



**Using short stories to enhance literal, inferential, and critical reading
comprehension in sixth-grade learners: A mixed-methods study**

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Abstract

Reading comprehension remains a critical challenge in primary education, where students often struggle to transition from mechanical decoding to inferential and critical thinking. This study examines the association between a pedagogical strategy based on short stories and the reading proficiency of sixth-grade students at the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit. Grounded in Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011), the research employed a mixed-methods approach with a pre-experimental design (single-group pre-test/post-test) involving 32 participants. The independent variable—short story strategy—was operationalized as an integrated instructional intervention combining measurable text features (structural brevity, narrative unity, and thematic relevance) with guided pedagogical mediation throughout the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading phases. After verifying normality via the Shapiro-Wilk test, the paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement ($p < .001$), resulting in the rejection of

the null hypothesis. Notably, Cohen's d (0.73) indicated a medium-to-large effect size, reflecting a robust positive trend in student performance. Qualitative findings further identified a reduction in cognitive fatigue and enhanced engagement. Overall, the findings indicate that optimizing cognitive load through brief narratives may facilitate the allocation of mental resources toward higher-order comprehension. Due to the absence of a control group, these results are interpreted as indicative evidence of a positive association rather than definitive proof of exclusive causality. The study concludes that the short story may function as a high-potential didactic resource for fostering analytical reading skills in basic education.

Keywords: reading comprehension, short story, cognitive load theory, effect size, pre-experimental design, pedagogical scaffolding.

Introduction

Reading comprehension represents a fundamental pillar in the cognitive and academic development of primary school students. Globally, however, standardized evaluations such as PISA and PIRLS consistently reveal a significant gap in the ability of young learners to move beyond literal decoding toward inferential and critical understanding. In the Latin American context, and specifically within the Ecuadorian educational system, this challenge is intensified by the persistence of traditional pedagogical models that often rely on extensive, fragmented texts. Such materials frequently exceed the students' processing capacity, leading to cognitive fatigue and a progressive loss of interest in reading activities.

At the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit, this reality is empirically observable in the sixth-grade classroom. Diagnostic assessments of the 32 students participating in this study indicated that while most can identify explicit information (literal level), there

is a marked difficulty in deducing implicit meanings (inferential level) and formulating value judgments about the text (critical level). This pedagogical gap is characterized by a mismatch between the complexity of the reading materials and the students' working memory capacity. Extensive narratives, traditionally used in the curriculum, impose an overwhelming extraneous cognitive load that exhausts mental resources before high-order comprehension can occur.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to transition toward instructional strategies that optimize cognitive processing. The implementation of short stories is justified here not merely as a change of format, but as a technical intervention grounded in Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011). By utilizing narratives characterized by brevity and "unity of effect," the extraneous load associated with text length is minimized. This reduction theoretically frees "mental space" (germane load), allowing students to allocate their limited cognitive resources to deeper meaning-making processes. Therefore, this study seeks to determine how a structured strategy based on short stories, implemented through guided pedagogical mediation, may support the development of literal, inferential, and critical sub-skills in this specific educational setting.

General and specific objectives:

General objective

To evaluate the association between the implementation of short stories as a pedagogical strategy and the observed improvement in literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels among sixth-grade learners.

Specific objectives

- To diagnose students' initial level of reading comprehension (literal, inferential, and critical) through the administration of an objective pre-test.
- To design and implement a teaching sequence based on short stories, structured in pre-reading, mediated reading, and post-reading phases, focused on optimizing cognitive load.
- To analyze the changes in reading comprehension levels by comparing pre-test and post-test results, identifying positive trends and the potential utility of the short story as a didactic resource.

Problem statement

At the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit, sixth-grade students demonstrate a persistent gap between mechanical decoding and deep text comprehension. While preliminary assessments show that students can identify explicit data (literal level), there is a marked difficulty in performing higher-order cognitive tasks, such as deducing implicit meanings (inferential level) or formulating ethical value judgments (critical level).

This challenge is characterized by a "cognitive wall" encountered when students face extensive or complex narratives. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, such materials impose an overwhelming extraneous load that leads to rapid mental fatigue and a subsequent loss of interest. Traditional teaching methods in this context have historically focused on repetitive tasks rather than meaning-making, which limits the development of reading autonomy. Consequently, students often remain stuck in a superficial relationship with the text. There is, therefore, a need to examine whether a

transition toward short narrative structures—acting as pedagogical scaffolding—is associated with a reduction in this cognitive burden and the facilitation of more complex reading dimensions.

Under this premise, the short story is proposed as a high-potential didactic resource capable of optimizing cognitive processing and fostering the analytical competencies required for academic success.

Research question

Given the scenario described, the following question is posed: What is the association between a strategy based on short narratives and the observed development of literal, inferential, and critical reading comprehension levels in sixth-grade students?

Scope of the study

This study falls within the field of reading didactics and language teaching in basic education. It focuses specifically on the analysis of pedagogical strategies aimed at developing reading comprehension in sixth-grade students. The scope is descriptive and inferential within a pre-experimental framework, aimed at identifying trends in reading comprehension development rather than establishing causal relationships.

Operationalization of variables

To ensure a rigorous quantitative approach, the study distinguishes between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV), while recognizing that the instructional procedure constitutes the mode through which the independent variable is implemented in the classroom context.

The independent variable (short story strategy) is operationalized as an integrated pedagogical intervention through three observable dimensions related to text design and classroom implementation, all of which are intended to reduce cognitive load. In contrast,

the dependent variable (reading comprehension) is measured through specific performance indicators across three cognitive levels, as evaluated by the pre-test and post-test instruments.

Variable	Dimensions	Indicators (Observable/Measurable)	Assessment instrument (Items)
Independent Variable: Short story as a pedagogical unit	Structural brevity	Word count (limit of 500-800 words) and reading time (max 10-15 min).	Instructional design / Reading Log
	Narrative unity	Presence of a single main plotline and a limited number of characters (1-3) to minimize extraneous load.	Text selection rubric
	Thematic relevance	Alignment with students' developmental stage and prior knowledge to foster germane load.	Student interest Survey / Text selection rubric

Variable	Dimensions	Indicators (Observable/Measurable)	Assessment instrument (Items)
Dependent Variable:	Literal level	Identification of explicit data: names, dates, and main events.	Pre/Post-test: Items 1, 2, 5, 8
Reading comprehension	Inferential level	Deduction of implicit meanings, cause-effect relationships, and character motivations.	Pre/Post-test: Items 3, 4, 6, 9
	Critical level	Formulation of value judgments, analysis of the author's intent, and ethical evaluation.	Pre/Post-test: Items 7, 10

Assessment instruments and measurement criteria

The 10-item instrument was specifically calibrated to target high-precision cognitive markers, ensuring that each question evaluates a discrete processing level (literal, inferential, or critical) rather than broad content recall.

- **Scoring:** Each correct answer was assigned 1 point, for a total maximum score of 10 points.

- **Measurement of Levels:** * **Literal:** 40% of the test (4 points). Focuses on memory and recognition.
- **Inferential:** 40% of the test (4 points). Focuses on logical deduction.
- **Critical:** 20% of the test (2 points). Focuses on evaluative synthesis.

This distribution ensures that the results quantitatively reflect the students' progression from basic decoding to complex cognitive processing.

Justification

This research is justified by its contribution to the field of reading didactics through the practical application of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, the study explores the premise that narrative brevity may act as a facilitator of higher-order cognitive processes. By utilizing the short story as the unit of analysis, this work provides indicative evidence on how the optimization of the initial processing burden is associated with a more efficient allocation of mental resources toward inferential and critical thinking in sixth-grade students.

From a practical and social standpoint, the study addresses the specific pedagogical needs identified at the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit. It offers a structured instructional model—comprising a sequence of pre-, during-, and post-reading activities—that may serve as a potentially effective reference for educators facing similar challenges in the region. Furthermore, this work aligns with national and international educational goals, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), by fostering essential literacy skills. By moving beyond rote decoding toward a more reflective relationship with the text, the study contributes to the development of the analytical competencies required for academic success and active citizenship.

Literature review

Conceptual convergence on narrative brevity

The academic discussion regarding the short story in basic education shows a significant convergence between recent studies. Faulkner (2023). argues that narrative brevity is a psychological trigger that reduces "reading anxiety," a common barrier in sixth-grade learners. This perspective is complemented by Caliri (2025), who suggests that manageable text lengths facilitate a more efficient neural synchronization between decoding and meaning-making, thereby preventing cognitive fatigue. Finally, these views align with Nair and Yunus (2022), who transition from the emotional to the functional, stating that such structural brevity serves as the primary vehicle for developing reader autonomy in young learners.

However, a conceptual tension emerges when analyzing the role of vocabulary. While Shin, Sok and Do (2023). suggest that short stories are instrumental for direct vocabulary acquisition, Reynolds and Ding (2022) offer a more nuanced view: they argue that vocabulary growth is not a byproduct of length, but of the organic narrative context that allows students to infer meanings. This study adopts a middle ground, aligned with the findings of Liu and Dou (2023). who demonstrate that "narrative density" in shorter formats optimizes the encoding of new terms by providing high-frequency contextual cues without overwhelming the learner's lexical processing capacity. Consequently, brevity lowers the cognitive barrier, while the richness of the plot supports sustained linguistic development.

Cognitive load theory in sixth-grade learners

To avoid theoretical simplification, the application of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011) must be contextualized for students aged 11 to 12. At this developmental

stage, working memory is highly sensitive to extraneous load (mental effort wasted on processing complex formats).

1. **Literal level and intrinsic load:** when faced with long or structurally complex texts, the student's working memory is frequently saturated by basic decoding processes. As noted by Osorio (2025), an excessive cognitive demand during initial reading stages impedes the transition to deeper comprehension, as mental resources are consumed by the management of complex information. This phenomenon aligns with Sweller's (2011) updated Cognitive Load Theory, which suggests that learning is optimized only when the total cognitive load does not exceed the capacity of the working memory. By implementing short stories, this approach minimizes the extraneous burden, allowing the intrinsic load—the actual content of the story—to be processed more efficiently. As argued by Mayer (2024), the reduction of unnecessary textual complexity is a fundamental principle of effective instructional design, as it prevents the interference of cognitive fatigue and facilitates the construction of coherent mental models.
2. **Inferential level and germane load:** both Smith et al. (2021) and Tovani (2023) emphasize that inference requires connecting text with prior knowledge. Cognitively, once literal decoding is streamlined by the short format, the student may be able to redirect germane load (productive mental effort) toward constructing mental models and "reading between the lines."

3. **Critical level and mental resources:** Critical thinking requires the highest level of cognitive maturity. As Yang and Lee (2022) suggest, in sixth grade, the ability to judge a character's ethics depends on having "available mental space." Short stories may provide this cognitive space by ensuring that the student is not exhausted by the time they reach the climax of the narrative. This is further supported by Crone and Van Goch (2024), who argue that the economy of narrative means in shorter texts allows for "imaginative engagement," enabling students to allocate their remaining executive functions toward ethical evaluation and deeper reflection instead of mere information retrieval.

The role of mediation and orality

There is a strong consensus among Schrodtt, FitzPatrick and McClain (2023) and Abebe and Weldearegawi (2023) regarding the "bridge effect" of orality. They argue that discussing a story orally before or during reading acts as a cognitive scaffold. Nevertheless, Chambers (2011) introduces a critical distinction: orality is not just a support tool but a process of meaning-recreation. This study aligns with Chambers' perspective, viewing the teacher's mediation not as a simple explanation, but as a strategic intervention that may help prevent cognitive overload during the transition from the spoken word to the critical analysis of the written text.

In summary, the literature establishes a robust link between narrative format and cognitive efficiency. The convergence of evidence suggests that short stories function as more than just brief texts; they are strategic instructional units that mitigate reading anxiety and prevent cognitive fatigue through neural synchronization. By aligning with

the updated principles of Cognitive Load Theory, this framework posits that reducing extraneous load is the essential prerequisite for students to redirect their limited germane resources toward the construction of inferential and critical mental models. Ultimately, when this structural brevity is coupled with active mediation and meaning-recreation, the short story emerges as a transformative didactic tool capable of bridging the gap between mechanical decoding and deep, autonomous comprehension. This integrated perspective provides the theoretical foundation for the mixed-methods analysis that follows in this study.

Methodology

Approach and scope

This research employs a mixed-methods approach. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), this integration allows for a more complete understanding of the research problem by combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative component focuses on identifying statistically supported changes and performance trends through numerical data analysis, while the qualitative component provides a deeper interpretation of student engagement through thematic patterns. The scope is descriptive and inferential within a pre-experimental framework. According to Salkind and Frey (2023), this level of analysis is essential in educational research to describe current phenomena and make inferences about group improvements without the strict requirements of true experimental designs. It aims to identify significant shifts in reading comprehension levels rather than establishing absolute causal relationships, acknowledging the exploratory nature of the design.

Research design and hypotheses

A pre-experimental design with a single-group pre-test and post-test was used. This design was selected because the study involved a pre-existing classroom environment, which precludes randomization. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), pre-experimental designs are often necessary in educational settings where intact groups must be studied in their natural environment to maintain ecological validity. To provide a rigorous framework for the statistical analysis, the following hypotheses are established, following the inferential logic proposed by Salkind and Frey (2023) for evaluating changes in group performance over time:

- **Null hypothesis (H_0):** There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test reading comprehension scores ($H_0: \mu_{pre} = \mu_{post}$).
- **Alternative hypothesis (H_1):** There is a statistically significant difference between the scores ($H_1: \mu_{pre} < \mu_{post}$), suggesting a positive trend in reading proficiency following the intervention.

Operationalization of variables

To avoid confusion between the resource and the teaching procedure, the Independent Variable (IV) is defined as the "Short story as a pedagogical unit," characterized by its structural brevity (limited word count) and narrative unity. According to Mayer (2024), the specific design features of a learning resource are the primary drivers of cognitive processing, independent of the delivery method. In this framework, the instructional mediation (pre-, during-, and post-reading phases) serves as the vehicle

for the IV. As noted by McCarthy and Yan (2024), narrative unity acts as a supportive scaffold that allows the brain to organize information more effectively. Consequently, the Dependent Variable (DV) consists of reading comprehension proficiency across literal, inferential, and critical levels, measured by the ability to reconstruct and evaluate the narrative. Thus, the study focuses on how the intrinsic qualities of the narrative unit correlate with the expansion of the student's interpretive capacity

Population and sample

The sample consisted of 32 sixth-grade students selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Given the pre-experimental nature of the study, the results provide indicative evidence within the specific context of the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit.

Data collection techniques and instruments

To ensure methodological coherence, the following instruments were utilized:

- **Reading comprehension assessment (Pre-test and Post-test):** An objective instrument consisting of 10 items. Although the number of items is concise, the instrument was specifically calibrated to target high-precision cognitive markers for literal, inferential, and critical processing. Each item was validated via Expert Judgment to ensure it effectively measures the intended cognitive dimension rather than general recall.
- **Systematic observation and field notes:** Qualitative tools used to document cognitive fatigue patterns and attitudinal shifts. These provide

the "contextual depth" necessary to interpret the quantitative fluctuations.

Methodological rigor and validation

- **Expert Judgment:** The instruments underwent content validation by a panel of three specialists in linguistics and educational psychology, who certified the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the items with the developmental level of sixth-grade students.
- **Methodological Triangulation:** The consistency of the findings is ensured by cross-referencing quantitative performance data with qualitative evidence from field notes. This triangulation allows for a holistic understanding of how the short story strategy facilitates meaning-making beyond mere scoring.

Data analysis plan

The data processing followed a structured, three-stage multidimensional process:

1. **Descriptive analysis:** Calculation of the Mean and Standard Deviation for both pre-test and post-test results to observe the general trend in group performance.
2. **Normality testing:** Given the sample size ($N=32$), the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to empirically verify the data distribution. This step was crucial to justify the selection of parametric statistics, moving away from generalized assumptions about sample size.

3. **Inferential analysis and hypothesis testing:** Since the normality assumption was met ($p > 0.05$), the Paired-samples T-test was used to determine the significance of the changes. Furthermore, Cohen's d was calculated to measure the effect size, providing a standardized metric of the strategy's practical importance.
4. **Qualitative synthesis:** A thematic analysis of field notes was conducted to identify recurring patterns in student behavior and cognitive effort, which were then used to complement and explain the quantitative shifts.

Feasibility and ethical considerations

The feasibility of this study was ensured through the formal support of the administrative authorities at the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit. The intervention was strategically integrated into the existing Language and Literature curriculum, utilizing accessible and low-cost teaching resources, which allowed for implementation without disrupting the standard academic schedule.

From an ethical standpoint, the research adhered to international standards for studies involving human participants:

- **Informed consent:** Prior to the intervention, written informed consent was obtained from the students' legal guardians, and verbal assent was secured from the participants, ensuring they understood the voluntary nature of the study.

- **Confidentiality and anonymity:** To protect the privacy of the 32 students, all data were anonymized. Numerical codes were used instead of names during data processing and analysis.
- **Non-Maleficence:** The pedagogical strategy was designed as a supportive tool to enhance learning; therefore, no participants were subjected to risks or deprived of their regular educational rights.

All procedures were guided by the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence, ensuring the protection and well-being of the participants throughout the investigative process.

Analysis and discussion of results

The quantitative analysis was conducted by comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of the 32 participants. To ensure rigorous statistical processing, achievement categories were operationalized into a continuous quantitative scale, which allowed for the assessment of frequency distribution, changes in the Mean ($\bar{x}$), and group performance variability.

Descriptive findings

The descriptive data indicate a positive trend in the students' reading comprehension proficiency. As shown in Table 1, the transition from the pre-test to the post-test reveals a shift toward higher achievement categories.

Table 1: *Comparative Performance in Reading Comprehension (N=32)*

Performance level	Pre-test frequency (%)	Post-test frequency (%)
High (9.00 - 10.00)	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.3%)
Medium-high (7.00 - 8.99)	10 (31.2%)	21 (65.6%)
Satisfactory (4.01 - 6.99)	22 (68.8%)	9 (28.1%)
Unsatisfactory (≤ 4.00)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Mean score ($\bar{x}$)	7.06	7.50
Std. deviation (σ)	0.84	0.76

Note: $N=32$. The Mean score ($\bar{x}$) represents the average performance on a 10-point scale. Std. Deviation (σ) indicates the dispersion of scores within the group. Achievement levels are categorized based on the institutional grading scale. $p < .001$ indicates a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores ($t(31) = -4.05$). Source: Prepared by the authors based on the diagnostic and final evaluation data.

The group Mean increased from 7.06 to 7.50, and the percentage of students in the "Medium-High" category significantly expanded from 31.2% to 65.6%. This shift suggests that the strategy may be associated with an improvement in students' proficiency levels.

Analytical discussion

The observed progress in performance levels suggests that the structural brevity of the short stories may have facilitated the transition from superficial decoding to more fluent interpretation. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, this improvement points toward a more efficient allocation of working memory: by reducing the extraneous cognitive load inherent in extensive, fragmented texts, students appear to have utilized their germane cognitive resources to engage in deeper meaning-making.

However, the interpretation of these results requires caution. While the data indicate a robust positive trend, the absence of a control group in this pre-experimental design prevents the attribution of these gains exclusively to the instructional intervention. External variables, such as student maturation or the novelty of the teaching method (the "Hawthorne effect"), might also have influenced the results. Therefore, the findings are presented as indicative evidence of the strategy's potential, rather than definitive proof of causal impact.

Statistical significance, qualitative synthesis, and discussion

Statistical significance and effect size analysis

Prior to the inferential analysis, the normality of the data was empirically verified using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results ($W=0.96$, $p=0.281$) confirmed that the distribution of scores did not deviate significantly from normality, justifying the use of the Paired-samples T-test.

Since the p -value (0.0003) is lower than the alpha level ($\alpha=0.05$), the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. Furthermore, the calculated Cohen's d of 0.73 indicates a medium-to-large effect size (Cohen, 2013). This suggests a robust association between the short story strategy and the observed gains in reading proficiency. While the

pre-experimental design—lacking a control group—prevents an absolute claim of exclusive causality, the combination of statistical significance and a meaningful effect size points toward a positive trend in student performance. Consequently, these metrics provide a reliable quantitative basis for asserting that the intervention is associated with a substantive improvement in the learners' cognitive processing of texts.

Qualitative synthesis and field observation

Complementing the quantitative data, thematic analysis of field notes identified a marked reduction in cognitive fatigue. Learners showed greater willingness to engage in critical discussions and sustained attention periods when exposed to concise, high-semantic-content texts. This qualitative evidence suggests that the simplification of the text format effectively allowed students to redirect mental energy from basic decoding toward complex interaction with the narrative, supporting the quantitative shift.

Discussion of findings

The results suggest a positive trend in the reading performance of sixth-grade learners at the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit. The transition of the group mean from 7.06 to 7.50, reinforced by a medium-to-large effect size, indicates that the improvement holds practical significance within the classroom. This finding is consistent with Nair and Yunus (2022), who argue that narrative brevity serves as a catalyst for engagement in students who have historically struggled with extensive materials.

Cognitive mechanisms and the "Brevity effect":

From a theoretical standpoint, the improvement across literal, inferential, and critical levels aligns with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011). In this context, the short story strategy acted as a mechanism to optimize extraneous cognitive load. By limiting word count and simplifying structure, students' working memory was less

exhausted by decoding long passages, potentially facilitating the allocation of germane load toward meaning-making. This explains the upward trend in the inferential level: when not overwhelmed by length, students appear better equipped to connect explicit data with implicit meanings, a result supported by Tovani (2023). These results confirm that narrative brevity acts as a cognitive facilitator, allowing for a more efficient transition from mechanical decoding to the complex construction of mental models.

Instructional scaffolding vs. text format:

A critical reflection arises from the distinction between the text format (independent variable) and the pedagogical mediation (instructional procedure). The qualitative observations suggest that the pre-, during-, and post-reading phases were essential in guiding students through the three levels of comprehension. This synergy between "the right text" and "the right mediation" echoes Smith et al. (2021), who posit that background knowledge activation is a prerequisite for reaching the critical level of comprehension.

Contextual implications and analytical caution:

These results imply that the "crisis of comprehension" often attributed to a lack of student interest may, in fact, stem from instructional design and text selection. However, it is imperative to exercise analytical caution. Given the pre-experimental nature of this study, the observed improvements should be interpreted as indicative. Factors such as natural maturation or the "Hawthorne effect" must be acknowledged. Therefore, the findings are presented as indicative evidence of the potential of short stories to foster a more manageable and effective reading environment, rather than as definitive proof of causal impact.

Study limitations

While the findings of this study provide meaningful evidence regarding the application of short story strategies in reading didactics, it is necessary to acknowledge certain methodological constraints that delineate the scope of the conclusions:

- **Design constraints and internal validity:** The pre-experimental design, characterized by a single group without a control condition, limits the ability to isolate the specific causal mechanisms of the intervention. Consequently, potential confounding variables—such as the natural maturation of the 32 participants over the study period or the "Hawthorne effect" (the tendency of students to improve performance due to the novelty of the intervention and the awareness of being observed)—cannot be entirely excluded. Therefore, the observed improvements are interpreted as a positive association rather than an absolute causal impact.
- **Measurement and researcher bias:** The assessment instruments (pre-test and post-test) were developed specifically to align with the institutional curriculum and the pedagogical intervention. Although content validity was ensured through expert judgment, the dual role of the researchers as both designers of the instrument and facilitators of the instruction introduces a potential risk of measurement bias. The alignment between classroom activities and the evaluation items may have favored performance outcomes; thus, the findings are considered indicative of progress within this specific instructional context.

- **Generalizability and temporal scope:** Due to the non-probabilistic convenience sampling and the small sample size ($N=32$), the results are not intended for broad generalization. They reflect the specific reality of the José Vicente Luque Educational Unit. Furthermore, the study measures immediate performance gains; it does not account for the long-term sustainability of these comprehension skills, which remains an area for future longitudinal research.

Conclusions

The present study analyzed the potential of the short story as a pedagogical unit to foster reading comprehension among sixth-grade learners. Based on the empirical evidence, the following conclusions are drawn, strictly aligned with the study's descriptive-inferential scope:

1. The quantitative results reveal a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores across literal, inferential, and critical levels. The increase in the group mean from 7.06 to 7.50, combined with a medium-to-large effect size ($d = 0.73$), indicates a robust positive trend. These findings suggest that a strategy centered on short narrative structures is associated with an improvement in reading proficiency within this specific educational context.
2. From a cognitive perspective, the data align with the principles of Cognitive Load Theory. The use of brief narratives, characterized by structural brevity and narrative unity (the Independent Variable), appears to have optimized extraneous load. This potentially allowed

students to allocate germane resources toward higher-order processes, as evidenced by the qualitative reduction in cognitive fatigue and enhanced attention documented in field notes.

3. Although the results are promising, they must be interpreted within the inherent limitations of a pre-experimental design. In the absence of a control group, it is not possible to establish a definitive causal link between the intervention and the academic gains. The observed changes represent a meaningful association, acknowledging that external factors, such as student maturation or the "Hawthorne effect," may have influenced the outcomes.
4. The results indicate a synergy between the text format (structural brevity) and the instructional scaffolding (pre-, during-, and post-reading phases). While the short story provides the necessary "cognitive space" by its format, the pedagogical mediation acts as the vehicle for meaning-making. This distinction is crucial: the short story functions as a high-potential didactic tool when it serves as the core of a well-calibrated instructional sequence.

Recommendations

1. **Methodological diversification:** It is recommended that future research adopt experimental designs with randomized control groups to isolate the specific effects of the short story strategy and to more rigorously explore potential causal relationships.

2. **Curricular integration:** Educational institutions should consider the inclusion of short stories as a technical alternative to extensive texts, specifically to prevent cognitive overload in students transitioning to complex comprehension levels.
3. **Teacher training:** Faculty development programs should emphasize the importance of cognitive load theory in text selection, ensuring that instructional materials align with students' working memory capacity.
4. **Longitudinal scrutiny:** Conduct follow-up studies to determine if the positive trends in reading proficiency are sustained over time or if they represent temporary gains related to the novelty of the intervention.

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