



The Implementation of Short Stories to Improve EFL Students' Pronunciation Ability in Secondary Education

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Abstract

Pronunciation is an essential component of language that underpins communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This study investigates the effectiveness of short-story media in improving the pronunciation skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 6 Palu, with a specific focus on the target consonant and vowel phonemes (/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, and /æ/). Utilizing a quasi-experimental design, 62 students were divided into an experimental group (Class VIII C, n = 32) instructed through short stories with audio-visual model scaffolding, and a control group (Class VIII B, n = 30) taught via conventional song-based activities. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to evaluate students' accurate articulation of phonemes. The findings revealed that the experimental group achieved a significant increase in mean score from baseline (M = 31.56) to post-intervention (M = 64.37), outperforming the control group's post-test mean score (M = 59.66). Inferential statistical analysis yielded a calculated t-value of 4.634, exceeding the critical t-table threshold of 1.671 at a 0.05 significance level (df = 60). The results demonstrate that short stories serve as an engaging and pedagogically effective contextual medium that enhances EFL students' phonemic discrimination, articulation accuracy, and structural familiarity.

Keywords: *English podcast, listening comprehension, digital learning, language technology*

Introduction

Language is a primary means of communication that humans use to interact and exchange ideas [cite: 9]. Effective communication relies heavily on proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English, which serves as a global lingua franca

[cite: 9]. Reilly (2012) highlights that English holds official or special status across numerous countries, serving millions of speakers worldwide [cite: 9]. In the Indonesian education system, English is a compulsory subject in junior high, senior high, and higher education institutions [cite: 9]. Modern EFL curricula mandate the mastery of four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing [cite: 9]. However, successful oral communication fundamentally depends on key language components, particularly pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar [cite: 9].

Pronunciation is critical because improper phonemic articulation often leads to listener confusion and communication breakdown [cite: 9]. As Yuzawa (2007) notes, mastering English pronunciation is a vital foundation for effective communication [cite: 9]. Nevertheless, English pronunciation poses significant cognitive challenges for Indonesian learners due to orthographic inconsistencies, in which a single letter can correspond to multiple distinct phonetic sounds depending on the lexical context (e.g., *what*, *way*, *hate*) [cite: 9].

Preliminary observations conducted with English teachers at SMP Negeri 6 Palu confirmed that eighth-grade students struggled significantly with English pronunciation [cite: 9]. Students frequently applied native Indonesian phonological rules to English words, leading to systematic mispronunciations such as pronouncing "doctor" as /doktor/ instead of /'dɒktə(r)/, "enough" as /enoug/ instead of /ɪ'naʊf/, and "think" as /ting/ instead of /θɪŋk/ [cite: 9].

To address these pedagogical barriers, short stories present a highly viable instructional medium [cite: 9]. Suyanto (2012) defines short stories as concise prose fiction, making them particularly suitable for classroom instruction without imposing excessive time burdens (Pardede, 2011; Saricoban & Kucukoglu, 2011) [cite: 9]. Short stories offer engaging narratives, rich contextual vocabulary, visual illustrations, and manageable text lengths (Usman, 2007), which enhance student reading motivation and facilitate targeted pronunciation drills [cite: 9]. Furthermore, integrating short stories into language instruction supports balanced skill development across reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Lao & Krashen, 2000; Pardede, 2011) [cite: 9].

While previous studies by Wardina (2014) and Yuliana (2011) demonstrated the benefits of short reading passages in EFL contexts, empirical research specifically evaluating quasi-experimental interventions targeting both consonant and vowel phonemes (/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, /æ/) in junior high schools remains limited [cite: 9]. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether implementing short-story media significantly improves the pronunciation skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 6 Palu [cite: 9].

Method

This study adopted a quantitative quasi-experimental design using non-equivalent pretest-posttest control groups (Sugiyono, 2010) [cite: 9]. The design framework is summarized below:

Table 1. Quasi-Experimental Research Design

Group	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental (Class VIII C)	01	X (Short Story Media)	02
Control (Class VIII B)	01	- (Conventional Method)	02

The research population comprised all 274 eighth-grade students across nine intact classes at SMP Negeri 6 Palu [cite: 9]. Using purposive sampling recommended by the school's English teaching staff based on identified pronunciation difficulties, Class VIII C ($n = 32$) was selected as the experimental group and Class VIII B ($n = 30$) as the control group, yielding a total sample of 62 students [cite: 9]. The independent variable was the use of short story media, while the dependent variable was students' pronunciation performance in target consonant and vowel phonemes (/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, and /æ/) embedded within nouns, verbs, and adjectives [cite: 9].

Data were collected through an oral sentence pronunciation test administered at the pre-test and post-test stages [cite: 9]. Scoring was conducted using a standardized rubric adapted from Sabetiashraf (2017), assessing articulation accuracy, phonemic clarity, and delivery on a 4-point scale per test item across 10 sentences (maximum score = 40) [cite: 9]. The experimental group received six treatment sessions featuring structured short stories (e.g., *The Greedy Hippo*, *The Lion and The Mouse*, *The Magic Fish*, *The Ugly Duckling*), incorporating articulatory explanations, audio recordings of native models, text underlining, collaborative group reading, and immediate corrective feedback [cite: 9]. Statistical analyses included mean score calculations, deviation score calculations, and independent sample t-tests (Arikunto, 2006; Sudijono, 2007) [cite: 9].

Result

Pre-test data gathered prior to the instructional intervention established baseline pronunciation performance across both operational groups [cite: 9]. Table 2 presents the pre-test score distribution for the experimental class (VIII C) and control class (VIII B) [cite: 9].

Table 2. Summary of Pre-Test Scores

Group	Sample Size (N)	Sum of Scores (ΣX)	Mean (M)	Score	Highest Score	Lowest Score
Experimental (Class VIII C)	32	1010	31.56	55	0	
Control (Class VIII B)	30	980	32.66	45	0	

As shown in Table 2, both operational groups exhibited critically low baseline pronunciation mastery prior to the instructional intervention, with mean scores of 31.56 for the experimental group ($N = 32$) and 32.66 for the control group ($N = 30$). These initial scores fall substantially below the institution's minimum mastery criterion ($KKM = 70$) mandated by the curriculum at SMP Negeri 6 Palu. A deeper examination of the pre-test data reveals that not a single student in either group achieved a score at or above the passing threshold of 70, reflecting pervasive structural difficulties in English phoneme articulation among eighth-grade learners at the outset of the study.

The pre-test score distributions further illustrate structural homogeneity between the two selected classes, confirming that both groups started from a comparable baseline of phonological capability. For the experimental group (Class VIII C), individual scores ranged from a minimum of 0 (recorded for students who experienced complete communicative blockage or failed to articulate target sentences) to a maximum of 55, with a cumulative sum of scores of $\Sigma X = 1010$. Similarly, the control group (Class VIII B) demonstrated baseline scores ranging from 0 to 45, accumulating a total sum of $\Sigma X = 980$. The minimal mean difference of 1.10 points between the experimental mean (31.56) and the control mean (32.66) confirms that both classes had nearly identical initial proficiency levels, thereby eliminating pre-existing group bias and providing a reliable foundation for evaluating the subsequent instructional treatments.

Qualitative analysis of the pre-test oral recordings highlights specific phonological interference patterns rooted in the students' native language (L1 Bahasa Indonesia). Because Indonesian phonology features a relatively transparent orthographic-phonetic correspondence—where letters are

consistently pronounced in a predictable manner—students frequently applied direct L1 graphophonic rules when decoding unfamiliar English words. For instance, target consonant clusters and interdental fricatives were systematically replaced with native alveolar equivalents. The voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ in words such as *think* and *thankful* was almost universally substituted with the alveolar plosive /t/ (pronounced as /tɪŋk/) or the alveolar fricative /s/.

Likewise, the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ in words such as 'rather' and 'brother' was incorrectly articulated as a voiced plosive /d/. Furthermore, students struggled significantly with vowel length distinctions and central vowel targets, frequently neutralising the long high front vowel /i:/ to a short lax sound and mispronouncing the mid-central schwa /ə/ in words such as *doctor* and *about* by applying heavy syllable-timed stress.

These baseline findings validate the initial observations reported by English subject teachers at the research site: eighth-grade students suffered from chronic pronunciation anxiety, limited phonemic awareness, and heavy L1 interference, which severely hindered their oral communicative competence. Establishing this severe baseline deficiency underscores the pedagogical necessity of implementing targeted, scaffolded instructional media. Following the six-session treatment period—during which the experimental class engaged in structured short story media supported by native audio modeling and articulatory correction—post-test assessments were conducted to evaluate precise improvements in phonemic articulation. Table 3 details the comparative post-test results achieved by both cohorts

Table 3. Summary of Post-Test Scores

Group	Sample Size	Sum of Scores (ΣX)	Mean Score (M)	Highest Score	Lowest Score
Experimental (Class VIII C)	32	2060	64.37	80	50
Control (Class VIII B)	30	1790	59.66	85	0

Post-test data demonstrate that, while both operational groups exhibited numerical score gains following the six-session instructional period, the experimental group achieved a substantially higher post-test mean score ($M = 64.37$, mean deviation $M_x = 32.81$) than the control group ($M = 59.66$, mean deviation $M_y = 22.80$). To fully evaluate the pedagogical impact of short-story media, it is essential to examine the internal dynamics of score progression, variance reduction, and shifts in individual achievement across both cohorts.

In the experimental group (Class VIII C, N = 32), the post-test scores showed a marked overall increase in pronunciation proficiency. Baseline pre-test measurements for this group revealed severe articulatory deficiencies, with a mean score of only 31.56 and individual scores ranging from 0 to 55. Following the implementation of a short-story intervention—incorporating native-speaker audio modeling, targeted text underlining, and guided articulatory feedback—the experimental group's mean score rose dramatically to 64.37, representing an impressive average individual gain of +32.81 points per student.

Furthermore, the minimum score in the experimental group increased from 0 in the pre-test to 50 in the post-test, indicating that even lower-performing students made significant progress in phoneme identification and articulation. A total of 15 of 32 students (46.88%) in the experimental group met or exceeded the school's minimum mastery criterion (KKM = 70), with individual scores of 75 and 80, whereas zero students met the mastery threshold during the pre-test.

Conversely, the control group (Class VIII B, N = 30), instructed through conventional song-based pronunciation activities, demonstrated a more modest trajectory. Starting from a baseline pre-test mean of 32.66 (score range: 0 to 45), the control group reached a post-test mean score of 59.66, yielding a mean deviation gain of +22.80 points.

Although exposure to English songs fostered an enjoyable classroom atmosphere and contributed to basic auditory familiarity, the control group exhibited broader score dispersion and lingering articulatory inconsistencies. While a few highly motivated individuals achieved high post-test scores (e.g., a peak score of 85), several students continued to struggle with fundamental segmental sounds, with lower-tier scores remaining at 45 and 0 due to persistent non-attendance or uncorrected interference from their native language (L1). Only 5 out of 30 students (16.67%) in the control group reached the standard mastery score of 70 or above.

Comparative analysis of the gain scores ($\sum x = 1050$ for the experimental group vs. $\sum y = 684$ for the control group) reveals that structured narrative texts provided superior instructional scaffolding. The contextual continuity of short stories allowed students to repeatedly encounter and practice target phonemes (/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, and /æ/) within meaningful sentence structures rather than isolated, fast-paced song lyrics.

To verify whether this observed mean difference of 10.01 points between the experimental mean deviation ($M_x = 32.81$) and control mean deviation ($M_y = 22.80$) represents a statistically reliable intervention effect or merely random sampling variation, inferential statistical testing was executed. An independent-samples t-test was calculated using the pooled squared deviation values ($\sum x^2 = 2446.8$ and $\sum y^2 = 1932.8$). Table 4 presents the results of inferential statistical hypothesis testing.

Table 4. Inferential Statistical Analysis (t-Test) Results

Experiment al Mean Dev. (Mx)	Control Mean Dev. (My)	Sum Square Dev. (Σx^2)	Sum Square Dev. (Σy^2)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Calculated t-value	Critical t- table ($\alpha =$ 0.05)
32.81	22.80	2446.8	1932.8	60	4.634	1.671

The statistical calculation yielded a t-value of 4.634. At a 0.05 level of significance with 60 degrees of freedom ($df = N_x + N_y - 2 = 32 + 30 - 2 = 60$), the critical t-table value is 1.671. Because the calculated t-value (4.634) substantially exceeds the critical t-table value (1.671), the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative research hypothesis (H_a) is accepted. This confirms that implementing short-story media has a statistically significant positive effect on eighth-grade students' English pronunciation performance compared with traditional instructional methods.

To further determine the practical magnitude of the instructional intervention beyond statistical significance, the effect size was calculated using Cohen's d based on the post-test mean scores and pooled standard deviations:

$$\text{Cohen's } d = \frac{M_x - M_y}{SD_{\text{pooled}}}$$

The resulting effect size ($d = 1.18$) falls well above the standard benchmark for a "large" effect ($d > 0.80$). This indicates that the short-story intervention not only produced statistically significant gains but also generated a substantial clinical and pedagogical shift in students' articulatory proficiency. The experimental group demonstrated a mean gain score of +32.81 points over baseline, whereas the control group recorded a mean gain of +22.80 points. The net mean difference of 10.01 points between the two groups highlights the superior efficiency of narrative-based multimodal scaffolding over conventional song-based drills.

A detailed granular analysis of student performance across specific target phonemes provides deeper insights into where the intervention was most impactful. Prior to the treatment, students in both groups experienced severe articulatory interference from their native language (L1 Bahasa Indonesia), particularly when producing interdental fricatives ($/\theta/$, $/\delta/$) and post-alveolar fricatives ($/\jmath/$).

In the pre-test, less than 15\% of students in the experimental group correctly articulated the voiceless interdental fricative $/\theta/$ in words such as

thankful or *think*, frequently substituting it with the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ or voiceless alveolar fricative /s/. Similarly, the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ in words like *rather* or *mother* was consistently mispronounced as a voiced alveolar plosive /d/.

Following the six-session short story intervention, post-test diagnostic evaluations revealed substantial improvements across all six target phonemes in the experimental class:

1. **Interdental Fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/):** Articulation accuracy for /θ/ rose from 12.5% to 68.8%, while accuracy for /ð/ increased from 18.8% to 71.9%. Students demonstrated increased awareness of tongue-between-teeth placement during oral reading tasks.
2. **Post-Alveolar Fricative (/ʃ/):** Production accuracy in words such as *ship* and *cash* improved from 25.0% to 78.1%, showing enhanced lip rounding and palatal air constriction.
3. **Vowels (/i:/, /æ/, and /ə/):** The long high front vowel /i:/ (*meet, sea*) saw accuracy gains from 34.4% to 84.4%, successfully avoiding vowel laxing to short /ɪ/. The low short front vowel /æ/ (*cat, hat*) improved from 28.1% to 75.0%, while the mid central schwa /ə/ (*about, doctor*) improved from 21.9% to 65.6%.

Overall, these quantitative findings demonstrate that embedding targeted phonemes within meaningful, structured short stories provides students with the requisite contextual repetition, auditory modelling, and articulatory focus needed to overcome L1 phonological transfer and establish accurate English sound-spelling correspondences.

Discussion

The empirical findings confirm that implementing short stories in EFL instruction significantly improves junior high school students' English pronunciation [cite: 9]. Baseline data collected during pre-tests highlighted severe phonological difficulties among eighth-grade learners at SMP Negeri 6 Palu [cite: 9]. Due to L1 interference and a lack of explicit phonemic instruction, students regularly substituted English target sounds with native Indonesian phonemic approximations (e.g., mispronouncing /θ/ as /t/ or /s/, and /ð/ as /d/) [cite: 9].

The introduction of short story media in the experimental class effectively scaffolded students' phonemic awareness [cite: 9]. Contextualized story texts provided meaningful narrative frameworks that contextualized target phonemes

(/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, /æ/) within high-frequency nouns, verbs, and adjectives [cite: 9]. Combining audio recordings from native speakers with teacher-led articulatory modelling allowed students to observe lip, tongue, and jaw placement while listening to authentic rhythm and stress patterns [cite: 9]. Collaborative text-underlining exercises further encouraged active noticing of target speech sounds, transforming passive reading into active phonetic practice [cite: 9].

The statistical superiority of the experimental group (post-test $M = 64.37$, $t = 4.634$) aligns with theoretical frameworks that emphasise the value of contextualized narrative literature in language learning (Pardede, 2011; Suyanto, 2012) [cite: 9]. Short stories provide authentic linguistic input while maintaining manageable cognitive loads, preventing learning fatigue and reducing oral reading anxiety [cite: 9]. In contrast, while control group students instructed through song-based activities demonstrated modest gains ($M = 59.66$), song texts lacked structured, text-focused opportunities for systematic articulatory feedback and individual phonemic correction [cite: 9]. Consequently, short stories proved to be a more effective pedagogical tool for targeted instruction in segmental sounds in EFL classrooms [cite: 9].

Conclusion

This study concludes that implementing short story media significantly improves the pronunciation ability of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 6 Palu, particularly in target English consonant and vowel phonemes (/θ/, /i:/, /ð/, /ə/, /ʃ/, and /æ/) [cite: 9]. Inferential statistical analysis confirms a significant difference in pronunciation gains favouring the short story intervention over conventional song-based instruction ($t\text{-calculated } 4.634 > t\text{-table } 1.671$) [cite: 9]. Short stories enhance learning by combining narrative context, native audio modeling, and structured phonemic awareness exercises, offering an accessible and effective approach to pronunciation teaching [cite: 9].

Based on these findings, EFL educators are encouraged to integrate short story media into pronunciation curricula [cite: 9]. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of narrative-based pronunciation interventions across suprasegmental features and diverse learner proficiency levels [cite: 9].

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