

# Challenges and Strategies Employed in Comprehending Short Stories in English: The Case of Kurdish Learners<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the mental processes university students followed while reading short stories. It also sought to find the common problems in reading and understanding short stories and how linguistic and extra-linguistic factors formed those challenges. The total number of the participants was 15 (seven males and eight females) in three public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan. The data were recorded and collected among second year university students who were enrolled in an English short stories course in the second year of their studies in the 2014-2015 academic year. To collect the data, a think-aloud protocol was developed and questions about the text were answered verbally by the participants. A qualitative approach was adopted to analyse the obtained data descriptively. The results indicated the fact that some reading strategies were employed by the learners, these strategies were not adequate for them to fully analyse the text in a literary manner. More specifically, they attempted to answer literary questions in the same way that they answered general reading comprehension questions. The analysis of the data also revealed that lack of vocabulary was a major issue for the learners' inability in answering questions correctly. It was also found that the learners were influenced by their own cultural backgrounds and the social norms that they have been exposed to while reading and analysing short stories.

## Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar los procesos mentales que siguen los estudiantes universitarios al leer cuentos literarios. También buscó encontrar los problemas comunes en la lectura y comprensión de cuentos y cómo los factores lingüísticos y extralingüísticos formaron esos desafíos. El número total de participantes fue de 15 (siete hombres y ocho mujeres) en tres universidades públicas del Kurdistan iraquí. Los datos se registraron y recopilaron entre los estudiantes universitarios de segundo año que se inscribieron en un curso de cuentos de inglés en el segundo año de sus estudios en el año académico 2014-2015. Para recopilar los datos, se desarrolló un protocolo de pensamiento en voz alta y los participantes respondieron verbalmente a las preguntas sobre el texto. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo para analizar los datos obtenidos de manera descriptiva. Los resultados indicaron el hecho de que, aunque los alumnos emplearon algunas estrategias de lectura, estas estrategias no fueron adecuadas para analizar completamente el texto de manera literaria. Más específicamente, intentaron responder preguntas literarias de la misma manera que respondieron preguntas generales de comprensión lectora. El análisis de los datos también reveló que la falta de vocabulario es factor importante en la incapacidad de los alumnos para responder correctamente a las preguntas. También se encontró que los alumnos estaban influenciados por sus propios antecedentes culturales y las normas sociales a las que habían estado expuestos mientras leían y analizaban cuentos.

## Background of the Study

Using literature and its collaboration with language is not something new in language teaching with the aim of improving language skills. It has been used as a tool in teaching foreign languages widely, especially in the last decades (Violetta-Irene, 2015). In the time of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), literary works were well-thought of as materials in English as foreign language teaching, but when Structuralism and Audiolingualism were later used, literature was downplayed as these approaches are concerned with the correctness of grammatical form and teaching speaking and listening, rather than reading and writing (Collie & Slater, 1987). Later on, with the advent of the Communicative Approach, literature was neglected again. Dialogues and conversations were mostly targeted because the approach focused on using more practical materials and helping students in spoken language skills (Pardede, 2010). In the 1980s, literature returned to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Setiyadi, 2020). The integration and use of literature in foreign language curriculums were firmly suggested by many studies (for instance, Collie & Slater, 1987; Luukka, 2017; Lazar, 1993; Nation & Waring, 2019;). Brumfit and Carter (1986) argued that there are some possible contributions for using literature in English language teaching. Literature could be highly motivating for the students. For instance, a powerful emotional response may be obtained from students by literary genres, such as poems. Literature can also be considered as a way to access the cultural background of the author(s) or the background to the stories they have been writing. Nunan (2003) pointed out that reading literature provides the students with a lot of information about behaviour and reaction of people in different

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situations and in different places, because reading is building meaning by combining information from a text and the readers' own background knowledge.

Tso (2014) pointed out that sometimes teachers are anxious in using literature with their students because they believe that it is exposing wrong uses of language, since it breaks most of the grammatical rules and common use of vocabulary. In fact, there are many examples of rules broken in literary texts. Lazar (1993) explained that the point here is that this kind of writing expands students' awareness of the language and encourages them to think about the norms of language use (i.e., understanding sophisticated language helps the learner to master common use of language). The sensitiveness of the students to the features of language will grow with that.

Chastian (1988) stated that short stories are the most suitable literary genre for teaching as students can follow the story lines and there is usually one plot, one setting and few characters. Contrariwise, poetry is not easy to grasp because it includes a lot of figurative language, novels are too long to finish, and dramas need acting out which may be difficult to do in a crowded and time-limited classes.

Short stories can provide English as Second Language (ESL) learners with an appropriate study resource to improve their reading comprehension which is enjoyable and educational (Tso, 2014). Thus, a variety of strategies are used to make the teaching of the short stories pleasurable and dramatical, offering a rich experience in assisting reading comprehension (Ghasemi & Hajizadah, 2011). They also stated that these strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques, which aid and simplify overall reading comprehension, listening and spoken skills.

Ahmad (2012) explained that short stories can offer intellectual encouragement. They have a beginning and an end, so they have a complete experience in themselves. Their shortness and storyline keep the interest of readers without losing their patience. In fact, it is because of their length that they so readily lend themselves to the teaching of the reading skills that students need in their studies of literature.

Regarding the short story courses in English in the Iraqi Kurdistan education system, learners are introduced to short stories in grades 10, 11 and 12 for the first time. In those classes, these texts are treated as reading texts rather than literary texts and are not usually analysed. After completing high school, students are welcomed at university colleges. There are four different English departments where students can potentially study a bachelor's degree. Those four departments are the English Schools at the College of Languages, the College of Education/, the College of Basic Education and the College of Translation. The graduates of the two colleges of education are going to be English teachers in schools. In the faculties of education, first-year students (freshmen) take a course on English literature. The course covers an introduction to English literature and history. In the second year, the students study short stories as a content course. The stories are chosen by the Ministry of Higher Education. The study of the course requires deep understanding of stories and good reading comprehension to absorb the literary terms like theme, climax, symbolism and other similar aspects. Further, other requirements like discussion of the ideas, characters, and memorising quotations are vital.

Regarding those course requirements, research revealed that studying short stories requires more than understanding stories alone. It requires the comprehension of figures of speech, symbolism, themes, plot and characters (Al-Alami, 2016; Herman & Vervaeck, 2019; Kurtz & Schober, 2001). Hassan (2013) explained that Kurdish EFL learners suffer many difficulties on studying short stories. According to his study, the fundamental challenges the students face are: mastering problems with word meaning, obtaining equivalent words, and rephrasing the texts as a result of deficiency in vocabulary and grasping cultural differences through studying and reading of short stories. Reading different forms of literature would be illuminating and value-challenging activity when the readers are disposed to read it. Brumfit and Carter (1986) argued that because of cultural molds to literature of different class, country and age, a deal of meaning could be lost. These factors could lead to unsuccessful reading, difficulties, and anxiety while reading texts for EFL learners. Hassan (2013) noted that Kurdish students mostly have deprived themselves of reading original course books as a part of everyday assignments. Besides, they rely upon the summary of the short stories on the internet because they find the original ones too demanding to read. Furthermore, Lazar (1993) argued that the issue of enhancing literary texts and reading them always needs more investigating as literary texts are different from other texts because they break the rules of syntax, collocation, and even cohesion. This may confuse the learners in understanding, interpreting, and analysing the texts.

The aim of the study is to investigate the mental processes students follow while reading short stories and the difficulties among the second-year university students in reading short stories. It aims to find out the most common problems in their reading and understanding processes and how linguistic and extra-linguistic factors cause those challenges. It also tries to find out what the reasons behind the challenges they face are.

Investigating students' difficulties and mental processes when reading and comprehending short stories will be helpful for those who are interested in better EFL teaching in higher education. The study may aid EFL learners by raising their awareness on the challenges of reading and studying short stories at universities. This may, then, lead them to follow or choose different strategies that would benefit their process of reading short stories. In addition, this study may be a relevant source to use when teachers require a reference on students' views and their difficulties when designing courses using short stories.

## **Research Methodology**

### Design

To investigate the students' foci and how they read short stories, a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research aims to understand experiences and processes. As such, this approach was the most suitable approach for the research since the subject matter is how participants construct their understandings. To collect the data, a think-aloud protocol was used. This method allows researchers to better understand the thought processes of the participants as they solved a task, a product, a device, or a manual. It also reveals the difficulties which the individual participants may be experiencing during the process to be clearly illustrated (Eccles & Aarsal, 2017). In line with the qualitative nature of the study, during the think-aloud protocol open-ended questions based on verbal reports were used. Verbalisations were recorded, transcribed, grouped into themes, and then thematically analysed.

The participants were students of the English departments in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sulaimani, University of Salahaddin, and University of Charmo. They were completing a BA program in English language. The rationale for the choice of these participants was to find out the second-year students' attitude from different universities towards reading short stories. There were 15 participants (seven males and eight females) from the three public universities. Convenience sampling was used as the participants were assigned based on their willingness to share in the data collection process and their ability to speak English as the process needed verbal reports. They were all Kurdish students, and their educational background was homogenous, they were also studying in the same school and at the public universities.

A short story by Dorothy Parker entitled *You Were Perfectly Fine* was used in the think-aloud protocol. The story was selected from a book titled *American Stories* (Thompson & Jones, 2009) (see Appendix 1). Before selecting this story, the short stories which were studied and included in the syllabus of the second year of English courses in Iraqi Kurdistan were provided and read by the researcher and then, they were compared to the short story that was used in the data collection. The exam questions in the short stories in different universities were collected to understand how the short stories were studied and have a better understanding about the short story course in the universities. The criteria for the selection of this short story and the questions used were the period of the short story, its length, language, theme, and number of characters involved. After careful consideration of the short stories studied and exams taken by the participants at their respective universities, it was decided that the short story *You were Perfectly Fine* was similar to those previously studied in terms of the pre-set criteria.

The short story was printed and given to the participants in advance before they were asked to answer questions about it. They were given 15 minutes to read the short story since the pilot study showed that length of time is enough to read the text. Following that, two printed pages of questions (see Appendix 2) were given to the participants to be answered one by one. The questions were taken from the book *American Stories*. The book included reading comprehension and literary questions. Questions which matched with the purpose of the study were selected and then were checked. The questions that held vague meanings and could lead to interference as revealed in the pilot study were amended and checked again. They were also given to the lecturers who were teaching the short story courses at the three universities to be piloted before they were used for the purposes of this study. In the final version of the think-aloud questions, there were three parts. The first part included 17 reading comprehension questions. The second part had four matching expressions related to the content of the story and the third one included seven literary questions.

The questions were based on the purpose of the study and selected as appropriate to help investigating the research problem and questions and they were examined by external evaluators.

In addition to the printed materials used during the think-aloud sessions to assess the participants' reading processes, an audio-recorder was also used to record their verbal responses as they answered the relevant questions. These recordings were later transcribed to be analysed in detail.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses issues that emerged from the thorough analysis of the think-aloud sessions. First, those questions which the students found to be difficult to answer were analytically presented. This is followed by a thematic analysis and discussion of the thinking aloud sessions. The analyses are guided by the following research questions:

1. *What sort of questions do students find difficult to answer when reading short stories?*
2. *What major reading strategies do students employ while answering reading comprehension and literary questions?*
3. *What extra linguistic factors affect the way that students answer reading comprehension and literary questions?*

### Questions that participants found difficult

An initial analysis of the questions that the participants found difficult to answer revealed that direct questions were the most challenging. Twelve of the fifteen participants answered direct questions incorrectly, or they were initially answered incorrectly, and later changed after checking the text again.

Participants also found the reading comprehension questions, which were about very specific information (time, place, and person) challenging. They thought that some elements of the short story were not needed to understand the story itself because those events and characters did not change the direction of the events in the story. In other words, while reading short stories, the participants did not pay significant attention to specific information such as when an event happened. They seemed to ignore such details while reading. For example, when Student 1 read Question 6 in Section A, which read "What time did the young man get up? Why?" he said, "I don't remember. I think he usually gets up late. I didn't notice that in the story." Similarly, Student 2 pointed out that she noticed that it was not "a usual time" but that she did not "know why, he may be drunk."

The setting of the central events in the story was a hotel. There were also other places mentioned throughout the story, but the participants seemed to have focused on the main setting and the results showed that most of them did not remember the other places in the story. For instance, when Student 3 read Question 14 in Section A, which read "Where did Peter and the young woman go in the taxi?" she simply stated that she could not remember. Similarly, Student 4 pointed out that he knew that the young woman fell in love with him and they had a romantic time, but he did not "remember exactly where did they go [sic]."

Besides the major characters in the story, there were also some minor characters. It was revealed that while answering the questions, the participants did not pay attention to the minor characters and their roles in the story. Question 9 in Section A was "Why was Elinor a tiny little bit annoyed?" Student 5 commented on the question and explained that he did not know what the role of the character Elinor was in the short story. Rather than trying to answer the question, he said: "I don't know the function of the character." Student 6 thought that she did not know the answer to this question because "by once reading you can't get everything in any story." Student 7 and Student 8 said that they did not know the answer and Student 9 and Student 4's answers were corrected after getting back to the story and checking their answers. These answers tell us that on the first reading, the participants seem to focus on the general gist of the story, rather than the specific details. However, some were able to locate the correct information in the story after going back to it for the second time. Focusing on the central setting, the main character(s) and not paying enough attention to other minor details may relate to the students' previous experiences with the exams that they take in short story courses in their university syllabi. During the preparation of the questions for the current research, I obtained different exam papers from different universities in Kurdistan region to examine what students are usually assessed on. I noted that the main characters, themes, literary definitions, symbolism and important quotations were regularly included in the exam questions. Thus, the fact that many participants failed to locate the correct answers for such direct questions about minor details in the story



may be due to their prior training and expectations from questions on short stories. One can also say that for the participants' level, absorbing all the information in the short story may not be easy for the readers to tackling in one reading. So, they may not have been able to grasp all the details. It seemed that reading once was not enough for them to understand the text completely due to the possibility of having a poor proficiency level in reading comprehension or problems in reading comprehension in general. What makes the possibility stronger is that the problem of struggling to answer the questions on the details of the short story occurred among almost all participants.

### The Importance of Vocabulary

Nash and Snowling (2006) described vocabulary as the knowledge of words and their meanings, while Sesnan (1997) defined vocabulary as "total number of words we know and are able to use" (p. 123). Vocabulary is an essential element for reading instruction. It is clear that vocabulary and reading comprehension are closely associated to each other and the lack of vocabulary knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for readers to overcome (Alqahtani, 2015). From the data obtained in the present study, the results showed that low vocabulary proficiency was one of the disadvantages that the participants encountered, while reading the short story. They either claimed that they did not know the meaning of words' or expressions' meanings or that they could not be certain about performing the task correctly. One of the most difficult tasks for the readers during the think-aloud sessions emerged was the matching expression task. The participants claimed that the words that they were expected to match were either "archaic" or they have never heard them before. While completing this specific section, Student 8 asked whether she could leave this section blank and Student 2 said that she "matched the expressions but I am sure about only one because I don't understand them good [sic]." Student 10 thought that "most of those expressions are archaic" and she has heard one of the expressions "to make amorous advance" in movies before. Student 11 stated that it was not easy to guess them in the given task "because they are took out the text now [sic]." Among the expressions in section B to be matched by the participants, the third one seemed to be easier for them because they explained that the meaning of "off" and "give up" were familiar for them.

Thus, in relation to the vocabulary issues that the participants had, the result indicated that they were relatively more comfortable when the unknown words were not taken out of the text, and hence their context, because this gave an opportunity to the participants to find the meaning of the words or expressions by guessing from the context. As Ramezanali et al. (2020) stated, vocabulary knowledge is fundamentally necessary for mastering another language and many students continue to struggle with comprehension because of the vocabulary knowledge and ineffective strategies. It was noticed that there was a good correlation between vocabulary proficiency and guessing strategy as those participants with better vocabulary proficiency had better performance in guessing. It was also explained by Lubliner and Sementana (2005) that "readers with larger vocabularies find reading easier, read more widely, and do better in school" (p.163).

### Reading Strategies used for Comprehension

This section illustrates the most common strategies used by the participants of the study while reading. The strategies are guessing the meaning of words, guessing from the title, repeating words/expressions from the story and visualisation. It also discusses the findings and the analysis of the results.

#### *Guessing the meaning of words/expressions from the context*

The analysis of the reading strategies employed by the participants while answering the reading comprehension section showed that the most common strategy used was guessing the meaning of the words from context. The participants used this strategy while they were directly asked about the meaning of words. At the point when they had multiple choices to find the correct meaning of a word or its synonym, they were more successful in finding the correct answer than in questions which provided no choices. The participants seemed to believe that the multiple-choice questions helped them to find the correct answer.

The results of the current study also showed that some advantageous vocabulary learning techniques were created and exploited by learners to guess unknown words in the content and thereby understand the content. Content oriented speculating is one of these techniques. This strategy is a key learning aptitude for managing low-frequency vocabulary. EFL learners sometimes use their experience and common sense to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words (Huang & Eslami, 2013). Similar to the current study, Yousif (2014) claimed that one of the strategies that Kurdish EFL learners used frequently was understanding the

meaning of unknown words from the contextual clues. This strategy was specifically employed by some participants to answer Question 2 in Section A:

*"Tell me, was I very terrible last night?" "Oh, goodness," she said, "everybody was feeling pretty high. You were all right." "Yeah," he said. "I must have been dandy. Is everybody sore at me? "Good heavens, no," she said. "Everybody thought you were terribly funny..."*

What does 'sore' mean in the passage above?

a. shocked b. angry c. surprised

Student 12 pointed out that "the right one is angry" and thought that "sore" also could be considered as the synonym of other options like "shock" because they were not just angry, "they were shocked also." This shows that she has employed contextual guessing to find the correct answer unlike Student 10, who employed grammatical clues to find the correct answer. She said that "angry, is the right answer" because the word "at is used with angry just like sore." Ranjbar (2012), who investigated the relationship between grammatical knowledge and the ability to guess word meaning, revealed that there was a strong relationship between them. Hence, Student 10's strategy of looking at the grammatical structure to guess the meaning is a strong one among EFL learners who are predominantly taught by traditional methods of language teaching, focusing on grammatical structures rather than on communication.

Question 3 in Section A was similar to the previous question but no options were given to the participants:

*I did think that maybe you were a little tight at dinner—oh, you were perfectly all right, and all that, but I did know you were feeling pretty gay."*

What do you think "tight" means?

The participants used different forms of the guessing strategy to find the correct meaning of the word "tight" in the short story, and they explained that the exact meaning of the word was not clear for them but from the contextual clues, they tried to construct the meaning. Student 8 stated that, "tight may be means bad or not all right, [...] because he says I didn't think you were a little tight at dinner and then she says "oh you were perfectly fine." The uncertainty of the participants can be noticed more than in the previous questions in replying to this question as they kept repeating "maybe." Student 4 also said tight "means you were unmovable...you didn't move at all, may be." This shows that having a low proficiency in vocabulary prevents the reader to understand and integrate with the text fully. The uncertainty of the readers and their thinking about the meaning of the words or expressions may also create difficulties for the thinking process and solving problems, such as understanding the flow or the main idea of the text while reading.

### *Speculating on the Title*

From the data collected, it emerged that the title of the short story had an important role in understanding and attracting the reader. The title of the short story was also used by the participants to guess the main idea and the content. Similar to the current study, Ahmadi (2011) demonstrated that the title of a text has a powerful impact on the reader's comprehension. In addition, in his study on teachers' and students' perceptions towards improving vocabulary through using short stories in the EFL classroom, Hasan (2013) stated that those readers who paid attention to the title of a story would learn more vocabulary from it. Titles may attract the readers' attention and occupy an important space not only on a book cover or a title page, but also in the intentions and strategies of various parties (Schaper, 2013). Most of the participants emphasised that they guessed what might happen in the short story from the title of the short story. The title had the story's first impression. The title also made them think about the main idea and the summary. They explained that the title was the starting point of their judgment on whether they would enjoy the story or not. Thus, the title brought them to the world of the short story and captured their attention and led them to read on. Student 7, for example, pointed out that:

*I think it describes the whole theme of the story because he thinks that he has done something terrible that night before because he was unconscious, and he had no idea what to do but the young woman tells him he was perfectly fine that is same of the story.*

According to his quotation, Student 7's understanding of the short story lay in his perception of the title because the title contained the whole message of text and he combined his interpretation of the title with the main idea of the text. Similarly, Student 13 pointed out that he was inspired by the title and shared that "something bad happened to a person and it's about that the person was fine before and completely all right." Student 13's interpretation suggested that she had prior knowledge about the significance of titles

of the short stories in understanding them as she said "The title of many short stories are [sic] important. It can tell you the main idea of the short story and what the story is about." Student 4 had a different view about the importance of the title and besides his emphasis that the title "gives you a clue what it is about" he also said that the title "is important because it makes you curious to read the short story. If you have an interested [sic] title, it can make the reader curious to read it." Most of the participants agreed that the title of the short story is a good and very first tool to follow the sequence of events. Their awareness of the importance of this tool seemed to suggest that their prior training in reading and analysing short stories helped them in completing the think-aloud sessions.

#### *Repeating Words and Expressions from the Story*

It was observed that the participants repeated words and expressions that caught their attention in the story immediately after reading the story as they tried to answer questions. While answering a question, Student 7 quoted "Peter is stuffy and foolish" and Student 6 told about the main character of the short story by saying that "He was a society pet and comical." Student 15 also replied a literary question jokingly and said "oh dear, oh dear, I don't remember that hahaha" to express that he did not know the answer. Moreover, Student 5 used the word "tight" in his comment on the effect of alcohol on the themes of the short story and it seemed that he did not know the exact meaning of the word, but he used it instead of "reclusive." He said, "alcohol make [sic] him unconscious so not being tight is one of the themes of the short story." The expressions "stuffy," "society pet," "oh dear oh dear" and "tight" were expressions that were used by the author in the short story. The expressions they have repeated were from the main character or showed negative feelings about him. This could indicate that the participants were emotionally involved while reading the text. This also shows that those linguistic items that catch the attention of the readers while reading the story are easily retrieved and immediately put in use. While doing that, the participants might have used an effective strategy, which includes readers' emotions, interests and attitudes towards the text content.

Repeating words and expressions can be seen as improving vocabulary. The participants tried to take some new words and expressions from the short story and use them in their answers and comments. Repeating words and expressions can be due to learning new words from the short story or lacking vocabulary on the part of the participants and compensating it by using the words which are still in their short memory.

#### *Articulation between Reading and Picture/video Visualisation*

After analysing the data to find out the most frequent strategies that were used by the participants, it was found out that visualisation is one of them. The participants created mental images to talk about or confirm their answers. It was found that some of readers used visualisation strategy while reading about the characters, their actions and their surroundings. They seemed to have created a visual picture of what they had read based on the text. I also noticed that those who created mental images in their answers were more successful in doing the tasks and answering the questions about the short story. Student 4 pointed out that the place "they go around and around then to the park to look the stars ... that's so beautiful." Not all of what Student 4 said was included in the text. For example, the word "star" and "beautiful" were not included in the text, but she used these to form her mental imagery. Similarly, Student 2, on Q13 in section A, which reads "What happened on the sidewalk?" answered "Peter fell down. The weather may be is winter [sic] and the street covered [sic] with snow and white." After answering the question about what happened, she immediately depicted the setting by her explanation. She could be inspired by the sentence "There was that nasty stretch of ice on the sidewalk" in the short story to create the images. It could also be that this visual mental imagery has given her more encouragement to convince herself and me on the reason why Peter fell down and supported the correctness of her answer by the depiction in a better way. Saying "winter" and "snow on the street" is more likely to be an inspirational imagery taken from the text.

The visual images were not only used by the participants to imagine settings, but they also visualised the characters. On the main character of the short story, Student 10 said "the young man is pale with a messy face, looks like so ugly [sic]." It seemed that the picture that Student 10 visualised for Peter was based on her feelings or attitude towards Peter's appearance as described by the author since "messy face" and "ugly" were not included in the text. In order to back her own interpretation, this participant and others have repeated the same attitude in different situations.

Readers usually try to employ different strategies to have better performance in reading. Griffiths' (2003) study investigated language learning strategy use and proficiency at a private language school in New

Zealand. The results of his study showed that the participants used mental images at a high level. These results are also in line with Yousif's (2014) study. He stated that the most frequent memory strategy used by his participants was visualisation.

Employing this strategy may be seen as an indicator to distinguish skilful readers and unskilful readers because skilful readers are able to visualise and there is a positive correlation between fluency and comprehension (De Koning & van der Schoot (2013). The results of the current study also showed that visualisation was one of the characteristics of those readers who answered more correctly. Visualisation cues might be helpful self-check items for readers for comprehension. In other words, readers ought to see a motion picture going through their brains when reading. In case the motion picture or brain pictures stop, then the content is excessively troublesome or the reader is not actively involved in the process (Jensen, 2010). Hence, they show lower levels of achievement in comprehension.

### Mobilising Literary Analysis Strategies

It was noticed that while answering the literary questions, the majority of the participants tried to provide answers similar to reading comprehension questions, and this showed that they might not have deep understanding of the short story and the questions. It seemed that most of them could not construct meanings on their own and draw conclusions explicitly. They also seemed to have a shallow understanding of the text. The participants tried to retell the story, not announcing their literary analysis while answering literary questions. Trying to find the answers from the literary questions in the passage without analysing and not being able to combine the related events well revealed the similarity of their answers to reading comprehension questions and literary questions. For instance, Question 1 in Section C read: "How are the young man and the young woman described in the beginning of this story? What do these descriptions tell us?" Student 10 quoted that "the young man is pale and the young woman with her eyes that is [...] the woman with her starry eyes looking at him and telling him a story. I think she is pretty with clear eyes." This is a description of the complexion of the two characters and it lacks any analytical statements about the references to the two characters' descriptions. Student 3's answer for the question was different from others as she linked her answer with literature but failed to answer the question correctly. It seemed that when she realised that the question was a literary one, she tried to answer it in a literary way. She expressed:

*I think, his character is round character, round character I mean that character has problems and he has a conflict in the story and after the climax, he /she face a problem and solution. Here that man has a problem and he can't control his feeling and he talk to the girl about himself [sic].*

She mentioned one of the types of the characters in short stories, i.e., the "round character," and then plots the elements while her quote does not in fact relate to the question. This might suggest that she was aware of the requirements of the question but still failed to deliver a valid analysis and hence the correct answer.

The participants' quotes about the contribution of alcohol on the themes of the short story were not analytical and literary answers as well. For example, Student 15 pointed out that "drinking is not a solution to get rid of sadness." Here, the participant could not combine the contribution of alcohol to the main themes and did not create an analytical statement about joining the single elements to the whole story. She could not pull all of this information from the text together to create an analytical statement. This means that she was not able to answer the question correctly because the themes are not usually expressed plainly by the authors; the reader must question and analyse the story's points of interest to open it. Since Student 15 employed the reading strategies she used for comprehension to answer literary questions, her conclusion failed to reach the correct answer.

The participants of this study did not have enough literary background in literature in general and in English literature in particular. In the previous years, they had not studied any course related to analysing literature except for a general review of English literature. The course included poetry, drama, short stories and novels in their first year in English departments. This might have been a reason that precluded them from understanding the text differently from what was required and they could not differentiate between the literary texts and non-literary texts. Moreover, Janseen et al. (2006) pointed out that "making sense of a literary text requires time to reflect. Meanings may not occur on the first reading of a story, but might be generated only later through rereading and retrospection" (p. 47). It is also worth mentioning that having vocabulary issues and not enough awareness about reading strategies would influence the answers given because mastering the text and understanding it fully is essential to answering literary questions correctly.



*Recurring to Cultural Background and Previous knowledge*

The analysis of the current data also revealed that culture related issues influenced the understanding and reading processes of the participants. The participants interpreted and mentioned the actions of the characters and their personalities in a way that could be interpreted as biased. This conclusion emerged specifically as the participants were answering literary questions more than the reading comprehension questions because the literary questions required them to talk more on the personality of the characters. Literary questions generally transcend the literal meaning of the texts. This led the participants to be more open in the terms of giving verbal reports on culture and religion. For example, Student 12 said:

*The man, Peter, his personality is not bad but he is drunk and get wasted. In my opinion everybody who drinks is a bad person because it will reach to something that no one like to do. You do something that make others feel bad of you or annoyed. For the girl, she was honest with him, she was frankly with him. Maybe she loved him. She didn't hide anything from him so she is honest. Every girl who has a husband or boyfriend ... it's like rare to a woman to love such a guy or be with him. Every woman hates that. For example in our culture most of the people don't like drunken men [sic].*

In the quote above, the participant showed her point of view on those who drink alcohol. In her excerpt, she linked her society's standards and her emotions to understand the short story. Her references to "no one like to do" and "every woman hates that" show that she is actually referring to some predetermined criteria. At the end of her answer, she referred to the basis of these criteria as "our culture." Her words can be read as a bias here and the reason for her bias appears to be her understanding of how "most people" in her culture do not like drinking and drunk men. When Student 10 comments about Peter, the main character, and said "he slipped on the ice, thank God!" her answer also holds different implications. Her expression "thank God" can be interpreted in two ways here: First, she is glad to see Peter slipping because she is sympathetic towards the woman and hates drunk men. Second, she may be a devout Muslim as Islam is the predominant religion of the Kurdistan region. Many Muslim Kurds usually may not call themselves religious in the matter or praying five times a day, however, in the Kurdish culture, secondary practices of Islam have a fortification and many do follow Islamic food restrictions and avoid alcohol. In both cases, Student 10's exclamation regarding Peter's fall indicates that she did not approve of his drinking behaviour and her cultural background had an impact on this judgment.

Concerning the same topic, Student 3 said, "I say alcohol isn't a solution. The young man isn't true for this. It's bad for society and religion." So, again, religious and social values have a great role in the life of the individuals of the society. It sometimes seemed that those values had exerted influence on the participants' lives, as Student 6 quoted "I have heard stories like that before how those men had bad affect on family and hit their wife [sic]." Her use of the reported stories indicates that this is not a personal experience and she has not seen it around similar to Student 10, who quoted "it's said that alcohol brings joy." In other words, their judgment is steered by stories they have heard rather than personal experience, which confirms the interpretation that social rules and cultural values dictate their judgments when moral issues are concerned.

The literature on the relationship between reading comprehension and cultural background suggests that one of the elements of understanding a text well is general knowledge of the world.

Readers also need to expand their knowledge of the author's culture (Mustofa & Hill, 2018). The result of the current study showed that the cultural differences influenced the students' answers and because of limited knowledge of the target culture or personal experience in the matters discussed, they read and analysed the text according to their own cultural and social norms. Erten and Razi (2009), who investigated the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension in the Turkish context, revealed that:

*although reading activities do activate schematic knowledge and promote strategic reading behaviours, the influence of cultural familiarity remains intact. Therefore, if readers lack the relevant cultural schema, reading activities cannot fully compensate for the discrepancy or help readers comprehend a text (p. 71).*

The results also demonstrated that cultural values may create challenges in the interpretation of texts, particularly if the writer and reader come from two different cultures. It seems that learning about the target culture plays a great role in the understanding and appreciation of the text.

**Conclusion**

The present study found that, as a consequence of poor skills in reading comprehension, students ignored some parts of the text as they were reading it. The general gist of the story caught the attention of the

participants rather than the specific information because they regarded direct and very specific questions as difficult questions and not easy to be comprehended by reading once. Concerning this point, vocabulary was discovered as a disadvantage that the students encountered while reading the text. The participants found the words and expressions difficult in terms of understanding their meanings when they were taken out of the content. This problem led to hesitations in indicating the exact meaning of words and predicting.

There were some reading techniques which students employed frequently while reading the short story employed in this study. Predicting word meanings was one of them. The participants used contextual clues and grammatical clues to find the meaning of the unknown words. It was found that when the words were unknown and could not be predicted, made the integrating text difficult. They created difficulties for the participants to engage with the text. Furthermore, the participants used mental imagery to clarify their answers. This visualisation was a helpful strategy for a better performance in reading comprehension. It was revealed that their visualisations were based on their feelings or attitudes to characters, characters' actions and surroundings. Besides these strategies, the findings indicated that the participants' emotional involvement led to learning of new words or expressions and utilising them in speaking immediately after reading.

The participants mostly could not develop their own analytical statements and build their own analysis. Their attempts in making sense of the literary text were not successful enough. It was noted that the participants employed the same strategies to answer reading comprehension questions and to answer literary questions. So, there was a large similarity between answers given to reading comprehension questions and literary questions. Both of them were mostly in the form of storytelling.

The participants appeared to have answered some of the questions under the influence of their cultural background. This means that their cultural values, perceived social rules and religion had important roles in understanding the story, which was written in a western context. These standards caused emotional reactions in the participants while answering the questions.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of the current study delineated different aspects of the reading process including students' thinking processes while reading and reading strategies. Specific reading strategies should be taught more explicitly to raise awareness among Kurdish EFL learners for the sake of better reading comprehension. For example, providing learners with more knowledge about employing skimming and scanning strategies and how these strategies can be used for different purposes while trying to understand a text (Harmer, 2003).

It appeared in the findings that students used limited reading strategies and failed to use vocabulary learning strategies. The memory strategies like predicting and compensation strategies such as visualisation were used frequently. Therefore, other possible vocabulary learning strategies should be taught for EFL learners to use while reading short stories.

Teachers should be helped to design appropriate activities to help them be prepared for further literary analysis at high school level. This would then help learners to be better prepared for the following stage of their studies at the university. Students ought to be taught how to analyse literary texts and what is needed to analyse short stories. This can be fulfilled by providing more practice about literary analysis in short story courses. In other words, in addition to studying short stories as reading texts, students should be taught about methods of literary analysis.

Cultural issues appeared to be significant factors while learners read short stories. This is due to the fact that short stories are situated in a specific cultural and social setting and that they are not necessarily meant to be read by language learners as a learning material. In the current study, religion and attitudes towards drinking were the issues that emerged as significant, impacting students' comprehension. Identifying such sensitive issues for Kurdish EFL learners through an empirical study can help lay the grounds for better selection of short stories and planning relevant learning activities around literary texts.

Students should be exposed to different perspectives regarding cultural issues and stereotypes. This may help to reduce learners' ethnocentricity and increase their tolerance as well as raising their cultural awareness. Taking this into consideration can help students better understand and analyse the text without bias.

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## Appendix 1

The short story (Thomson & Jones, 2009)

### **YOU WERE PERFECTLY FINE**

*By Dorothy Parker (1893–1967)*

The pale young man eased himself carefully into the low chair, and rolled his head to the side, so that the cool chintz comforted his cheek and temple.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear. Oh.”

The clear-eyed girl, sitting light and erect on the couch, smiled brightly at him.

“Not feeling so well today?” she said.

“Oh, I’m great,” he said. “Corking, I am. Know what time I got up? Four o’clock this afternoon, sharp. I kept trying to make it, and every time I took my head off the pillow, it would roll under the bed. This isn’t my head I’ve got on now. I think this is something that used to belong to Walt Whitman. Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.”

“Do you think maybe a drink would make you feel better?” she said.

“The hair of the mastiff that bit me?” he said. “Oh, no, thank you. Please never speak of anything like that again. I’m through. I’m all, all through. Look at that hand; steady as a humming-bird. Tell me, was I very terrible last night?”

“Oh, goodness,” she said, “everybody was feeling pretty high. You were all right.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I must have been dandy. Is everybody **sore** at me?”

“Good heavens, no,” she said. “Everybody thought you were terribly funny. Of course, Jim Pierson was **a little stuffy**, there, for a minute at dinner. But people sort of held him back in his chair and got him calmed down. I don’t think anybody at the other tables noticed it at all. Hardly anybody.”

He was going to sock me?” he said. “Oh, Lord. What did I do to him?” Why, you didn’t do a thing,” she said. “You were perfectly fine. But you know how silly Jim gets, when he thinks anybody is making **too much fuss** over Elinor.”

“Was I **making a pass at** Elinor?” he said, “Did I do that?”

“Of course you didn’t.” she said. “You were only fooling that’s all. She thought you were awfully amusing. She was having a marvelous time. She only got **a little tiny bit annoyed** just once, when you poured the clam-juice down her back.”

“My God,” he said. “Clam-juice down that back. And every vertebra a little Cabot. Dear God. What’ll I ever do?”

“Oh, she’ll be all right,” she said. “Just send her some flowers, or something. Don’t worry about it. It isn’t anything.”

“No I won’t worry,” he said. “I haven’t got a care in the world. I’m sitting pretty. Oh, dear, oh, dear. Did I do any other fascinating tricks at dinner?”

“You were fine,” she said. “Don’t be so foolish about it. Everybody was crazy about you. The maître d’hôtel was a little worried because you wouldn’t stop singing, but he really didn’t mind. All he said was, he was afraid they’d close the place again, if there was so much noise. But he didn’t care a bit, himself. I think he loved seeing you have such a good time. Oh, you were just singing away, there, for about an hour. It wasn’t so terribly loud, at all.”

“So I sang,” he said. “That must have been a treat. I sang.”

“Don’t you remember?” she said. “You just sang one song after another. Everybody in the place was listening. They loved it. Only you kept insisting that you wanted to sing some song about some kind of fusiliers or other, and everybody kept shushing you, and you’d keep trying to start it again. You were wonderful. We were all trying to make you stop singing for a minute, and eat something, but you wouldn’t hear of it. My, you were funny.”

“Didn’t I eat any dinner?” he said.

“Oh, not a thing,” she said. “Every time the waiter would offer you something, you’d give it right back to him, because you said that he was your long-lost brother, changed in the cradle by a gypsy band, and that anything you had was his. You had him simply roaring at you.”



“I bet I did,” he said, “I bet I was comical. Society’s Pet, I must have been. And what happened then, after my overwhelming success with the waiter?”

“Why, nothing much,” she said. “You took a sort of dislike to some old man with white hair, sitting across the room, because you didn’t like his necktie and you wanted to tell him about it. But we got you out, before he got really mad.”

“Oh, we got out,” he said. “Did I walk?”

“Walk! Of course you did,” she said. “You were absolutely all right. There was that nasty stretch of ice on the sidewalk, and you did sit down awfully hard, you poor dear. But good heavens, that might have happened to anybody.”

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Louisa Alcott or anybody. So I fell down on sidewalk. That would explain what’s the matter with my—Yes. I see. And then what, if you don’t mind?”

“Ah, now, Peter!” she said. “You can’t sit there and say you don’t remember what happened after that! I did think that maybe you were a little **tight** at dinner—oh, you were perfectly all right, and all that, but I did know you were feeling pretty gay. But you were so serious, from the time you fell down—I never knew you to be that way. Don’t you know how you told me I had never seen your real self before? Oh, Peter, I just couldn’t bear it, if you didn’t remember that lovely long ride we took together in the taxi! Please, you do remember that, don’t you? I think it would simply kill me, if you didn’t.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Riding in the taxi. Oh, yes, sure. Pretty long ride, hmm?”

“Round and round and round the park,” she said. “Oh, and the trees were shining so in the moonlight. And you said you never knew before that you really had a soul.”

“Yes,” he said. “I said that. That was me.”

“You said such lovely, lovely things,” she said. “And I’d never known, all this time, how you had been feeling about me, and I’d never dared to let you see how I felt about you. And then last night—oh, Peter dear, think that taxi ride was the most important thing that ever happened to us in our lives.”

“Yes,” he said. “I guess it must have been.”

“And we’re going to be so happy,” she said. “Oh, I just want to tell everybody! But I don’t know—I think maybe it would be sweeter to keep it all to ourselves.”

“I think it would be,” he said.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Great.”

“Lovely!” she said.

“Look here,” he said, “do you mind if I have a drink? I mean, just medicinally, you know. I’m **off the stuff for life**, so help me. But I think I feel a collapse coming on.”

“Oh, I think it would do you good,” she said. “You poor boy, it’s a shame you feel so awful. I’ll go make you a whisky and soda.”

“Honestly,” he said, “I don’t see how you could ever want to speak to me again, after I **made such a fool of myself**, last night. I think I’d better go join a monastery in Tibet.”

“You crazy idiot!” she said. “As if I could ever let you go away now! Stop talking like that. You were perfectly fine.”

She jumped up from the couch, kissed him quickly on the forehead, and ran out of the room.

The pale young man looked after her and shook his head long and slowly, then dropped it in his damp and trembling hands.

“Oh, dear,” he said. “Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear.”

## Appendix 2

### The think-aloud questions

#### Section A

*Reading comprehension questions.*

1. What do you think the significance of the short story's title is?

2. Read this passage:

*Tell me, was I very terrible last night?"*

*"Oh, goodness," she said, "everybody was feeling pretty high. You were all right."*

*"Yeah," he said. "I must have been dandy. Is everybody sore at me?"*

*"Good heavens, no," she said. "Everybody thought you were terribly funny..."*

What does 'sore' mean in the passage above?

a. shocked b. angry c. surprised

3. *"I did think that maybe you were a little tight at dinner—oh, you were perfectly all right, and all that, but I did know you were feeling pretty gay."*

- What do you think 'tight' means?

4. How does the young man feel at the beginning of the story? How do you know?

5. How do you think the young woman feels throughout the story? What evidence is there for this?

6. What time did the young man get up? Why?

7. What does the young man want to know about the previous evening?

8. According to the young woman, why is Jim Pierson *a little stuffy*?

9. Why was Elinor *a tiny little bit annoyed*?

10. How long was the young man singing? How did the maître d'hotel react?

11. Why did the young man not eat anything?

12. Why was the young man taken out of the hotel?

13. What happened on the sidewalk?

14. Where did Peter and the young woman go in the taxi?

15. How does the young woman feel about what happened in the taxi?

16. Why do you think Peter asks for a drink?

17. How do you think Peter feels after the young woman leaves the room?

#### Section B

*Match the expressions in the bold below with their definitions in the right-hand column.*

1. You **made too much fuss over here** A. paid excessive attention to

2. Was I **making a pass at** her? B. to behave recklessly

3. I am **off the stuff for life**. C. to make an amorous advance

4. I **made such a fool of myself**. D. to give something up

**Section C**

*Literary questions*

1. How are the young man and the young woman described in the beginning of this story? What do these descriptions tell us?
2. In your opinion, what are the main themes covered in the story?
3. Alcohol consumption seems to play a significant role in the story. Discuss the ways in which it contributes to the themes of the story.
4. Is the atmosphere of the story light-hearted or is there a dark side to it? Give reasons for your answer.
5. *“Look at that hand; steady as a hummingbird. Tell me, was I very terrible last night?”*

-Identify the figure of speech in the sentence above.

6. Do you believe the young woman’s version of events from the previous night. Why?
7. Most of the story consists of direct speech? What effect does this have on the reader?