). Additionally, participatory action research was utilized to tackle practical and specific issues within the educational setting (Creswell, 2012), characterized by adhering to five essential stages (Vélez, 2018).

Initially, a comprehensive assessment of the participants was conducted, aimed at scrutinizing their individual contexts and personal narratives. Following this, a meticulously formulated action plan was established, detailing a study strategy for selecting short stories for use in English lessons. This plan was then enacted, engaging students in reading, reflecting upon, and relating the stories to their own lived experiences.

Upon the execution of these planned activities, their efficacy was appraised through an evaluation. At this juncture, inquiries modeled after Hughes (2007) were deployed for two primary objectives: to enhance critical literacy among the students and to delve into their perceptions regarding the story content. This approach enabled students to openly share their thoughts and analyses concerning the themes addressed, fostering an environment of inquiry, critique, and comparison throughout the sessions.

Conclusively, insights garnered from the employment of short stories facilitated a feedback loop on the procedural dynamics and guided strategic improvements for the investigated scenario. In a similar vein, the methodological framework encompassed a case study methodology, as described by Schoch (2020): “case study research involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, organization, or social unit” (p. 245). The implementation of a case study was deemed highly pertinent for examining the specific circumstances of 10th-grade students as a distinct phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

The study’s demographic consisted of a cohort of 28 students from grade 10-06, originating from a middle-class socioeconomic stratum, with ages ranging from thirteen to sixteen years. Among these students, 5 were intentionally chosen for their involvement in supplementary review sessions. The methods for gathering data encompassed field observations, audio recordings, and focus group discussions.

In terms of ethical considerations, consent was secured from both the educational authorities and the parents, ensuring the confidentiality of the data collected, abstaining from plagiarism, and adhering to predefined deadlines. Seven ethical guidelines were observed, which included pre-venting harm to the participants, safeguarding their privacy, and upholding honesty in data presentation (Mills et al., 2010). These

ethical protocols and principles underpinned the integrity and respect towards participants and maintained transparency throughout the research process.

## RESULTS

The findings of this study were derived using the coding technique, aimed at identifying and de-scribing the data reported by the students across the three utilized instruments, a process known as triangulation. Denzin (1970) defines this approach as “the combination of two or more theories, data sources, methods of investigation, in the study of a single phenomenon” (p. 511). For this re-search, triangulation involved the interrelation between two distinct established categories.

Initially, it was discovered that incorporating short stories into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms could foster critical reflection among students. Secondly, narratives proved to be effective in promoting engagement with the target language. Each category was examined through the lens of the respective instruments employed, as illustrated in the subsequent Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Student perceptions by categories and instruments about short stories*

Categories	Field Notes	Audio Recordings	Focus Group Discussion
<b>The use of short stories in EFL classrooms encourages critical reflection</b>	60% of students drew parallels between real-life events and story situations, while 40% did not.	80% of students made meaningful connections between everyday life aspects and story situations, while 20% did not.	60% of students expressed and established comparisons between story events and their own reality, enabling critical reflection, while 40% failed to make such connections.
<b>Short stories promote the use of the target language</b>	80% of students found the target language beneficial for enhancing their language skills, while 20% found it less effective.	Storytelling in the target language aided in the development and improvement of linguistic skills (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) in 80% of students; 20% saw no significant improvement.	20% of students showed improvement in pronunciation, whereas 80% saw no noticeable enhancement in this area.

As highlighted in this field note, 60% of students actively engaged in drawing parallels between scenarios in the short stories and real life, underscoring the effectiveness of the stories in fostering reflective thought and connecting to their personal experiences. This indicates that linking fictional elements with reality enhances comprehension and enables the application of the story themes to their own lives.

Conversely, in the second category, 80% of students noted enhancements in their language abilities through the use of short stories, emphasizing the narratives’ efficacy in language acquisition. This implies that short stories, by featuring varied situations and contexts, offer practical opportunities for applying and enhancing language skills in a contextual and meaningful manner.

The findings from the audio recordings in the first category revealed that 80% of the students demonstrated considerable engagement and comprehension when utilizing short stories as an

educational instrument. Moreover, the students made meaningful connections between story elements and their everyday lives, enhancing their understanding and critical thinking abilities. This underscores the value of narratives as an effective pedagogical tool.

In the analysis of the second category, 80% of students showed significant improvements in linguistic components such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation through storytelling in the target language. This indicates that short stories were instrumental in providing immersive language experiences and promoting more dynamic learning, leading to substantial advancements in the mastery of the target language.

In the focus group discussions, 60% of the students were able to connect the events in the short stories with their own realities. This indicates that the narratives effectively bridged students with the scenarios depicted in the stories, thereby enhancing their comprehension and engagement with the content.



Additionally, 20% of students noted improvements in their pronunciation through engagement with short stories in the English as a Foreign Language classroom. This underscores the importance of short stories in promoting the use of the target language. Nevertheless, there was noticeable variability in the impact on pronunciation across students, emphasizing the necessity to tailor pedagogical strategies to meet individual learning requirements and to explore further methods for enhancing pronunciation in the context of teaching English as a foreign language.

Thus, data analysis indicated that short stories facilitated critical reflection and the development of language skills among students. These outcomes underscored the utility of stories in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Similarly, the study's findings demonstrated that employing short stories as an educational instrument yielded multiple positive effects on students.

Firstly, they fostered critical awareness in students, enabling them to analyze, compare, and scrutinize the story contents in the context of real-life scenarios. Secondly, they provided a forum for students to voice their thoughts and perspectives on social issues pertinent to the narratives and their surroundings. Lastly, they served as a means for students to interpret the events described in the stories through the prism of their own social and cultural realities.

## DISCUSSION

As highlighted at the outset of this document, the English language has transcended its role as a mere facilitator of communication and international relations, attracting critique for its hegemonic teaching methodologies. In this context, critical scholars like Janks (2014), Luke (2012), and Mora (2014) emphasize the necessity of adopting a more encompassing view of English. This perspective extends beyond its utility as a linguistic instrument, advocating for the cultivation of critical and social competencies.

These scholars contend that English should not merely be viewed as a tool for communication but as a conduit for nurturing critical literacy and an understanding of the social and power dynamics

that envelop it. Within this framework, significant findings resonate with the investigations conducted by various experts in this area. Their research demonstrates that short stories enable students to cultivate critical awareness, empowering them to scrutinize, compare, and reflect upon the interpretation and significance of their contextual realities (Al-Munawwarah et al., 2019; Hali-mah & Damaianti, 2018; Kurniawati et al., 2020).

The discussion within this category revealed that employing short stories as a pedagogical instrument effectively fosters students' critical awareness by enabling them to juxtapose the content of the stories discussed in class against the realities of their surroundings. This observation corroborates Behmer's (2005) viewpoint that stories serve as a learning environment where students are encouraged to question, analyze, and compare ideas, opinions, and experiences, thereby attributing meaning to their own lives and to those of others.

Furthermore, Behmer's stance is reinforced by Freire's (1970) assertion that "...Through a critical lens, students are not only able to scrutinize the message of the text but also gain the capability to question, analyze, and debate the power dynamics embedded within the text. This method facilitates reflection, transformation, and social action, as students often need to relate their readings to their context to cultivate a profound understanding" (p. 14).

Another key discovery was that narratives can foster engagement with the target language. This category highlighted that utilizing stories as a teaching aid facilitated students' acquisition of grammatical concepts, including the recognition of regular and irregular verbs in the simple past tense, as well as comprehension of noun and adjective usage in concise sentences.

Furthermore, short stories enabled students to enhance and solidify their pronunciation of both familiar and unfamiliar words encountered throughout the story interventions. Additionally, storytelling in the target language motivated students to broaden their vocabulary, acquiring an array of practical words and phrases that arose from their engagement with the narratives.

The benefits outlined align with prior studies endorsing the utilization of narratives as an effective educational instrument for enhancing

specific linguistic elements, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Chaves & Chapetón, 2019; Forero, 2015; Pathan & Al-Dersi, 2013). Similarly, feedback from students indicated that leveraging short stories as a teaching resource positively impacted their English language acquisition. They reported feeling more empowered and cognizant of the advantages this approach provided.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has definitively shown the value of short stories as a significant educational resource in enhancing critical literacy and the acquisition of English as a foreign language among tenth-grade students. The findings further underscore the role of narratives in fostering critical reflection by linking the story content to the students' realities, thereby deepening their understanding of social and power structures.

Moreover, these stories were effective in advancing students' linguistic abilities, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in English. Consequently, this educational strategy proved to be both motivating and meaningful, enabling students to develop a robust understanding of the language while cultivating a critical viewpoint. Collectively, these outcomes highlight the benefits of integrating short stories into EFL instruction to enrich learning experiences and promote critical consciousness among learners.

Nevertheless, further investigation is warranted to examine and implement ongoing critical literacy practices throughout the secondary education spectrum, utilizing pedagogical tools like short stories to delve into social, cultural, political, and religious themes. Additionally, it would be valuable to consider narratives as a continuous explorative method starting from the early years of primary education to enhance and solidify foreign language teaching and learning through a critical pedagogical framework.

### Recommendations

A prospective avenue for research involves investigating and implementing ongoing critical literacy practices across the entire secondary education trajectory, leveraging educational tools

like short stories to probe into social, cultural, political, and religious matters. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the role of short stories as a sustained exploratory approach beginning in the early stages of primary education. This strategy aims to enhance and reinforce the teaching and learning of a foreign language through a critical pedagogical lens.

### Contributions to scientific knowledge

This research underscores the utility of employing short stories as an effective educational instrument to foster critical literacy and facilitate English language acquisition among tenth-grade students. These narratives not only promoted critical awareness by encouraging students to compare, analyze, and reflect upon the content but also cultivated a critical stance towards social and cultural issues. The value of the stories extended beyond fostering critical literacy; their capacity to enhance linguistic skills was also apparent, making them a compelling method for English language learning. Ultimately, this educational tactic proved to be substantial and enriching, highlighting the necessity of integrating short stories into the curriculum to advance both critical literacy and proficient English language learning.

### Limitations of the Study

During the progression of this study, certain limitations were encountered, primarily stemming from specific constraints. One significant limitation was the restricted observation of a particular student group, attributed to the time constraints associated with the project's completion. Consequently, for enhanced outcomes and more robust conclusions, extending the observation period across the entire group could prove crucial. Additionally, challenges arose in extracting data from the audio recordings, particularly when students articulated their perspectives on the short stories in subdued tones. This issue complicated the interpretation of results from some audio segments, impacting the reporting accuracy of the data analysis.

#### Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest

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