

The Effect of Short Stories on the Iranian EFL Learner's Writing Accuracy and Complexity

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Abstract

The current study was an attempt to examine the effect of short story as an educational tool have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy and complexity. To this end, 60 Iranian EFL learners from Kanon Zaban language institute, in Zahedan, Iran, were selected and taken from the intermediate level classes. They were divided into equal groups as the experimental and control groups. The selected groups took a pretest of essay writing task to ascertain their homogeneity in terms of the initial writing ability. Next, the experimental group was taught based on the instruction via reading short stories. In the treatment phase, totally eight sessions of treatments were offered within eight weeks of instruction for experimental group. In this phase, during each session the students in experimental group was taught the materials using short stories in a way that after presenting the reading material they were asked to underline the unfamiliar vocabulary items and lexical combinations then tried to guess the meanings based on the context of the story. Then, learners were given time to exchange views about the items they learnt. At the end of each session, the researcher asked the participants to write a summary of the reviewed section of predetermined short story using the newly-learned vocabulary items and combinations. The participants in the control group were taught and practice classroom writing using traditional methods without any treatment. The obtained data were analyzed via conducting descriptive statistics and MANOVA. The results revealed that short story had a positively significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy and complexity. Finally, the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study are presented.

Key words: Iranian EFL learners, Short Story, Writing Accuracy, Writing Complexity

1. Introduction

Teaching English in educational settings where it is not recognized as a priority and where opportunities to practice the language are restricted makes the language and educational centers the only places where communicative practices can be occurred. One of the challenges in those contexts is to involve learners in meaningful language activities so that they can utilize the language actively.

For years, researchers supported and agreed with the importance of incorporating literature in EFL classroom.

literature expands language awareness, educates the whole person, is motivating, holds high status in many cultures and countries, and is often more interesting than the texts found in course books.

Collie and Slater (1990) stated that literary material stands as a model for EFL learners since they contain real examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary samples, which in turn provide real meaning to their learning processes. They also highlight that incorporating the literary component in language teaching provides language learners with cultural information about the language they are learning; literary texts may increase learners' motivation and insights into the cultures and/or speakers of the target language.

From EFL research literature, many relevant studies have been carried out on incorporating EFL literature, and have analyzed appreciations, interests and responses, especially with EFL short stories. These selected research reports support the present study as they provide background knowledge about how EFL learners have experienced reading EFL literature and have empowered literary texts according to their contextual characteristics and according to their personal features. These studies reported here were the product after searching carefully on research data bases reports and reading a considerable number of research documents, which have researched about the implementation of literature in the EFL classroom. In addition, the effect of short stories on the language skill in general and writing skill in particular has been highlighted.

It is widely believed that English writing is one of the fundamental skills that EFL/ESL learners should master to gain desired achievements in learning and future employment (Alderson & Banerjee, 2002). In spite of all its significance, English writing is considered one of the highly challenging and complex skill that needs a considerable amount of time, effort, practice, learning, and teachers' instruction (Cooper, 1983). Hapsari (2011) argues that writing is generally known as the most difficult of the four skills. The difficulty is seen in generating and organizing

ideas and the mastery of the different aspects of writing such as grammar, spelling, word choice, punctuation, and so on.

Skehan and Foster (1997) define writing complexity as, “Learners’ capacity to use more complex target like language” (Skehan & Foster, 1997; p. 230). According to Skehan (1996), complexity is “the stage and elaboration of the underlying inter language system”, which utilizes complicated and structured inter-language (Skehan, 1998). Going along with these two important aspects of the writing process, the EFL learners should face some serious challenges in producing an acceptable and satisfactory piece of writing. These challenges and difficulties can be largely attributed to the cognitive aspect of writing process which encompasses primarily insufficient knowledge of lexical and syntactic properties of a foreign language (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

Nowadays, students are able to provide more input into their learning by participating in interactive, real-world learning situations rather than remaining passive listeners. Consequently, to continue addressing the needs of students of different learning styles, teachers should consider updating their teaching approaches in order to enable a supportive, creative and much more learner-centered instructional atmosphere for their students. In the Iranian EFL context, employing the traditional methods and procedures of foreign language teaching and learning are preferred to innovative and up-to-date trends and few hours are allocated to the English language curriculum, so English proficiency targets are unlikely to be achieved. Furthermore, as classes are crowded, most of the students do not have enough practice in English and do not overcome language learning problems and are not proficient enough to communicate in the foreign language (Ghaedi & Shahrokhi, 2016).

According to Caudery (2018), compared to other language skills such as listening and speaking, writing is the least utilized skill for most of foreign language learners. This means that it is frequently neglected and overlooked in spite of the fact that through writing learners can and do internalize vocabulary and structures. One of the main problems of the EFL learners is that they cannot write academically in terms of accuracy and complexity. They also lack the sufficient opportunities to practice writing skill. In the same vein, Richard and Renandya (2002)

The EFL learners are expected to develop the ability to write simple sentences that have correct grammar, spelling, punctuation and meaning. On the other hand, it seems that the writing activities available in their textbooks do not provide enough practice for learners and do not consider their individual needs. Furthermore, most teachers do not employ enough writing activities that consider these needs or meet the learners’ interests and motivate them to learn.

In spite of numerous body of research works carried out with regard to the effectiveness of using authentic materials such as short stories in various realm of language pedagogy (Tabrizi & Abbasi, 2016; Bartan, 2017; Khodabande, 2018), there are few research studies, in which the effectiveness of integrating short story has been investigated in terms of EFL learners’ writing accuracy and complexity. Accordingly, to fill the gap in literature, and find a solution for the EFL learners’ writing the current study was an endeavor to investigate the effect of short story on the Iranian EFL learners’ writing accuracy and complexity.

2. Methodology

The target participants included 60 Iranian students who had nearly the same language experiences in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). To achieve the purpose of this study, the following steps were taken:

In the first step, 60 Iranian EFL learners from Kanon Zaban language institute, in Zahedan, Iran, were selected and taken from the intermediate level classes. They were divided into equal groups as the experimental and control groups. Then, an independent sample t-test was conducted to ensure the homogeneity of two groups (experimental and control). That is to say, the participants were randomly divided into two groups (classes) so that every member had an equal chance to be located to each group. At the second step of this study, the selected sample took a pretest of essay writing task to ascertain their homogeneity in terms of the initial writing ability. Next, the experimental group was taught based on the instruction via reading short stories.

In the treatment phase, totally eight sessions of treatments were offered within eight weeks of instruction for experimental group. In this phase, during each session the students in experimental group was taught the materials using short stories in a way that after presenting the reading material they were asked to underline the unfamiliar vocabulary items and lexical combinations then tried to guess the meanings based on the context of the story. Then, learners were given time to exchange views about the items they learnt. At the end of each session, the researcher asked the participants to write a summary of the reviewed section of predetermined short story using the newly-learned vocabulary items and combinations. The participants in the control group were taught and practice classroom writing using traditional methods without any treatment. They were presented the vocabulary items and word lists including synonyms, antonyms and dictionary definitions. Immediately after finishing the treatment, the posttest of essay writing was administered to both groups in two separate sessions. Finally, the gathered data from this test was analyzed using

descriptive and inferential statistical procedures to answer the research questions and test the generated null hypothesis of this study.

In order to analyze the obtained data, different statistical procedure are used. First, the descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and other central tendencies were run. Then, in order to answer the research questions, MANOVA analysis was conducted to examine the effect of short story as an educational tool on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy and complexity.

3. Results

In this study, the following hypotheses tested:

H01. Integration of short story as an educational tool does not have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy.

H02: Integration of short story as an educational tool does not have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing complexity

3.1. Assumptions

In order to conduct the MANOVA, three main assumptions including normal distribution, linearity, and homogeneity of variances. Normal distribution refers to the fact that the dependent variable should be normally distributed within groups. Overall, the F test is robust to non-normality, if the non-normality is caused by skewness rather than by outliers. Tests for outliers should be run before performing a MANOVA, and outliers should be transformed or removed. According to linearity, MANOVA assumes that there are linear relationships among all pairs of dependent variables, all pairs of covariates, and all dependent variable-covariate pairs in each cell. Therefore, when the relationship deviates from linearity, the power of the analysis will be compromised. In addition, Homogeneity of Variances assumes that the dependent variables exhibit equal levels of variance across the range of predictor variables

3.1.1. Examining the Normality Distribution

In order to examine the normality of distribution, the Normal Probability Plot was conducted. To this end, first, the data were sorted, then, computed evenly spaced percentiles from a normal distribution.

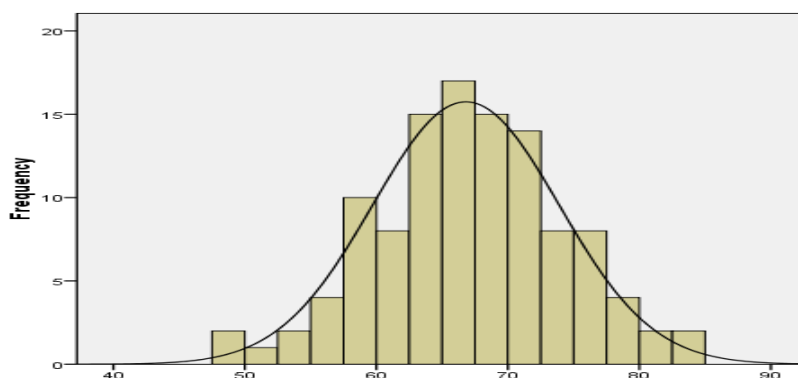


Figure 1. Normality of the Data Distribution

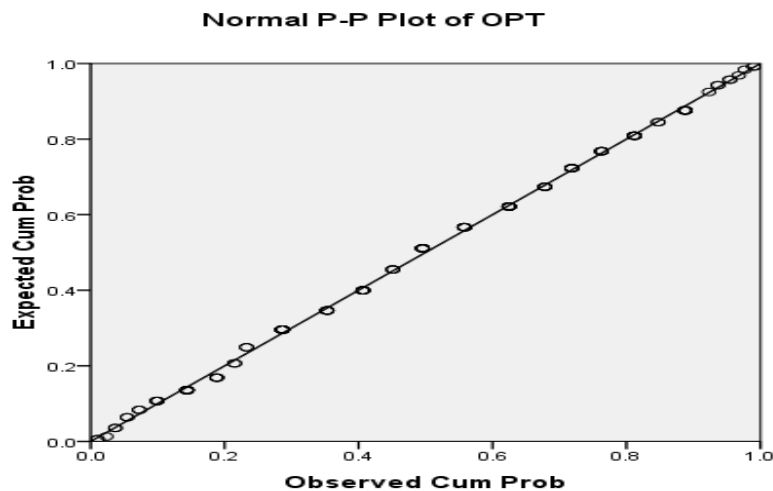


Figure 2. Normal Probability Plot

Evenly distributed data can be seen both in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The closeness of attributes to the standard line confirmed the normal distribution of the data.

3.1.2. Examining the Linearity

In order to check the linearity graphically, we can use the output of a normal Q-Q Plot. If the data are normally distributed, the data points will be close to the diagonal line. If the data points stray from the line in an obvious non-linear fashion, the data are not normally distributed. The normal Q-Q plot below in Figures 3 is presented.

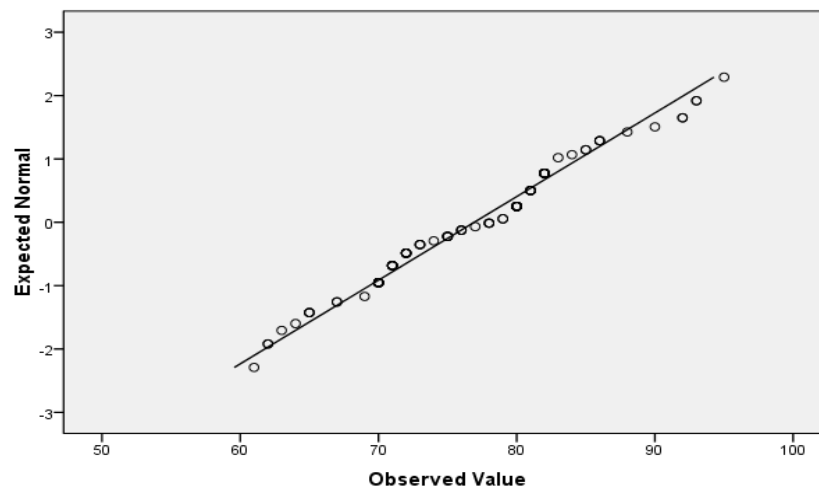


Figure 3. Scatterplot of Test Scores

3.1.3. Examining the Homogeneity of Variances

Furthermore, to examine the third assumption, namely, the homogeneity of variances, Levene's test was run. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1. Levene's Test Results

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	.084	1	58	.722

Based on Median	.078	1	58	.719
Based on Median and with adjusted df	.078	1	34.02	.719
Based on trimmed mean	.082	1	58	.720

According to Table 1, the Levene's test is non-significant at $p < .05$. Thus, it is concluded that the difference between the groups' variances is not significant and roughly equal, and therefore the assumption of homogeneity of variances as well as the main assumptions of the parametric test were met.

3.1.4. Descriptive Analysis of Groups in Pretest and Posttest

The descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest of the experimental group (EG) is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Descriptive Analysis of Results for EG in Writing Accuracy and Complexity

	Accuracy					Complexity				
	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Pretest	30	4	6.30	5.25	1.09	30	5	5.30	5.30	1.45
Posttest	30	4.30	7.30	6.00	1.22	30	4.30	7.00	6.00	1.77
Valid N	30					30				

As shown in Table 2, the pretest mean score of EG in writing accuracy is 5.25 and $SD = 1.09$. In addition, the posttest mean score of EG in the writing accuracy is 6.00 and $SD = 1.22$. Moreover, the pretest mean score of EG in writing complexity is 5.30 and $SD = 1.45$. In addition, the posttest mean score of EG in the writing complexity is 6.00 and $SD = 1.77$. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the pretest and posttest scores for EG in writing accuracy, respectively.

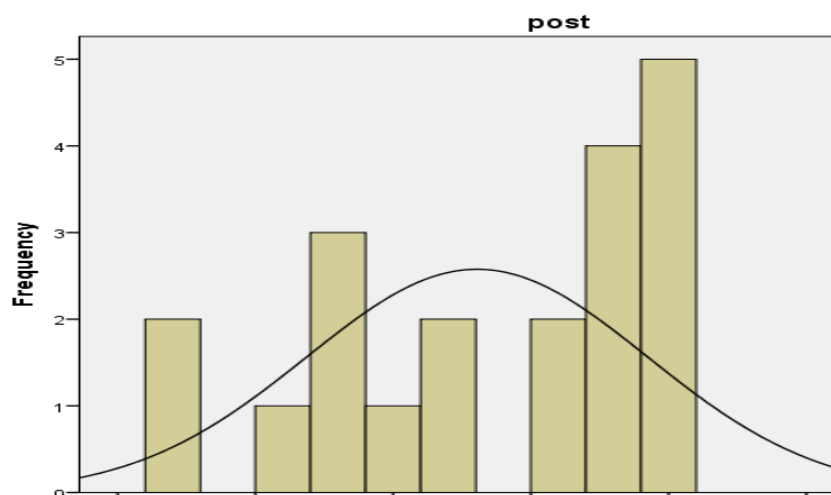


Figure 3. Pretest of EG in Writing Accuracy

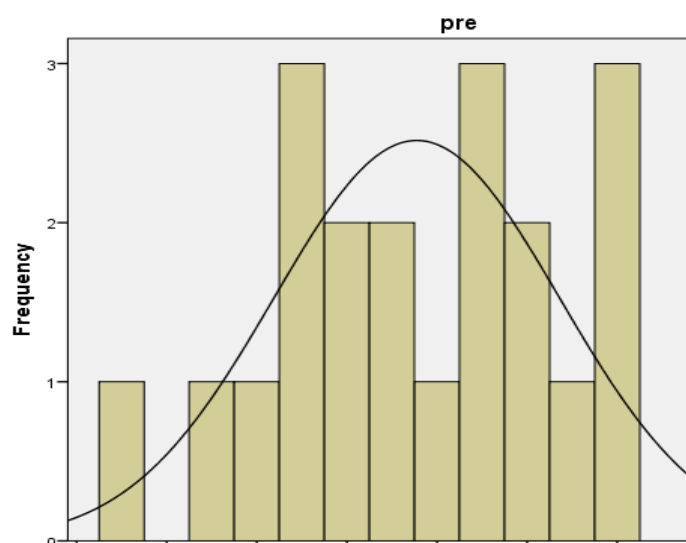


Figure 4. Posttest of EG in Writing Accuracy

Moreover, Figures 5 and 6 show the pretest and posttest scores for EG in writing complexity.

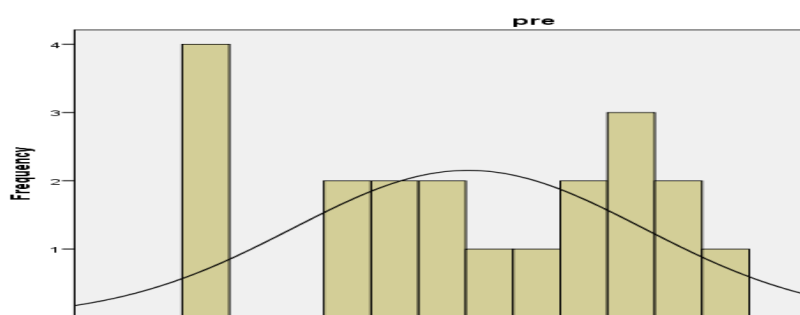


Figure 5. The Pretest of EG in Writing Complexity

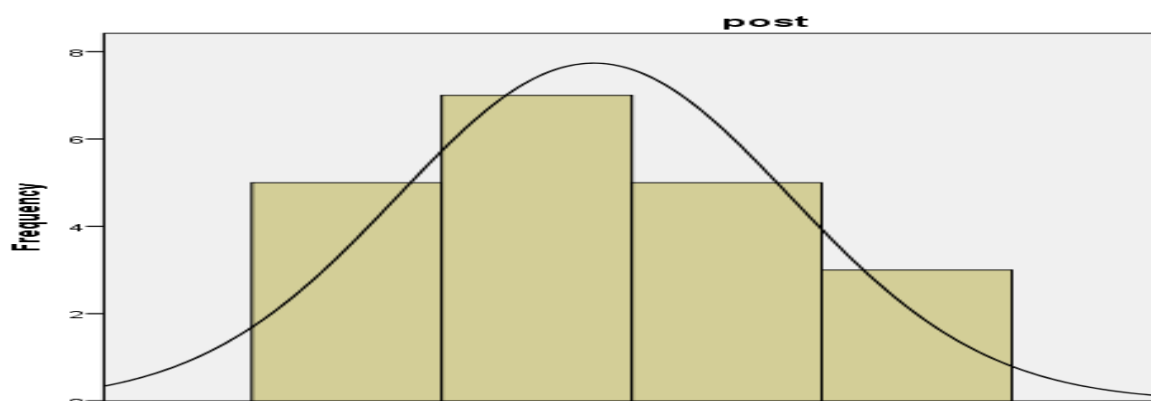


Figure 6. The Posttest of EG in Writing Accuracy

In addition, the descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest of the control group (CG) is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The Descriptive Analysis of Results for CG in Writing Accuracy and Complexity										
	Accuracy					Complexity				
	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Pretest	30	3.50	5.30	4.50	1.07	30	4.00	5.00	4.30	1.45
Posttest	30	4.00	6.00	4.00	1.23	30	4.50	5.00	4.00	1.07

As presented in Table 3., the pretest mean score of CG in writing accuracy is 3.50 and SD= 1.09. In addition, the posttest mean score of CG in writing complexity is 4.00 and SD=1.22. Additionally, the pretest mean score of CG in writing complexity is 4.30 and SD= 1.45, and the posttest mean score of CG in writing complexity is 4.00 and SD=1.07. The following figures show the pretest and posttest of this group.

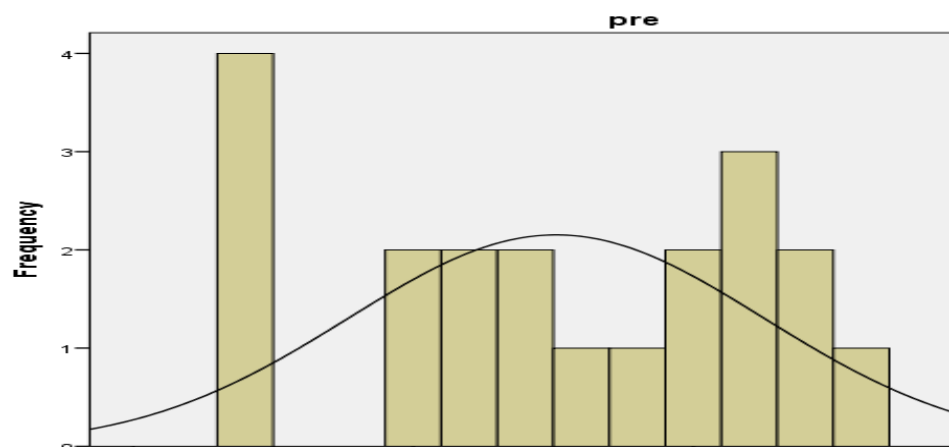


Figure 7. The Pretest of CG in Writing Accuracy

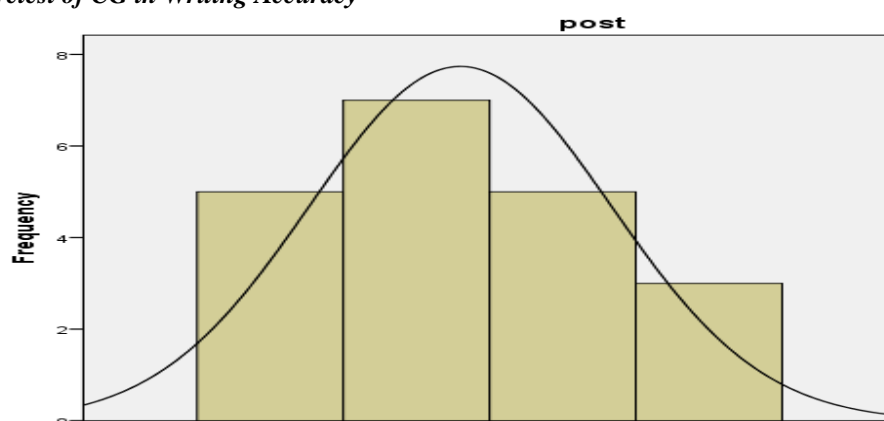


Figure 8. The Posttest of CG in Writing Accuracy

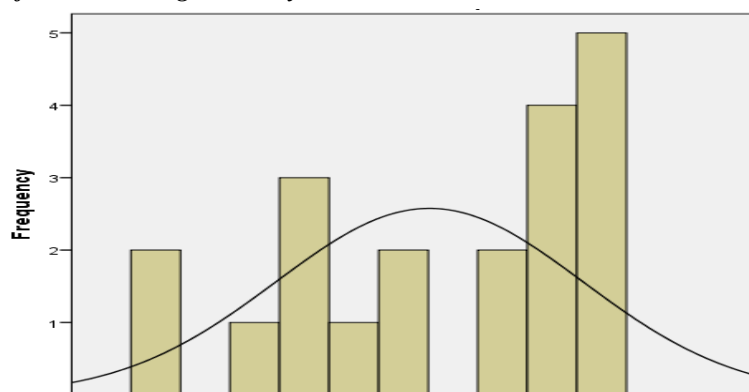


Figure 9. Pretest of CG in Writing Complexity



Figure 10. Posttest of CG in Writing Complexity

3.2. Testing the hypotheses

3.2.1. Testing the First Null Hypothesis

The first research hypothesis stated that integration of short story as an educational tool had no significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy. To test this hypothesis, MANOVA was run.

Table 4. MANOVA for Writing Accuracy

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df.	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Sq.
Pillai's Trace	.40	2.71 ^a	2.00	59.00	.000	.40
Wilks' Lambda	.596	2.71 ^a	2.00	59.00	.000	.40
Hotelling's Trace	.679	2.71 ^a	2.00	59.00	.000	.40
Roy's Largest Root	.679	2.71 ^a	2.00	59.00	.000	.40

As Table 4 presents, the F-observed value for comparing the variables was 2.71. This amount of F-value was higher than the critical value of at 2 and 59 degrees of freedom. Therefore, it was assumed that there was a significant difference among the mean scores of the experimental groups and control group in the writing accuracy posttest. That is, integration of short story as an educational tool had a significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy

3.2.2 Testing the Second Null Hypothesis

The second hypothesis maintained that integration of short story as an educational tool had no significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing complexity. MANOVA was conducted to test this null hypothesis.

Table. 5. MANOVA for Writing Complexity

	Value	F	Hypothesis df.	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Sq.
Pillai's Trace	.993	718.584	2.000	59.00	.000	.993

Wilks' Lambda	.596	718.584	2.000	59.00	.000	.993
Hotelling's Trace	.679	718.584	2.000	59.00	.000	.993
Roy's Largest Root	.679	718.584	2.000	59.00	.000	.993

The results of MANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean score of all two groups for writing complexity, since $F(f, 59) = 1.732$, $p = .14$; Wilks' Lambda = .75; partial eta squared = .24 ($p < .05$). Therefore, the integration of short story as an educational tool had a significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing complexity.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that short story for EFL teachers the task is to help learners build appropriate background knowledge and teach them that writing is a process of making good use of prior knowledge to build new knowledge. Only if teachers try to take short story into consideration during the teaching processes, will learners' writing be improved. Meaning does not come from the text alone; it needs the reader to predict and interpret the message presented in print. Meanings and comprehension happened when readers' prior knowledge or schemata are in line with the information obtained from the text. Short stories can activate the learners' background knowledge. Proper educational materials and methods benefit learners to organize the messages and direct them to pay attention to the main points of learning for decreasing their burden of memory. It is evident that short story does have something very unique to present to language learning. Short story is motivating and engaging, and, in the cases where learners show resistance and dislike of short story. Clearly, providing adequate direction and clear scaffolding is vital. This scaffolding may be provided by a short story, but more often than not, it is provided by the teacher, who is important in two ways. One is the way in which the task is set up; the second is the way in which a teacher can react to the way a discussion is going, provide scaffolding as and when it is needed.

It is also concluded that the use of short stories in EFL classroom has always been recommended by the experts in the field for developing language skills. Since they are short, and purposes to give a single impact, there is typically one scheme, an insufficient art; there is no comprehensive explanation of situation. Thus, it is not hard for the students to apply the story line of the work. The goal of using short story in learning English is to motivate the students to practice what they have earlier educated, and therefore, it is a student-centered education. On the other hand, the teacher plays a role with great importance

In short stories someone tells the story from memory to a unique person or a set of individuals. The person who is telling performs as a teller and therefore the listener(s) receive views and concepts with communication between them

Additionally, according to the findings of the study, it is concluded that short story can be an ideal entry into language learning for English language learners for many reasons. Through listening to, reading, and rereading short story, students can begin to increase their exposure to language, and the fact that poems are usually enjoyable and brief, makes them less intimidating and more manageable pieces of text for reading. In an EFL classroom, the teachers seldom teach learners how to read or comprehend a text. As a result, comprehension instruction becomes an important part to help learners to write later on their own. In general, if students have sufficient "prior knowledge" in the specific subject, any teaching approach will do for students' learning. If students' "prior knowledge" is less, they need more support such as improving the models of teaching sources, supporting definite teaching or directive teaching, so as to help students deal with message into memory.

Appropriate teaching materials and methods benefit students to organize the messages and direct students to notice the focal points of learning for reducing their burden of memory. Furthermore, stimulating the senses can enhance learning.

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