

**Exploring Emotional Engagement and Challenge Resolution in Story Reading  
among Basic EFL Students at a Private University in Thailand**

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Received: 03/08/2025

Revised: 24/10/2025

Accepted: 31/10/2025

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**Abstract**

This study explores the connections between emotional engagement, reading difficulties, resolution strategies, and language retention among basic-level EFL learners reading short stories. The participants included 20 Thai students enrolled in a Basic Reading course at Asia-Pacific International University. Data were collected at the end of the semester using a questionnaire with five sections: emotional reactions, motivation, reading difficulties, learning strategies, and reflective practices. This study examined how students' emotions and motivation affected their comprehension and retention of story-based vocabulary and grammar. It also explored the specific challenges students encountered while reading and the self-regulated learning strategies they employed to overcome them. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified key themes. Findings show that positive emotional responses such as enjoyment, empathy, and curiosity significantly enhanced students' motivation, engagement with texts, and retention of vocabulary and grammar. While these benefits were clear, students still faced reading challenges, which they addressed through both external aids (e.g., translation tools, peer support) and internal strategies (e.g., contextual guessing and rereading). This diverse range of approaches reflected varying levels of learner autonomy, literacy development, and motivation, highlighting the importance of integrated reading instruction in EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** Emotional Engagement, Challenge Resolution, Short Stories, Motivation, Student Strategies

**1. Introduction**

Stories are structured narratives that present sequences of events involving characters, settings, and conflicts, often designed to entertain, instruct, or evoke emotional responses. In language learning, stories especially short stories serve as authentic and engaging texts that connect linguistic forms with human experiences, emotions, and culture (Krashen, 2004; Yulianawati et al., 2022). Short stories are an effective tool for language learning, particularly for beginner English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. They provide rich contexts for acquiring vocabulary, understanding grammar, and enhancing communication skills. Beyond linguistic benefits, their emotionally engaging content also significantly supports learning (Andriani, Marlina, & Maulida, 2024). These concise literary texts facilitate a bridge between language competence and emotional learning by immersing readers in relatable human experiences, cultural values, and moral dilemmas.

Emotional engagement plays a vital role in language acquisition. When learners connect emotionally with a text by empathizing with characters or relating to familiar themes. They become more invested in reading. This emotional connection increases motivation, enjoyment, and the retention of vocabulary and grammar (Erkaya, O. R. (2005). Literature-based instruction has also been shown to enhance emotional intelligence by promoting self-awareness and empathy (Shao et al., 2013). Therefore, emotional engagement is not incidental but central to meaningful language learning (Wang, Ganushchak, Welie, et al., 2024).

However, beginner EFL learners face numerous challenges. Limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammar, and cultural unfamiliarity often hinder comprehension and emotional connection. Without a sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to interpret meaning, making it difficult to engage with the narrative or its characters (Gallardo & Gindidis, 2020). Reliance on dictionaries or guessing strategies can interrupt reading flow and lead to frustration, which may lower motivation (Nation, 2001; Phajane, 2014).

Complex grammatical patterns, such as passive constructions and subordinate clauses, also create barriers especially when these differ from learners' native language structures (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Li, Arase, & Crespi, 2025). Additionally, cultural references embedded in short stories such as idioms, customs, or historical contexts can fall outside students' lived experiences, making it difficult to grasp implied meanings or relate to characters (Radzi & Aziz, 2023). On the other hand, other positive values embedded in stories "can contribute a great deal to the socio-cultural, emotional, cognitive, and personal growth of EFL learners" (Pathan, 2013, p. 21). This cultural gap may restrict emotional engagement and hinder deeper understanding (Wakat et al., 2023).

Although emotional engagement and reading strategy use have been widely studied among intermediate and advanced EFL learners, there is limited research on these dynamics in basic-level learners. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how beginner students experience emotional engagement and address reading difficulties. Common barriers like limited vocabulary, complex grammar, and unfamiliar cultural content can impede comprehension. A step-by-step instruction and culturally appropriate texts are thus crucial for supporting understanding and fostering confidence and motivation among basic EFL students.

To address these concerns, this study investigates the role of English short stories in enhancing language learning for basic-level EFL learners. It specifically examines how emotional engagement influences learners' motivation, enjoyment, and retention of vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, it explores the difficulties these learners face and the self-regulated strategies they use to overcome challenges. Situated within a multicultural academic context, this research provides qualitative insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of literary engagement among beginner learners, addressing an underexplored area in EFL education.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the role of short stories in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, focusing on their contribution to both linguistic competence and emotional engagement. Short stories are valued for their brevity, relatability, and authentic language, supporting vocabulary development, grammar comprehension, and reading fluency (Andriyani, Wennyta, & Aisyah, 2022). Their emotionally rich narratives also enhance motivation and make language learning more meaningful (Ghafar & Zubaedah, 2023; Yulianawati et al., 2022).

### 2.1 Use of Short Stories in EFL Instruction

Short stories have been widely endorsed in EFL pedagogy for beginner learners due to their manageable length, contextualised language, and capacity to link form and meaning

within engaging narratives. Research shows that properly chosen short literary texts provide meaningful contexts for vocabulary acquisition, grammar development, and reading fluency, without the heaviness of full-length novels (Andriyani, Widodo & Sulisty, 2022; Ullah, 2021). By embedding linguistic forms in emotionally coherent plots, short stories can foster deeper processing of language input (Krashen, 2004). Moreover, Hirvela & Boyle's study found short stories were *less feared* and easy to finish compared with other genres, useful for incremental reading that builds confidence (Hirvela & Boyle, 1988); See also Ali, Abdullatif, & Oyed, 2024).

Beyond the purely linguistic, short stories afford exposure to diverse cultural and moral themes, which aligns with goals for intercultural competence in EFL contexts (Banks, 1989). Short stories are positioned as **manageable texts** that can be systematically used for language skills (reading, vocabulary, grammar) and meaningful classroom tasks, supporting motivation and participation (Baytar & Timuçin, 2021). In sum, short stories function as a dual resource, glossing language forms and fostering learner engagement through human-centered narrative.

## 2.2 Benefits of Using Short Stories

Research shows that using short stories in EFL instruction provides multiple educational benefits. Stories help language learners develop the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing and stimulates their thinking skill (McRae, 1991). They also allow teachers to integrate these skills across proficiency levels, and when carefully chosen, can greatly enhance ELT courses through meaningful and authentic language use (Murdoch, 2002, p. 9). Literary texts not only support language acquisition but also promote critical thinking and cultural awareness (Banks, 1989; Sage, 1987). When appropriately selected, short stories provide meaningful, authentic contexts that enhance motivation and classroom interaction (Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Thiagarajan, 2014). Their accessible length enables learners to complete tasks within a session, increasing confidence and a sense of progress. Compared to traditional drills, short stories offer a less intimidating medium for learning vocabulary and grammar (Krashen, 2004; Keller, 2010; Pardede, 2011; Ullah, 2021). Moreover, by reflecting real-life communication and cultural diversity, they foster intercultural competence and intrinsic motivation, making language learning more engaging and sustainable (Mantra & Gana, 2018; Barzani, 2020; Baytar & Timuçin, 2021).

## 2.3 Emotional Engagement and Its Influence on Comprehension and Retention

Emotional engagement is vital in language learning as it deepens comprehension and improves retention (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007; Fredricks et al., 2004). When learners connect emotionally with a text, they focus better and remember more. Short stories evoke empathy, suspense, and joy, creating meaningful links between language and experience (Erkaya, 2005). Such emotions enhance creativity, motivation, and long-term memory by associating vocabulary and grammar with authentic, memorable contexts (Fredrickson, 2001; Pekrun, 2006; Krashen, 2004).

Positive emotional responses such as curiosity, empathy with characters, and enjoyment facilitate vocabulary encoding and grammar internalization (Pekrun, 2021). Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety can limit comprehension and motivation, emphasizing the importance of emotional balance in second language learning (Feng & Hong, 2022). Despite its benefits, basic-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often encounter comprehension barriers due to limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammar, and cultural references within stories (Nation, 2001; Gallardo & Gindidis, 2020; Radzi & Aziz, 2023). A systematic review by Zhu, Mofreh, Salem, and Li (2023) found that while cognitive and behavioral engagement are direct predictors of reading outcomes, emotional engagement acts as a facilitator that enhances the impact of these two domains.

Learners use self-regulated strategies such as rereading, translation tools, contextual guessing, and peer support to overcome reading challenges and build autonomy (Schmitt, 2000; Tuan, 2011). Yet, the link between emotional engagement and these strategies remains underexplored in multicultural EFL contexts. Empathy with story characters fosters reflection and problem-solving beyond linguistic decoding (Gerrig, 1993; Goetz et al., 2006). This emotional-cognitive connection deepens understanding and personal growth. Despite increasing interest in emotion and learning, few studies have examined emotional engagement among beginner EFL learners. This study investigates its interaction with reading challenges and self-regulation at Asia-Pacific International University.

#### **2.4 Reading Difficulties and Challenge Resolution**

Although short story reading offers many benefits, beginner EFL learners often struggle with comprehension due to unfamiliar vocabulary, idioms, and culturally specific content (Allehyani, 2025; Bilal et al., 2013; Hidayati, 2018). High lexical density and complex syntax increase cognitive load, disrupting fluency and engagement (Arya, Hiebert, & Pearson, 2011). Learners frequently use digital tools such as Google Translate to maintain understanding and flow, improving diction and coherence when applied in reading and writing (Gumartifa et al., 2022). Recent studies highlight that adaptive strategies like rereading and self-monitoring enhance comprehension when supported by scaffolding (Habók, Oo, & Magyar, 2024).

Importantly, the relationship between emotional engagement, reading difficulties and strategy use appears reciprocal: learners who feel emotionally engaged are more willing to persist, apply strategies, and regulate their reading; conversely, effective strategy use may enhance confidence, thereby sustaining motivation and emotional engagement (Huang et al., 2024). While short stories present lexical and structural barriers, they also encourage the development of self-regulated strategies, with technology serving as a valuable aid in overcoming comprehension gaps and enhancing learner confidence.

#### **2.5 Summary and Gap**

Research affirms the value of short stories in EFL learning, the role of emotional engagement, and the use of coping strategies. However, key gaps remain. Most studies focus on intermediate or advanced learners, leaving beginner-level engagement underexplored. The interaction among emotional engagement, reading challenges, and self-regulated strategies in multicultural EFL contexts such as Thailand is also limited. Few studies examine how emotions and strategies together influence language retention. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the triadic relationship among emotional engagement, challenge resolution, and vocabulary and grammar retention in story-based reading among basic-level EFL students. This study explores how emotional engagement with short stories influences language learning among basic EFL students, focusing on reading challenges and coping strategies. The objectives are to: (1) examine how emotional engagement affects learners' motivation, enjoyment, and retention of vocabulary and grammar; (2) identify key grammatical and discourse-related reading difficulties; (3) analyze self-regulated strategies such as rereading, translation, and peer support; and (4) propose teaching approaches integrating emotionally engaging texts in beginner-level EFL classrooms.

### **3. Research Objectives**

This study explores how emotional engagement with short stories influences language learning among basic EFL students, focusing on reading challenges and coping strategies. The objectives are to: (1) examine how emotional engagement affects learners' motivation, enjoyment, and retention of vocabulary and grammar; (2) identify key grammatical and discourse-related reading difficulties; (3) analyze self-regulated strategies such as rereading,

translation, and peer support; and (4) propose teaching approaches integrating emotionally engaging texts in beginner-level EFL classrooms.

#### **4. Research Questions**

- 4.1 How does emotional engagement with short stories affect basic EFL learners' motivation, enjoyment, and retention of vocabulary and grammar?
- 4.2 What specific reading difficulties do basic EFL learners encounter when reading English short stories?
- 4.3 What self-regulated learning strategies do these learners employ to overcome the challenges they faced during the reading process?

#### **5. Research Methodology**

##### **5.1 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to investigate the emotional engagement, reading challenges, and resolution strategies among basic-level EFL students reading English short stories. This design provided a structured yet flexible framework for examining learners' experiences in depth, allowing for nuanced interpretation of both emotional and cognitive aspects of language learning.

Data was collected through a structured open-ended questionnaire, enabling participants to articulate their personal responses and feelings in their own words. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. To enhance the credibility, peer debriefing was conducted, through reflective discussions with a colleague to verify coding accuracy, and refine themes. This collaborative process ensured methodological reliability and alignment with the study's research objectives.

##### **5.2 Sampling Procedures and Participants**

This qualitative study took place at a private international university in Saraburi Province, Thailand, with 20 first-year Thai students (aged 18–21) enrolled in a Basic Reading class during the second semester of 2024–2025. Participants were purposively selected for having completed a short story reading activity and being able to reflect on their experiences. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained. Ethical protocols were followed, ensuring confidentiality and the right to withdraw without penalty. All data were anonymized, and participation had no impact on students' grades or class standing, maintaining full adherence to institutional ethical standards.

##### **5.3 Instrument**

Data was collected using a structured open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit students' reflections on their experiences in a short story reading class. The questionnaire focused on key thematic areas aligned with the research questions, including emotional reaction, motivation, comprehension difficulties, vocabulary challenges, emotional engagement, and the strategies students used to overcome these challenges. The instrument allowed participants to express their personal learning experiences in their own words.

##### **5.4 Data Analysis**

Data were collected from 20 EFL students through a structured open-ended questionnaire with 17 items across five themes: emotional reaction, motivation, reading difficulties, strategy use, and reflective learning. Students reflected on challenges, coping strategies, and learning outcomes from reading English short stories. Responses were typed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher reviewed data multiple times, coded recurring ideas, and grouped them into broader themes aligned with research questions.

Credibility was strengthened through independent review and joint refinement of themes. Anonymity was maintained by removing identifying details, and an audit trail documented coding and analytical decisions to ensure transparency and trustworthiness. The thematic analysis followed the six-phase process outlined in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Phases of Thematic Analysis

## 6. Research Findings

To address how emotional engagement with short stories influences motivation, enjoyment, and language retention among basic EFL students, a thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Nine themes emerged from students' responses. The most frequent was **Positive Emotional Responses** ( $n = 10$ ), including excitement, curiosity, and achievement. **Vocabulary Development** ( $n = 9$ ) highlighted learning new words and idioms, while **Story-Based Enjoyment** ( $n = 8$ ) reflected pleasure from engaging plots and relatable contexts. **Learning-Driven Motivation** ( $n = 7$ ) showed intrinsic goals to improve skills, and **Mixed Emotions** ( $n = 6$ ) combined enjoyment and anxiety due to limited fluency. **Grammar Improvement** ( $n = 6$ ) and **Reading Fluency** ( $n = 5$ ) indicated enhanced awareness and pacing. **Mixed Motivation** ( $n = 5$ ) varied with content and difficulty, and **Negative Emotional Reactions** ( $n = 4$ ) included stress or fear of mispronunciation. Overall, these findings reveal that emotional engagement strengthens motivation, comprehension, and confidence, supporting both affective and cognitive development in beginner-level EFL reading.

### 6.1 Positive Emotional Responses

This theme captures students' emotional responses such as excitement, curiosity, and enjoyment arising from the act of reading itself. These feelings were linked to comprehension breakthroughs and recognizing new vocabulary, rather than the story content. Such responses foster motivation and support language retention, distinguishing them from story-based enjoyment, which focuses on narrative engagement. (Inf. stands for 'Informant')

**Table 1 Positive Emotional Responses**

Theme 1	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Positive Emotional Responses	10	-excited -curious & focus	Inf. 3: "I feel excited when the story made me understand more." Inf. 8: "I feel curious and focused."

### 6.2 Vocabulary Development

This theme highlights vocabulary acquisition as a key benefit. Participants noted that stories introduced new words and idioms, improving comprehension, writing, and fluency. Emotionally engaging stories effectively supported contextual word learning and enhanced overall language development for EFL learners.

**Table 2 Vocabulary Development**

Theme 2	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Vocabulary Development	9	-picked up a lot of new vocabulary -learned new vocabulary	<b>Inf. 4:</b> "I have picked up a lot of new vocabulary and learning as well." <b>Inf. 17:</b> "I learned new vocabulary like 'brave', 'challenge'."

### 6.3 Story-Based Enjoyment

This theme reflects the enjoyment students experienced from story content such as engaging plots, characters, or cultural relevance. Their motivation stemmed from interest in the narrative itself, rather than the act of reading. Unlike general emotional responses, this highlights how story elements drive emotional engagement.

**Table 3 Story-Based Enjoyment**

Theme 3	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Story-Based Enjoyment	8	-like reading fairy tales -like imaginative stories	Inf. 12: "I enjoy because I like reading fairy tales and stories." <b>Inf. 19:</b> "Like reading fairy tales because I like the imaginative stories."

### 6.4 Learning-Driven Motivation

Some students viewed reading short stories as a functional tool to develop their language abilities, particularly vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. This theme emphasizes how emotional engagement is driven not only by enjoyment but also by the perceived educational value. For these learners, motivation is rooted in measurable progress and self-improvement.

**Table 4 Learning-Driven Motivation**

Theme 4	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Learning-Driven Motivation	7	-know what word to learn -allows me to learn	Inf. 5: "It made me know what word I can/can't read." Inf. 9: "Stories allow me learn vocabulary and grammar"

### 6.5 Mixed Emotions

This theme shows that students felt both confidence and anxiety while reading. Though they enjoyed the stories, limited proficiency caused fear of misunderstanding. Such mixed emotions reveal the complexity of emotional engagement and highlight the need for supportive, low-stress reading environments that build confidence and reduce self-doubt in ESL learners.

**Table 5 Mixed Emotions**

Theme 5	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Mixed Emotions	6	-excited and nervous -nervous first but better	Inf. 7: "I am excited and nervous because I think I'm not good." Inf. 14: "I felt nervous first, but better after reading more."

### 6.6 Grammar Improvement

Students noted improvement in using correct grammar and sentence forms as a result of reading stories. This theme shows that the structured language in short stories, especially the frequent use of simple past tense supports grammar acquisition. This grammatical awareness builds confidence in speaking and writing, reinforcing the broader goal of language mastery.

**Table 6 Grammar Improvement**

Theme 6	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Grammar Improvement	6	-improved grammar -learned new words	Inf. 5: "Words and grammar." Inf. 14: "I learned new words and past tense grammar."

### 6.7 Reading Fluency

This theme highlights the role of consistent reading in improving fluency and comprehension. Participants reported that reading regularly made them more confident, improved their pacing, and enabled them to understand stories without constant translation. This fluency contributes to their ability to retain vocabulary and understand sentence structures in real time.

**Table 7 Reading Fluency**

Theme 7	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Reading Fluency	5	-confidence in speaking -read again slowly	Inf. 9: "Reading stories has given me more confidence...." Inf. 14: "I read again slowly and guessed the meaning."

### 6.8 Mixed-Motivation

This theme represents students who engaged with reading under specific conditions when the stories matched their interests, were short, or easy to understand. While not entirely disengaged, these learners displayed a more utilitarian or selective motivation. Their partial enthusiasm suggests that personalized story selection could significantly enhance motivation for this group.

**Table 8 Mixed- Motivation**

Theme 8	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Mixed Motivation	5	-fun but throat hurts -don't enjoy all	Inf. 2: "It is fun but my throat hurts. Inf. 9: "I don't enjoy all of them....but only certain things that interests me."

### 6.9 Negative Emotional Reactions

This theme reflects the stress and anxiety some EFL learners experience when reading English texts. Unfamiliar content or fear of mistakes reduces engagement and motivation. Recognizing these emotions helps educators design scaffolding that fosters confidence, emotional resilience, and a more positive reading experience.

**Table 9 Negative Emotional Reactions**

<b>Theme 9</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Negative Emotional Reactions	4	-feel stress	Inf. 16: "Stories make me feel stress."
		-nervous and afraid	Inf. 4: "I'm nervous because I'm afraid I might mispronounce"

To address the second question on reading difficulties faced by basic EFL students, thematic analysis identified recurring challenges and strategies used to overcome them. Seven key themes emerged, revealing common comprehension problems and the self-regulated coping mechanisms students employed when reading English short stories. Thee seven themes are as follows: (1) Vocabulary and Idiomatic Challenges (n-13), (2) Text Structure and Narrative Complexity (n-12), (3) Grammar and Sentence Complexity (n-6), (4) Cultural and Moral Interpretation (n-2)

#### **6.10 Vocabulary Difficulty and idiomatic Challenges**

Vocabulary and idiomatic expressions present key challenges for basic EFL learners reading short stories. Unfamiliar words and non-literal idioms often disrupt comprehension, especially for students lacking cultural context. These difficulties highlight the need for targeted vocabulary instruction and culturally accessible materials.

**Table 10 Vocabulary Difficulty and idiomatic Challenges**

<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Vocabulary Difficulty and Idiomatic Challenges	13	-difficult vocabulary	Inf. 2: "Section with difficult vocabulary."
		-difficult to grasp when idiom is used	Inf. 1: "The most difficult thing to grasp is when they use idiom or phrase..."

#### **6.11 Text Structure and Narrative Complexity**

This theme highlights students' difficulty following the structure and flow of English short stories. Long texts with many characters or settings caused confusion and reduced focus. These challenges underscore the need for simpler, well-organized stories to support beginner-level EFL readers' comprehension.

**Table 11 Text Structure and Narrative Complexity**

<b>Theme 2</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Text Structure & Narrative Complexity	12	-long story	Inf. 15: "Long story"
		-too many characters and settings	Inf. 4: "The beginning is difficult to understand because it introduces many new characters and settings at once."

#### **6.12 Grammar and Sentence Complexity**

This theme highlights the difficulties basic ESL learners face with long or complex sentences that disrupt comprehension. Such structures cause confusion and hinder understanding of ideas and story flow, emphasizing the need for simplified grammar and targeted instruction in reading materials for beginning-level learners.

**Table 12 Grammar and Sentence Complexity**

<b>Theme 3</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Sentence Complexity	6	-long sentences and grammar -complex sentences	Inf. 11: "Some long sentences and grammar were difficult to understand." Inf. 19: "The most difficult part was understanding long or complex sentences especially."

### 6.13 Cultural and Moral Interpretation

This theme shows students' struggles to grasp deeper meanings in short stories, such as character emotions or moral lessons. Many basic EFL learners lack the cultural context or inferencing skills to interpret symbolism or underlying messages, even when they understand the literal storyline.

**Table 13 Cultural and Moral Interpretation**

<b>Theme 4</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Cultural and Moral Interpretation	2	-confuse hidden meaning -lack understanding	Inf. 4: "One idea that confuses me was the hidden message...." Inf. 12: "I don't understand some of the characters' thoughts or feelings."

After identifying reading difficulties, the study examined which self-regulated strategies basic EFL students used to overcome them. Thematic analysis revealed seven strategies, ranked by frequency: (1) translation tools or dictionaries ( $n = 17$ ), (2) oral practice ( $n = 14$ ), (3) rereading ( $n = 10$ ), (4) seeking help ( $n = 9$ ), (5) contextual guessing ( $n = 6$ ), (6) perseverance ( $n = 3$ ), and (7) using visual cues ( $n = 2$ ). The numbers indicate how many students used each strategy. These findings illustrate learners' active problem-solving approaches and growing autonomy in navigating reading challenges.

### 6.14 Using Translation Tools or Dictionaries

This theme highlights students' frequent use of translation tools like Google Translate and bilingual dictionaries to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. These tools bridge their first language and English, showing both autonomy and reliance on quick digital aids. They also play a vital role in supporting vocabulary growth and comprehension.

**Table 14 Using Translation Tools or Dictionaries**

<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Representative Quotes</b>
Using Translation Tools or Dictionaries	17	-translate (digital or printed) -use google	Inf. 6: "I translate unknown words." Inf. 11: "I used Google Translate."

### 6.15 Oral Practice for Word Retention

Reading aloud and verbal repetition help students retain vocabulary and improve pronunciation. This active approach links reading and speaking, reinforcing comprehension through auditory practice. It shows that ESL learners view reading as a dynamic, multisensory process that integrates multiple language skills for deeper learning.

**Table 15 Oral Practice for Word Retention**

Theme 2	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Oral Practice for Word Retention	14	-say correctly -help remember words	Inf. 3: "Yes... I want to be able to say that word correctly." Inf. 8: "Yes...it helps me remember words better."

**6.16 Rereading to Enhance Understanding**

Rereading reflects persistence and self-monitoring to improve comprehension. Students revisit texts to clarify meaning and process complex grammar and vocabulary. This metacognitive strategy promotes active comprehension checking, deeper understanding, and greater vocabulary retention through repeated exposure and increased familiarity with the text.

**Table 16 Rereading to Enhance Understanding**

Theme 3	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Rereading to Enhance Understanding	10	-reread/google -guess the meaning	Inf. 1: "I read it again or google it." Inf. 14: "I read again slowly and guessed the meaning."

**6.17 Asking for Help from Others**

Social interaction aids problem-solving when individual strategies fail. Students seek help from peers and teachers, showing that ESL reading benefits from collaboration. This cooperative approach fosters dialogue, shared understanding, and increased confidence, highlighting the social dimension of effective language learning.

**Table 17 Asking for Help from Others**

Theme 4	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Asking for Help from Others	9	-seek classmates help -seek help from teachers	Inf. 13: "If I come across a difficult story, I ask my friend." Inf. 19: "I asked my teacher or classmates."

**6.18 Guessing Word Meaning from Context**

This theme shows students using context clues to infer meaning instead of external tools, demonstrating growing language awareness and independence. Though less common than translation, it is essential for developing autonomous reading, deeper comprehension, and long-term vocabulary retention.

**Table 18 Guessing Word Meaning from Context**

Theme 5	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Guessing Word Meaning from Context	6	-read slowly and guess the meaning -reread and guess meaning	Inf. 17: "I read the sentence again slowly and tried to guess the meaning from the context." Inf. 19: "I reread the sentence and tried to guess the meaning from the context."

### 6.19 Reading Perseverance

Some students demonstrated persistence and resilience, continuing to read even when full comprehension was not achieved. This theme reveals a positive attitude toward task completion, reflecting endurance and self-discipline. Although this may not always lead to full understanding, it promotes reading stamina and a sense of achievement, which are crucial for long-term language learning motivation.

**Table 19 Reading Perseverance**

Theme 6	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Reading Perseverance	3	-continuing to read -pause/resume	Inf. 2: "I just want to finish reading it." Inf. 10: "Stop reading & read again."

### 6.20 Using Visual Cues and Text Features

Though least mentioned, visual supports and strategic segmentation of text help reduce cognitive overload. Learners use illustrations and layout cues to reinforce meaning and simplify complex sections. This strategy caters especially to visual learners and supports understanding in the absence of strong linguistic skills. It also encourages a chunking approach breaking down information into manageable parts which improves processing and retention.

**Table 20 Using Visual Cues and Text Features**

Theme 7	n	Code	Representative Quotes
Using Visual Cues and Text Features	2	-use pictures to understand -break down into smaller chunks	Inf. 12: "I will look at the pictures or try to read and understand each sentence." Inf. 4: "Break it into smaller chunks to make it easier to focus."

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of emotional engagement in enhancing reading comprehension and language development among basic EFL learners. Emotions such as curiosity, enjoyment, and empathy served as strong motivators, helping students persist through linguistic and cultural challenges. These affective responses deepened learners' investment in reading and supported the retention of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Themes like Story-Based Enjoyment and Mixed Emotions reflect the dual cognitive-affective nature of language learning. While emotional connection to narratives enhanced comprehension, some students also experienced anxiety or frustration, especially those with limited proficiency. This underscores the importance of emotionally safe learning environments that acknowledge and support diverse emotional responses.

Students adopted a range of self-regulated strategies to overcome reading difficulties, including rereading, contextual guessing, oral repetition, and seeking help. These strategies reflect emerging learner autonomy and suggest that even beginners can engage in metacognitive regulation. Oral practice was notably linked to improved confidence and language retention. Frequent use of translation tools like Google Translate revealed students' practical methods for addressing vocabulary gaps. While effective, overreliance on such tools may limit deeper processing. Guided instruction on strategic tool use, alongside training in inference and prediction, is recommended to foster independent reading skills.

A key insight is the reciprocal relationship between emotional engagement and strategy use. Emotionally connected students were more likely to apply effective strategies, while

successful strategy use enhanced motivation and confidence. The study emphasizes the need for EFL curricula that combine emotionally engaging content with explicit strategy instruction to build fluency, confidence, and long-term language success.

## **8. Conclusions**

This study concludes that short stories are effective tools for stimulating emotional engagement, which significantly enhances motivation, comprehension, and vocabulary retention among basic EFL learners. Students demonstrated strong emotional connections to the characters and storyline, which enabled them to remain engaged even when facing linguistic and cultural difficulties. Emotional engagement was closely linked to cognitive processing, contributing to a more meaningful language learning experience.

Additionally, learners employed a range of self-regulated strategies such as rereading difficult passages, using translation tools, practicing oral repetition, and seeking peer support. These behaviors reflect growing learner autonomy and the ability to think about their own learning skills essential for long term academic success.

The findings underscore the interplay between emotional and cognitive dimensions of reading. Emotionally rich texts not only make reading more enjoyable but also help beginners learn language and stay motivated. By fostering positive emotional responses and encouraging strategic learning behaviors, short stories can serve as both linguistic and motivational scaffolds for beginner learners. These insights affirm the integration of emotionally engaging literary texts (short stories), along with targeted strategy instruction, into beginner-level EFL curricula.

## **9. Recommendations**

Based on the findings, educators are encouraged to select short stories with universal and culturally relevant themes to promote emotional connection and engagement. Lessons should include targeted instruction in reading, such as summarizing, using bilingual tools, and peer collaboration, to help learners navigate language challenges. Post-reading tasks like reflective journaling, creative retelling, and small group discussion can reinforce language use and emotional expression. Teachers should consider offering students choices in reading materials to enhance learner autonomy, and assessments should be broadened to capture both cognitive outcomes and affective engagement. These practical steps aim to promote not only immediate reading success but also the long-term development of independent, motivated, and emotionally invested language learners.

## **10. Implications**

10.1 The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for EFL pedagogy and curriculum design. First, educators should intentionally incorporate emotionally engaging and culturally relevant short stories into beginner-level reading instruction. Such texts foster learner motivation, enhance comprehension, and support vocabulary development through meaningful emotional connections.

10.2 Instruction should explicitly integrate self-regulated reading strategies, particularly those targeting vocabulary decoding and syntactic complexity. Teaching approaches such as rereading, contextual inference, and selective use of translation tools can promote learner autonomy and resilience when facing reading challenges.

10.3 An implementation of reflective practices including learning journals and open-ended self-assessments can provide educators with valuable insights into students' emotional and cognitive engagement. These tools also empower learners to monitor their progress and develop metacognitive awareness.

10.4 Future research should investigate the longitudinal impact of emotionally driven literary instruction on language development, particularly in early-stage EFL learning contexts.

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