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## **THE ROLE OF SHORT STORIES IN SHAPING COGNITIVE AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EFL**

### *Abstract*

This article examines how short stories function as a lingua-cultural resource for developing EFL learners' cognitive and cultural competence. We define cognitive competence as the ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate meanings in authentic texts, and cultural competence as the awareness of values, social codes, and viewpoints represented in those texts. Short stories are uniquely suited to classroom use: they are complete narratives of manageable length, linguistically dense, and culturally embedded. Drawing on recent work in applied linguistics and literature-in-ELT, the paper outlines a lesson architecture (pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading) that promotes inferencing, metaphorical awareness, and intercultural reflection. Classroom-based evidence from recent studies is synthesized to illustrate gains in learners' critical thinking, motivation, and intercultural awareness when short stories are used systematically. The article argues that short stories should be treated not as supplemental reading but as a core component of a holistic EFL curriculum that integrates language, cognition, and culture, and it provides practical implications for text selection and task design.

**Keywords:** *short stories; EFL; cognitive competence; cultural competence; intercultural awareness; critical thinking; literature in ELT*

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## **АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНДЕ ОҚУ ДАҒДЫЛАРЫН МЕНГЕРУДЕГІ ҚИЫНДЫҚТАР ЖӘНЕ ОЛАРДЫ ШЕШУ ЖОЛДАРЫ**

### *Аңдатпа*

Бұл мақалада қысқа әңгімелер (short stories) EFL студенттерінің когнитивтік және мәдени құзыреттілігін дамытуға арналған лингвомәдени ресурс ретінде қарастырылады. Когнитивтік құзыреттілік – шынайы мәтіндердегі мағыналарды талдау, интерпретациялау және бағалау қабілеті; мәдени құзыреттілік – мәтіндерде көрініс тапқан құндылықтар, әлеуметтік кодтар және көзқарастарды тану. Қысқа әңгімелер сыныпта қолдануға ыңғайлы: олар толық оқиғаға ие, көлемі қолжетімді, тілдік жағынан қанық және мәдени мазмұнға бай. Қолданбалы лингвистика мен әдебиетті EFL-де оқыту бойынша соңғы еңбектерге сүйене отырып, мақала алдын-ала оқу, оқу барысы және оқудан кейінгі рефлексия кезеңдерінен тұратын сабақ құрылымын ұсынады. Жүйелі қолданылғанда қысқа әңгімелер студенттердің сыни ойлауын, уәждемесін және мәдениетаралық түсінігін арттыратынына сыныптағы зерттеулер дәлел келтіреді. Қорытындыда қысқа әңгімелер ны тіл, таным және мәдениетті біріктіретін тұтас оқу бағдарламасының негізгі бөлігі ретінде қарастыру ұсынылады.

*Кілт сөздер:* қысқа әңгімелер; EFL; когнитивтік құзыреттілік; мәдени құзыреттілік; мәдениетаралық түсінік; сыни ойлау; әдебиет арқылы оқыту.

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## РОЛЬ КОРОТКИХ РАССКАЗОВ В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ КОГНИТИВНОЙ И КУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ КАК ИНОСТРАННОМУ

### Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются короткие рассказы как лингвокультурный ресурс формирования когнитивной и культурной компетенций у изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Под когнитивной компетенцией понимается способность анализировать, интерпретировать и оценивать значения в аутентичных текстах; под культурной — осознание ценностей, социальных кодов и точек зрения, представленных в этих текстах. Короткие рассказы удобны для аудиторной работы: это завершённые нарративы управляемого объёма, языково насыщенные и культурно обусловленные. Опираясь на современные исследования по применению литературы в ELT, предлагается архитектура урока (pre-, while-, post-reading), которая развивает умение делать выводы, понимать метафорический язык и проводить межкультурные сопоставления. Синтезируются недавние данные classroom-исследований, демонстрирующие рост критического мышления, мотивации и межкультурной осведомлённости при систематическом использовании короткой прозы. Делается вывод о необходимости рассматривать короткую прозу как ядро целостной EFL-программы, интегрирующей язык, когницию и культуру.

**Keywords:** *короткие рассказы; EFL; когнитивная компетенция; культурная компетенция; межкультурная осведомлённость; критическое мышление; литература в ELT.*

### Introduction

In recent years, the integration of literature into EFL instruction has attracted renewed attention as educators seek to promote not only linguistic proficiency but also higher-order thinking and intercultural competence. Short stories have emerged as a particularly effective literary genre for classroom use because of its brevity, narrative completeness, and cultural richness. Scholars argue that such texts stimulate interpretative skills, foster critical thinking, and provide learners with authentic exposure to cultural codes [1; 6]. In the Kazakhstani context, the integration of literature into foreign language teaching has also been emphasized. Kunanbayeva (2010) argued that foreign language education should be viewed not only as linguistic training but as the formation of intercultural communicative competence [13]. Similarly, Bekmasheva and Zhautikbayeva (2016) examined lingua-cultural aspects of language learning and highlighted the importance of cultural content in shaping learners' worldviews [14]. Cognitive competence in EFL refers to learners' ability to analyze implicit meanings, recognize figurative language, and evaluate narrative strategies. Studies across diverse contexts confirm that short stories support the development of these abilities. Namaziandost et al. showed that comparing Persian and English short stories enhanced learners' ability to interpret emotive and symbolic language [4]. Similarly, Seo and Kim found that Korean high school students improved in writing and analytical tasks when short stories were incorporated into lessons [1]. More recent research expands this perspective: Calafato identified how literary competence profiles, including empathy and interpretative strategies, are shaped by engagement with fiction [8], while Astudillo Tapia and Argudo-Serrano reported that

using short stories with sixth graders improved both language proficiency and motivation [9]. Cultural competence is equally central to literature's role in foreign language education. Short stories often contain values, norms, and traditions that encourage learners to reflect on unfamiliar cultural perspectives. Rezaei and Naghibian argue that short stories fosters intercultural communicative competence by providing a platform for comparative cultural analysis [6]. Recent findings confirm this claim: Ahlquist showed that children in Sweden developed greater intercultural awareness through fiction-based Storyline activities [7], while Zheng highlighted the effectiveness of reframing storytelling approaches to raise cultural awareness in EFL classrooms [10]. Taken together, these studies underline the dual function of short stories in language education. It provides learners with opportunities to enhance cognitive engagement through interpretation and critical questioning, while also supporting intercultural awareness and empathy. The present study builds on this body of research to examine how short stories contributes to the development of both cognitive and cultural competence in EFL classrooms, drawing on classroom-based observation within the Kazakhstani context and aligning local findings with international perspectives [5; 9; 11].

### Methods and Materials

This study was conducted as a qualitative classroom observation focusing on how short stories contributes to the development of learners' cognitive and cultural competence in EFL lessons. The purpose was not to produce statistical generalizations but to provide a descriptive account of classroom processes, which is consistent with prior pedagogical research into literature-based instruction [1; 6]. Classroom observation was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture learning as it naturally unfolds, without relying solely on self-reports or test scores. Unlike questionnaires, which may reflect only what learners are willing to disclose, observation provides direct access to authentic behaviors, group interactions, and spontaneous reactions to instructional input. This makes it particularly suitable for examining both cognitive and cultural aspects of learning, which are often visible in students' discussions, gestures, and collaborative meaning-making.

The participants were secondary-level students aged 15–17 with an intermediate level of proficiency. The selection of short stories took into account the learners' proficiency level. Only texts that matched their intermediate abilities were chosen, in line with the principle of leveling. Simplified or abridged versions were preferred when authentic texts proved too linguistically demanding, ensuring that cognitive and cultural engagement remained accessible without overwhelming the learners. The lessons were delivered during teaching practice and followed a three-stage instructional structure that has been widely recommended in both earlier and recent research: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading [1; 7; 9]. This structure ensured that learners moved gradually from surface-level understanding to higher-order interpretation. The pre-reading stage helped to prepare the ground by activating schemata, while the while-reading phase allowed learners to practice strategies for identifying symbolism and cultural codes. The post-reading activities encouraged reflective thinking and intercultural dialogue, which are considered key for building both cognitive and cultural competence in EFL classrooms.

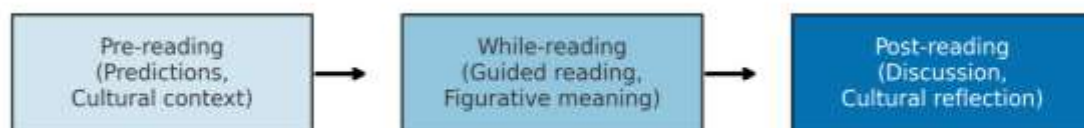


Figure 1. Three-stage lesson model with short stories

In the pre-reading stage, students activated their background knowledge through brainstorming and prediction tasks, while also being introduced to potential cultural references. The while-reading stage emphasized the comprehension of narrative structure, the recognition of figurative

language, and the identification of cultural codes. In the post-reading stage, learners participated in reflective discussions, compared cultural values in the stories with their own experiences, and occasionally engaged in short written responses. Examples of activities included guiding questions such as “What might be the author’s intention in portraying this character?” or “How would this situation be interpreted in your culture?”. Students were also asked to write short reflections on whether the values expressed in the story could be considered universal or specific to the English-speaking world. These tasks were designed not only to check comprehension but also to push learners toward deeper interpretation and cross-cultural comparison.

Observation was chosen as the primary research method. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, keeping detailed field notes of students’ verbal contributions, group discussions, and non-verbal reactions during the lessons. The notes were later analyzed descriptively and categorized into two domains: cognitive indicators (inference-making, recognition of symbolism, and critical questioning) and cultural indicators (identification of traditions, empathy, and reflection on values).

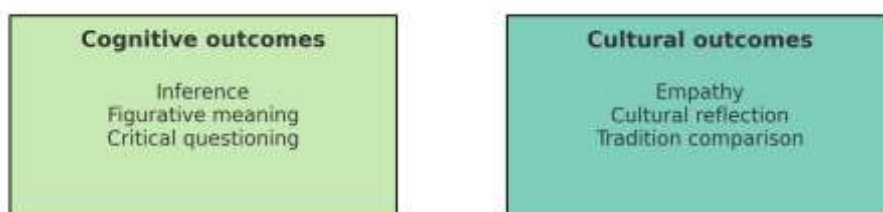


Figure 2. Classification of observed indicators

This approach aligns with qualitative frameworks used in recent studies that investigated the role of short stories in improving reading ability, motivation, and intercultural awareness.

The use of classroom observation also allowed for triangulation with findings from international research. For instance, Astudillo Tapia and Argudo-Serrano (2024) emphasized how short stories tasks enhanced motivation and proficiency in younger learners [9], while Adam et al. (2024) demonstrated that story-based instruction improved writing skills and critical engagement [11]. These findings helped to frame the analysis of local observations within a broader comparative context.

### Results and Discussion

The classroom observations revealed that the use of short stories promoted both cognitive engagement and cultural awareness among EFL learners. Students frequently demonstrated higher-order thinking skills such as inference-making, critical questioning, and recognition of figurative meaning.

Domain	Sub-categories	Illustrative examples from observation	Pedagogical significance
Cognitive outcomes	Inferential reasoning	Students predicting narrative endings; anticipation of ironic twists	Demonstrates ability to go beyond literal comprehension and engage in higher-order thinking [4; 8]
	Critical interrogation of text	Learners asking “Why did the author use this device?” or	Encourages analytical questioning and reflective

		“What is implied here?”	learning practices [5; 9]
<b>Cultural outcomes</b>	Empathic engagement	Expressing emotional identification with characters and their dilemmas	Supports affective dimension of intercultural communicative competence [6; 7]
	Cultural self-reflection and comparison	Contrasting Kazakh family traditions with those in the story; reflecting on social roles	Promotes awareness of cultural relativity and intercultural dialogue [10]

Table 1. Analytical classification of observed indicators in EFL classroom discourse

For example, while working with an O. Henry story, several students predicted the twist ending, indicating their ability to interpret textual clues beyond surface comprehension. Others identified irony in dialogues and linked it to the broader moral message, showing reflective analysis. These findings are consistent with earlier research that demonstrated how short stories enhance learners’ interpretative abilities and critical thinking [1; 4; 5]. More recent studies also confirm these outcomes: Adam et al. (2024) found that short story activities stimulated deeper writing and analytical skills in Indonesian EFL classrooms [11], while Calafato (2024) emphasized that engagement with fiction strengthens empathy and interpretative strategies [8].

Cultural competence was equally visible during observation. Learners often asked about cultural references embedded in the stories, such as holiday traditions or social practices, and compared them with Kazakhstani contexts. In one lesson, students reflected on family obligations presented in a contemporary short story and contrasted them with their own cultural values. Such reactions mirror earlier studies in Iran and Sweden, where short stories was shown to enhance intercultural awareness and communicative competence [6; 7]. The observations are also consistent with Zheng (2024), who argued that reframing storytelling activities can significantly improve learners’ sensitivity to cultural differences in EFL classrooms [10]. These results also resonate with Kazakhstani research. For instance, Bekmasheva and Zhautikova (2016) highlight that exposure to cultural texts enriches learners’ cognitive categories and strengthens intercultural competence [14].

The findings further suggest that cognitive and cultural development are not separate but interconnected processes. When learners interpreted figurative language or symbolic elements, they simultaneously reflected on cultural values, while discussions of cultural differences often required interpretative reasoning. This duality confirms the claims of recent systematic reviews [12], which underline that storytelling and short stories function as holistic tools for language education, combining linguistic input with opportunities for critical and intercultural growth.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of short stories in fostering both cognitive and cultural competence depends on careful leveling. If texts are not adapted to learners’ proficiency, students may struggle with comprehension and fail to engage in deeper reflection. This confirms the recommendations of both international and Kazakhstani scholars, who emphasize that literary input must be aligned with learners’ linguistic readiness [9; 12].

The results also highlighted the importance of instructional design. Lessons that followed a structured three-stage sequence (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading) produced richer responses, as learners were guided to move from prediction and comprehension to reflection and cultural comparison. Without such scaffolding, student engagement tended to remain superficial.

These findings echo the observations of Astudillo Tapia and Argudo-Serrano (2024), who showed that structured story-based programs improved both motivation and proficiency in younger learners [9].

Overall, the present observations confirm that short stories fosters a dual competence in EFL classrooms: cognitive gains in interpretative and critical thinking, and cultural gains in intercultural awareness and empathy. These results not only align with international research but also demonstrate the relevance of short stories for the Kazakhstani context, where language education increasingly emphasizes both linguistic proficiency and intercultural preparedness.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study confirm that short stories is an effective pedagogical resource for developing both cognitive and cultural competence in EFL classrooms. The results confirm that literature-based instruction can be an effective medium for balancing linguistic accuracy with the development of higher-order thinking skills. short stories, in particular, provides a manageable yet meaningful text type that combines accessibility with interpretative richness. Learners demonstrated interpretative skills such as inference-making, recognition of figurative meaning, and critical questioning, while also engaging in intercultural reflection and comparing cultural values represented in stories with those of their own context. These outcomes are consistent with earlier evidence that short stories enhance critical and reflective thinking [1; 4; 5] and align with more recent research showing that fiction strengthens empathy, interpretative strategies, and writing skills [8; 11]. The observations also highlight that cognitive and cultural growth are closely interconnected. Interpretative tasks often led to cultural comparisons, while reflection on cultural differences encouraged deeper reasoning. This dual function of short stories supports the conclusions of recent systematic reviews [12], which emphasize that storytelling integrates linguistic, cognitive, and intercultural dimensions of learning. Moreover, the structured three-stage lesson design—pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading—proved particularly effective in guiding learners from surface comprehension to critical interpretation and intercultural awareness, confirming the importance of instructional planning [7; 9]. For the Kazakhstani context, these results underline the potential of short stories as more than a supplementary classroom activity. Teachers should also ensure that short stories are leveled appropriately to match learners' proficiency, as this balance maximizes both accessibility and interpretative challenge. Its systematic integration into the EFL curriculum can prepare learners not only for linguistic accuracy but also for meaningful communication in global contexts. Future directions may include experimenting with different literary genres—such as poetry, drama, or contemporary flash fiction—to investigate whether they elicit similar or distinct patterns of cognitive and cultural growth. Expanding the research to digital storytelling or multimedia texts could also shed light on how traditional narratives can be integrated with modern educational technologies. By encouraging reflection, empathy, and comparative analysis, short stories equips students with the competences needed for academic success and intercultural dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world [6; 10].

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