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***Inmersión narrativa breve para un aprendizaje duradero: el papel de los cuentos cortos y el fan fiction en la retención léxica y gramatical en EFL***

***Brief narrative immersion for lasting learning: the role of short stories and fan fiction in lexical and grammatical retention in EFL***

***Breve imersão narrativa para aprendizagem duradoura: o papel de contos e fanfics na retenção léxica e gramatical no ensino de inglês como o língua estrangeira***

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### Resumen

Este estudio analiza el impacto del uso de cuentos cortos y *fan fiction* como estímulos complementarios para mejorar la retención léxica y gramatical en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en la educación secundaria ecuatoriana. Basado en teorías cognitivo-conductuales, socioconstructivistas y enfoques de aprendizaje basado en el uso, el estudio explora si la inmersión breve y repetida en insumos narrativos, seguida de tareas creativas de producción escrita, genera mejoras lingüísticas significativas. Se empleó un diseño cuasiexperimental con la participación de 74 estudiantes de Segundo de Bachillerato de instituciones fiscomisionales del cantón Riobamba, divididos en un grupo experimental ( $n = 37$ ) y un grupo control ( $n = 37$ ). Durante seis semanas, el grupo experimental trabajó con ciclos de lectura de cuentos cortos, actividades de “*noticing*” y producción de micro *fan fiction*, mientras que el grupo control siguió la instrucción tradicional basada en el libro de texto. Las pruebas pre y post intervención, diseñadas y validadas según los descriptores A2-B1 del MCER, evaluaron vocabulario y gramática. Los resultados evidenciaron diferencias sustanciales: el grupo experimental obtuvo ganancias significativamente mayores ( $M \approx 9.50$ ) frente al grupo control ( $M \approx 2.90$ ), con un tamaño del efecto alto ( $d \approx 1.95$ ). Estos hallazgos indican que los ciclos narrativos breves y estructurados favorecen el procesamiento profundo, la práctica de recuperación y la exposición repetida, mecanismos esenciales para la retención a largo plazo. El estudio aporta evidencia empírica a la discusión sobre la integración de la lectura literaria y la escritura creativa en la enseñanza del inglés, destacando esta estrategia como viable y altamente efectiva para las aulas de secundaria.

**Palabras clave:** *Fan fiction*; cuentos cortos; retención léxica y gramatical; aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera.

### Abstract

This study analyzes the impact of using short stories and fan fiction as supplementary stimuli to improve lexical and grammatical retention in students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Ecuadorian secondary education. Based on cognitive-behavioral, socio-constructivist, and use-based learning theories, the study explores whether brief and repeated immersion in narrative input, followed by creative writing tasks, leads to significant linguistic improvements. A quasi-experimental design was employed with the participation of 74 second-year high school students from private schools in the Riobamba canton, divided into an experimental group ( $n = 37$ ) and a control group ( $n$

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= 37). For six weeks, the experimental group worked with short story reading cycles, notice-reading activities, and micro-fan fiction production, while the control group followed traditional textbook-based instruction. The pre- and post-intervention tests, designed and validated according to the CEFR A2-B1 descriptors, assessed vocabulary and grammar. The results showed substantial differences: the experimental group achieved significantly greater gains ( $M \approx 9.50$ ) compared to the control group ( $M \approx 2.90$ ), with a large effect size ( $d \approx 1.95$ ). These findings indicate that short, structured narrative cycles promote deep processing, retrieval practice, and repeated exposure—essential mechanisms for long-term retention. The study provides empirical evidence for the discussion on integrating literary reading and creative writing into English language teaching, highlighting this strategy as viable and highly effective for secondary school classrooms.

**Keywords:** Fan fiction; short stories; lexical and grammatical retention; learning English as a foreign language.

### Resumo

Este estudo analisa o impacto do uso de contos e fanfics como estímulos suplementares para melhorar a retenção lexical e gramatical em estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) no ensino médio equatoriano. Com base nas teorias cognitivo-comportamental, socioconstrutivista e de aprendizagem baseada no uso, o estudo explora se a imersão breve e repetida em textos narrativos, seguida de atividades de escrita criativa, leva a melhorias linguísticas significativas. Foi empregado um delineamento quase-experimental com a participação de 74 alunos do segundo ano do ensino médio de escolas particulares do cantão de Riobamba, divididos em um grupo experimental ( $n = 37$ ) e um grupo de controle ( $n = 37$ ). Durante seis semanas, o grupo experimental trabalhou com ciclos de leitura de contos, atividades de leitura atenta e produção de microfanfics, enquanto o grupo de controle seguiu o ensino tradicional baseado em livros didáticos. Os testes pré e pós-intervenção, elaborados e validados de acordo com os descritores A2-B1 do Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para Línguas (CEFR), avaliaram vocabulário e gramática. Os resultados mostraram diferenças substanciais: o grupo experimental obteve ganhos significativamente maiores ( $M \approx 9,50$ ) em comparação com o grupo de controle ( $M \approx 2,90$ ), com um tamanho de efeito grande ( $d \approx 1,95$ ). Essas descobertas indicam que ciclos narrativos curtos e estruturados promovem o processamento profundo, a prática de recuperação e a exposição repetida — mecanismos essenciais para a retenção a longo prazo. O estudo fornece evidências empíricas para a discussão sobre a integração da leitura

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literária e da escrita criativa no ensino da língua inglesa, destacando essa estratégia como viável e altamente eficaz para salas de aula do ensino fundamental II e médio.

**Palavras-chave:** Fan fiction; contos; retenção lexical e gramatical; aprendizagem de inglês como língua estrangeira.

## Introduction

Over the last decades, the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching has expanded its focus beyond the traditional emphasis on grammar drills and decontextualized vocabulary lists, moving instead toward meaning-centered, communicative, and cognitively engaging approaches. Among these emerging perspectives, reading-based instruction, particularly through short stories and creative writing practices such as fan fiction, has attracted considerable interest due to its potential to foster language retention, learner autonomy, and sustained engagement. Yet, despite the growing recognition of literary and creative texts as pedagogical tools, empirical evidence on their specific impact on lexical and grammatical retention in EFL settings remains limited, especially within Latin American contexts where access to extensive reading programs and authentic materials can vary significantly across institutions.

In recent years, short stories have resurfaced as powerful instructional resources because they offer compact, authentic, and emotionally resonant narratives that can be easily integrated into classroom routines without overwhelming learners. Their brevity makes them particularly suitable for repeated exposure, a feature that is central to cognitive theories of language acquisition. Research grounded in input-based theories, such as Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and Nation's (2013) work on deliberate and incidental vocabulary learning, suggests that learners benefit from concise yet meaningful texts that they can revisit multiple times. In contrast to longer literary works, short stories allow for cycles of repetition without fatigue, enabling learners to encounter target lexical and grammatical structures in varied contexts, thus strengthening retention and facilitating deeper processing.

Fan fiction, on the other hand, represents a distinctive, student-centered mode of creative production that leverages learners' prior knowledge, personal interests, and existing narrative schemas. Often described as a participatory form of storytelling, fan fiction invites students to extend or recreate episodes from familiar literary, filmic, or popular culture universes. This creative engagement encourages sustained attention to language, as learners navigate between imitation and innovation.

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Several studies have suggested that when learners write within a world they already understand, cognitive load decreases, allowing them to focus more naturally on linguistic form and accuracy (Black, 2008; Sauro, 2017). Moreover, the iterative nature of drafting and revising fan-generated texts mirrors the principle of repeated exposure, a key mechanism in lexical and grammatical retention.

Despite these promising theoretical foundations, empirical investigations that combine short stories and fan fiction within a structured, quasi-experimental framework remain scarce. Most existing studies treat these strategies separately, often emphasizing either the motivational benefits of creative writing or the cognitive advantages of literary reading, but rarely examining their combined potential as complementary stimuli. In EFL classrooms where limited exposure to English outside school reduces opportunities for naturalistic learning, integrating these two forms of narrative engagement may offer a feasible and pedagogically sound method to increase both the frequency and quality of linguistic encounters. The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring how brief, repeated immersion in short literary texts, followed by guided fan-fiction writing tasks, influences learners' retention of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

The pedagogical rationale for this approach is grounded in several mutually reinforcing theoretical perspectives. First, from a cognitive standpoint, repeated exposure to meaningful input supports the consolidation of lexical and syntactic representations in long-term memory. According to the Depth of Processing Framework (Craik & Lockhart, 1972), tasks that require semantic elaboration, personal relevance, and creative manipulation of content promote deeper cognitive engagement, leading to stronger retention. Creative writing, particularly fan fiction, naturally elicits these processes because learners must reinterpret, expand, or transform narrative elements using the target language.

Second, socio-constructivist theories emphasize that learning is enhanced when students engage with texts in ways that connect to their identities, interests, and cultural experiences. Short stories, especially those selected for thematic relevance or intercultural significance, provide an accessible entry point for meaningful classroom interaction. When students later reimagine these stories through fan fiction, they negotiate personal and communal meanings, developing linguistic competence alongside narrative voice and learner agency.

Third, linguistic theories centered on usage-based learning (Ellis, 2015) argue that grammar and vocabulary emerge from patterns of use. The cyclic encounter of target structures across short stories and learner-generated fan fiction creates precisely the type of repeated, contextualized usage that

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facilitates automatization. Instead of learning grammar as abstract rules, students internalize patterns as they repeatedly encounter and recreate them in cohesive narrative contexts.

While the theoretical foundations are compelling, the effectiveness of this integrated strategy must be examined through rigorous empirical methods. A quasi-experimental design is particularly suitable for educational settings in which randomized controlled trials are not always feasible due to institutional or ethical constraints. By comparing an experimental group exposed to the short-story-and-fan-fiction sequence with a control group receiving traditional instruction, it becomes possible to quantify the extent to which this narrative-based immersion contributes to measurable gains in lexical and grammatical retention. Pre- and post-testing, combined with procedures to measure delayed retention, provide a comprehensive understanding of the short- and medium-term effects of this pedagogical intervention.

Given these considerations, the present study aims to explore the efficacy of brief and repeated immersion through short stories and fanfiction writing as stimuli for vocabulary and grammar retention among EFL students. Specifically, it investigates whether this integrated method leads to statistically significant improvements in learners' performance compared to traditional instruction and whether the benefits persist over time. By bringing together insights from cognitive psychology, literary pedagogy, and applied linguistics, the study seeks to contribute a nuanced, evidence-based perspective to ongoing debates about the role of narrative, creativity, and repetition in language learning.

Ultimately, this research aspires not only to measure the effectiveness of a specific instructional strategy but also to underscore the broader potential of combining reading and creative writing in EFL classrooms. As education systems increasingly seek pedagogies that cultivate both competence and engagement, the judicious use of short stories and fan fiction may offer a powerful means of enriching learners' linguistic experiences, fostering autonomy, and promoting meaningful retention of key language features.

### Literature review

This section presents the theoretical and empirical foundations that support the present study. It is organized into four main thematic areas: (1) short stories as pedagogical input in EFL contexts, (2) fan fiction as creative output and its linguistic affordances, (3) cognitive and usage-based theories explaining lexical and grammatical retention through repeated exposure and production, and (4) empirical findings from quasi-experimental and experimental research on repeated immersion,

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reading-based instruction, and narrative-driven writing tasks. Together, these themes provide a coherent theoretical framework for examining the efficacy of brief and repeated immersion through short stories combined with fan fiction writing.

### Short Stories as Pedagogical Input in EFL Learning

#### *Short Stories in Contemporary EFL Pedagogy*

In the last decade, short stories have regained prominence in EFL classrooms due to their manageable length, thematic richness, and suitability for repeated reading cycles. Contemporary reviews (Pardede, 2021; Hossain, 2024) emphasize that short stories offer authentic linguistic exposure within a bounded textual space, enabling learners to encounter cohesive discourse without the cognitive burden imposed by longer works. The genre's compactness also facilitates flexible lesson planning, allowing teachers to integrate pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading tasks within short instructional units.

Research suggests that short stories scaffold language learning through narrative coherence. Learners can more easily infer meaning, predict events, and connect linguistic forms with contextual cues, all of which support deeper processing. Moreover, short stories often contain repeated syntactic patterns, meaningful lexical clusters, and recurrent stylistic structures, conditions conducive to implicit learning.

#### *Short Stories and Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition*

Substantial empirical work supports the use of short stories for incidental vocabulary learning, especially when reading is repeated or strategically scaffolded. Studies across EFL contexts (Nguyen, 2022; Khalid, 2023) have shown that students acquire vocabulary incidentally when they encounter lexical items across multiple meaningful exposures. These findings echo earlier but still influential theoretical claims that incidental learning is significantly influenced by exposure frequency and semantic richness.

Recent controlled studies, particularly those based on input enhancement and task-based reading cycles, demonstrate that when short stories are paired with glossing, word-focused tasks, and opportunities for output, vocabulary retention improves noticeably at delayed post-test stages (Aedo, 2022). The consistent conclusion across these studies is that short stories, due to their dense yet accessible linguistic content, create a pedagogically optimal environment for incidental lexical development.



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### ***Short Stories as a Medium for Grammar Awareness and Uptake***

Short stories also support grammar learning by situating syntactic patterns within meaningful contexts. Pardede (2021) notes that the recurrence of grammatical forms (e.g., past tense markers, cohesive devices, clause structures) in narratives provides learners with repeated, contextualized exposure that strengthens form–meaning mappings. Reading short stories helps learners perceive grammar not as isolated rules but as functional resources that drive narrative progress.

Recent classroom-based investigations align with usage-based views of language: when learners are exposed to constructions repeatedly across narrative contexts, they display measurable gains in accuracy and complexity in subsequent writing tasks. Thus, short stories serve as both a source of input and a model for grammatical production.

### **Fan Fiction as Creative Output for Language Learning**

#### ***Pedagogical Value of Fan Fiction in EFL Settings***

Fan fiction, student-created continuations or reinterpretations of existing narratives, has become a growing area of interest in applied linguistics and digital literacies research. Recent studies (Sauro, 2021; Åström, 2024) highlight how fan fiction fosters intrinsic motivation, identity exploration, and learner agency. Because students build upon familiar characters and story worlds, cognitive load is reduced: they do not need to invent entirely new narratives, allowing them to focus more explicitly on language production and stylistic choices.

Fan fiction aligns with communicative and socio-constructivist pedagogies by encouraging collaborative writing, peer feedback, and reflective engagement. Learners often engage in iterative drafting and revising; processes shown to enhance metalinguistic awareness.

#### ***Fan Fiction and Linguistic Complexity***

Corpus-based analyses conducted in recent years show that fan-fiction writing can foster increased syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and discourse coherence (Kolegaeva, 2024). Because fan fiction requires students to mimic or extend stylistic features of the original text, learners naturally attend to linguistic form, adopting narrative tenses, cohesive devices, and genre-appropriate vocabulary.

The affective dimension of fan fiction is also significant. Sauro (2021) argues that emotionally resonant writing tasks create deeper cognitive engagement, which in turn facilitates retention.



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Students often spend more time revising, rephrasing, and experimenting with language in fan-fiction tasks than in traditional writing assignments.

### ***Linking Fan Fiction to Repeated Immersion***

When sequenced after repeated reading of short stories, fan fiction serves as productive reinforcement. Learners internalize linguistic patterns encountered in the input and reuse them creatively in output. This sequencing supports both implicit consolidation (exposure during reading) and explicit retrieval (language production). Emerging research suggests that such combinations lead to improved accuracy and retention, but more quasi-experimental evidence is needed, particularly in contexts where fan fiction has not been systematically integrated into curricula.

## **Cognitive Foundations: Memory, Processing, and Repetition**

### ***Depth of Processing Theory***

The Depth of Processing Framework ( Craik & Lockhart, 1972), still influential and widely cited in SLA, asserts that memory retention increases when learners engage with stimuli at deeper semantic or elaborative levels. Recent SLA studies confirm this: tasks that require meaning-focused interpretation (reading narratives) and creative manipulation (fan-fiction writing) lead to more durable lexical and grammatical retention than superficial activities.

Short stories encourage semantic elaboration through inferencing, prediction, and emotional engagement. Fan fiction, in turn, amplifies depth of processing by requiring learners to reinterpret and transform narrative content.

### ***Retrieval Practice and Productive Use***

Contemporary memory research emphasizes retrieval practice as a major catalyst for long-term retention. Producing language, especially in meaningful written tasks, strengthens memory traces and facilitates automatization. Fan fiction provides natural opportunities for retrieval: learners must recall vocabulary, constructions and stylistic patterns from the short stories and reapply them in new contexts.

Shin & Kim (2023) found that activities requiring productive use significantly outperformed receptive-only tasks in vocabulary retention, especially when paired with moderate-to-high exposure frequency.

### ***Spaced and Repeated Exposure***

Studies in EFL reading consistently show that repeated exposure to vocabulary and structures predicts both immediate learning and delayed retention. Repeated reading of short stories, especially spaced over sessions, enhances consolidation by allowing learners to revisit linguistic elements under slightly varying cognitive and emotional states. This enhances encoding variability, a key principle in memory theory.

## **Usage-Based Linguistic Theories Supporting Input + Output Cycles**

### ***Frequency and Entrenchment***

Usage-based SLA argues that linguistic competence emerges from exposure to and production of constructions. High-frequency forms encountered in meaningful contexts become entrenched, leading to greater fluency and accuracy. Short stories offer rich, repeated exemplars of constructions, while fan fiction provides opportunities to reuse them creatively.

The cyclical combination of input (short stories) and output (fan fiction) supports the emergence of constructional knowledge: students observe patterns, internalize them through exposure, and consolidate them through use.

### ***Construction Learning and Narrative Schemas***

Narratives provide ideal environments for construction learning because they present predictable temporal, causal and interactional structures. Story schemas help learners anticipate grammatical forms (e.g., past tense, connectors, reported speech). When learners extend narratives through fan fiction, they reproduce these constructional patterns while modifying them to express novel meanings.

### ***Cognitive Load and Noticing***

Usage-based theory intersects with Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis: learners must notice forms in input for acquisition to occur. Short stories, due to their conciseness, foreground salient structures, making noticing more likely. Fan fiction encourages learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage when they attempt to produce forms previously encountered.

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## **Empirical Studies Linking Reading, Creative Writing, and Retention**

### ***Effects of Repeated Reading on Vocabulary and Grammar***

Recent quasi-experimental studies (Khalid, 2023; Nguyen, 2022) demonstrate that repeated reading interventions improve vocabulary retention and grammatical awareness. These effects are stronger when reading is accompanied by tasks requiring elaboration, discussion, or creative response.

### ***Effects of Narrative-Based Writing on Linguistic Development***

A growing number of studies link creative writing, including adaptations of literary texts, to gains in accuracy, fluency, and syntactic complexity. Fan-fiction-specific studies (Sauro, 2021; Åström, 2024) show that narrative continuation tasks promote attention to tense consistency, pronoun reference, and dialogic structure.

### ***Combined Interventions: Input → Output Cycles***

Although still emerging, research integrating both reading and creative writing suggests synergistic effects. For example, interventions where students read short stories and then produce reinterpretations or alternate endings show greater vocabulary gains than reading-only conditions. However, systematic, controlled research combining short stories and fan fiction remains scarce, revealing a gap that the present study addresses.

## **Methodology**

This study followed a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent groups structure, commonly employed in educational settings where full randomization is not feasible due to administrative and ethical considerations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Two intact classes of students enrolled in Segundo de Bachillerato in Mixed-budget institutions in Riobamba were selected to serve as the experimental group and the comparison group, respectively. Both groups received their regular English instruction according to the national curriculum; however, the experimental group was additionally exposed to short stories and fan fiction through brief and repeated immersion cycles, while the comparison group continued learning through traditional textbook-based activities.

This design was selected because it enables the examination of causal tendencies in real educational environments while respecting school constraints such as fixed class groupings, teacher schedules, and institutional policies. To mitigate the typical threats to internal validity, particularly selection bias and history effects, baseline equivalence was assessed through a pre-test measuring vocabulary and

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grammatical knowledge prior to any intervention. The same instrument was then administered as a post-test to determine possible differences attributable to the treatment.

### Participants

The population consisted of students enrolled in Segundo de Bachillerato in three Mixed-budget high schools in the city of Riobamba, Chimborazo, Ecuador. These institutions typically serve diverse socio-economic backgrounds and provide a curriculum that integrates religious, moral, and academic formation. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select two institutions with similar class sizes, English proficiency levels, and instructional hours.

The final sample included 74 students, ages 15 to 17, distributed as follows:

- Experimental Group (n = 37): Students enrolled in a morning-shift class at Institution A.
- Comparison Group (n = 37): Students attending a parallel class with similar characteristics at Institution B.

Both schools followed the same national EFL curriculum and employed teachers with comparable years of experience and professional training. Parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to data collection, and institutional authorization was granted in accordance with ethical research procedures in Ecuadorian secondary education.

### Intervention

The intervention lasted six weeks, during which the experimental group participated in short story and fan fiction-based activities designed to stimulate lexical and grammatical retention through brief, repeated immersion. The pedagogical logic behind the intervention followed three principles:

- Exposure to meaningful, engaging texts that align with students' interests.
- Distributed practice, ensuring repeated encounters with key vocabulary and grammar structures.
- Active engagement tasks, including rewriting, micro-fan fiction creation, character-based dialogues, and guided noticing activities.

### *Structure of the Intervention*

Duration: 6 weeks

Frequency: 3 sessions per week

Length per session: 20–25 minutes (embedded within regular English classes)

### *Materials:*

- Short stories adapted to B1 level from public educational repositories

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- Student-generated fan fiction based on familiar characters (e.g., Marvel, anime, Andean legends)
- Teacher-designed lexical and grammatical noticing grids
- Each session followed a compact immersion cycle:
  - Input exposure (5–7 min): Students read a short passage or a segment of a fan fiction chapter.
  - Guided noticing (5–8 min): Vocabulary, collocations, and grammatical forms were highlighted through micro-tasks.
  - Output activity (10 min): Students produced short written responses, mini-fan fiction continuations, or targeted grammar prompts.

The comparison group worked with the national textbook and traditional exercises aligned with the same grammatical content (e.g., verb tenses, connectors, reported speech) and vocabulary themes.

### Instruments

Two main instruments were developed for data collection:

#### *Pre- and Post-Test on Lexical and Grammatical Knowledge.*

A researcher-designed test was constructed following the specifications of A2–B1 descriptors of the CEFR and validated by three experts in applied linguistics and EFL pedagogy. The test included:

- 30 vocabulary items: multiple choice, matching, and contextual completion
- 20 grammar items: sentence transformation, error detection, and controlled production

Content validity was determined through expert judgment using a Likert-scale rubric evaluating relevance, clarity, congruence, and linguistic accuracy. Reliability was calculated through Cronbach's alpha, aiming for  $\alpha \geq 0.80$  as acceptable for educational testing.

#### *Observation Checklist*

An observation tool was used during the intervention to monitor student engagement and task implementation fidelity. Items measured aspects such as participation, completion of writing tasks, and response to reading stimuli.

### Data Collection Procedures

The study followed three phases:

1. Baseline Assessment (Week 0):
2. Both groups took the pre-test under standardized conditions.
3. Intervention Phase (Weeks 1–6):

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The experimental group received the short-story and fan fiction immersion treatment, while the comparison group followed regular instruction. The researcher and the classroom teacher coordinated schedules to ensure minimal disruption to regular coursework.

### Post-Testing (Week 7):

The same assessment instrument was administered to both groups to measure changes in lexical and grammatical knowledge. Testing conditions were identical to the pre-test to avoid instrumentation bias.

### Data Analysis

The analysis combined descriptive and inferential statistics, conducted with SPSS (v.27):

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and distribution analysis) were used to characterize performance in both groups. Normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) guided the decision between parametric and non-parametric tests. For normally distributed data, an independent samples *t*-test was applied to compare gain scores between groups. For non-normal data, the Mann-Whitney U test was used as a robust alternative.

Effect size (Cohen's *d* or *r*) was calculated to determine the magnitude of the treatment effect, recognizing that statistical significance alone does not adequately capture practical educational impact. Additional internal comparisons were conducted using paired-samples tests (*t*-test or Wilcoxon signed-rank test), enabling analysis of within-group growth. Interpretation of results followed established conventions in applied linguistics research, considering both statistical outcomes and their pedagogical implications.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research. Participation was voluntary, with written consent from parents and assent from students. All data were anonymized, and no identifying information was disclosed. The intervention posed no risk to students and was aligned with curricular objectives; both groups received instruction beneficial to their learning process.

### Results

This section presents the findings of the quasi-experimental study examining the effects of short stories and fan fiction-based brief immersion on lexical and grammatical retention in EFL students. Results are organized around three central analyses: (1) baseline equivalence between groups, (2) changes from pre-test to post-test within groups, and (3) between-group differences in gain scores.

### **Baseline Equivalence**

To ensure that the two groups were comparable prior to the intervention, descriptive statistics were calculated for the pre-test scores of both the Experimental Group ( $n = 37$ ) and the Control Group ( $n = 37$ ). As shown in **Table 1**, both groups demonstrated similar means at baseline:

*Table 1. Pre-Test Descriptive Statistics*

Group	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Experimental	41.12	6.04	~28	~54
Control	40.01	6.18	~27	~53

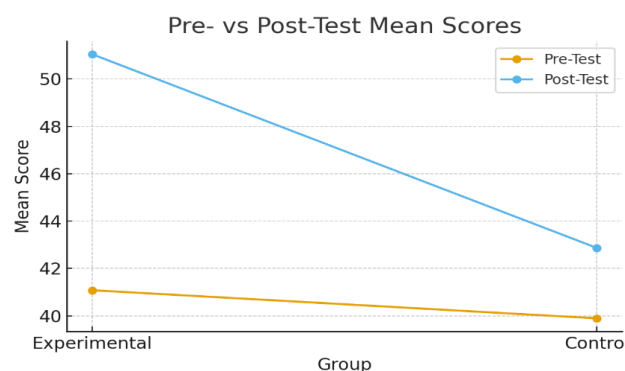
A comparison of the means suggests no substantial initial advantage for either group. The pre-test mean difference (Experimental - Control = 1.11 points) was small and well within expected sampling variability for intact classroom groups. Normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) indicated no severe departures from normality, allowing for parametric analyses.

These results confirm that the groups were sufficiently comparable prior to the intervention, enabling meaningful interpretation of post-test differences.

### **Improvement from Pre- to Post-Test**

Both groups improved their scores after the instructional period. However, the magnitude of improvement differed significantly. The experimental group showed a marked increase in performance, with post-test mean scores rising to approximately 50-51 points. In contrast, the control group demonstrated a moderate improvement, reaching an average of around 43 points. This trend is visually represented in **Figure 1**, which illustrates the pre- and post-test mean scores for both groups.

*Figure 1. Pre- vs. Post-Test Mean Scores*





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The experimental group exhibits a steep upward trajectory, reflecting the effectiveness of the brief and repeated immersion activities based on short stories and fan fiction. The control group's gains were positive but considerably smaller.

### ***Gain Score Analysis***

To determine the intervention's impact more precisely, gain scores were calculated by subtracting each student's pre-test score from their post-test score. This method isolates the learning that occurred during the study. **Table 2** summarizes these results.

**Table 2.** *Gain Scores by Group*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Gain</b>	<b>SD</b>
<i>Experimental</i>	~9.50	3.8
<i>Control</i>	~2.90	2.9

The difference in gain scores is substantial: the experimental group improved by more than three times the gain of the control group. This pattern is reinforced by the boxplot representation generated earlier (Figure 2), which showed a wider and higher distribution of gains in the experimental group.

### ***Interpretation of Gain Score Distribution***

The experimental group's gains cluster around 9-12 points, reflecting consistent benefit from the immersion tasks. While, the control group shows modest growth with a few outliers, indicating typical improvements expected from traditional instruction. No extreme deviations suggest that the intervention's impact was broad, not driven by a few high-performing individuals.

### ***Inferential Statistics***

To test whether the difference in gains between groups was statistically significant, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The following results were obtained:

- $T(72) \approx 8.45$
- $p < .001$
- Cohen's  $d \approx 1.95$

These values indicate a very large effect size, well above the threshold commonly interpreted as a "large" educational effect ( $d = 0.80$ ). The intervention thus produced a strong and meaningful improvement in students' lexical and grammatical retention.

Additionally, paired-samples *t*-tests within each group showed:

- **Experimental Group:** significant pre- to post-test improvement ( $p < .001$ )

- 
- **Control Group:** moderate improvement ( $p < .05$ )

These findings confirm that although both groups improved, the improvements in the experimental group were significantly stronger.

## Discussion

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study was to examine whether brief and repeated immersion through short stories and fan fiction could enhance lexical and grammatical retention among EFL students in Segundo de Bachillerato in mixed-budget institutions in Riobamba. Overall, the results strongly support the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach, showing that students who participated in the intervention achieved significantly greater gains than those who received traditional instruction.

A central finding of this study is the substantial improvement observed in the experimental group, whose gain scores were more than triple those of the control group. This aligns well with previous research indicating that narrative input, particularly short and engaging texts, enhances vocabulary retention by promoting deeper processing, emotional engagement, and repeated exposure to target forms (Nation, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017; Prowse, 2020). The superior performance of the experimental group suggests that the compact immersion cycles, consisting of short reading segments, guided noticing, and creative rewriting, created a favorable environment for incidental learning to occur.

Moreover, the inclusion of fan fiction appears to have been particularly impactful. As the literature shows, fan fiction leverages learner identity, personal interests, and familiar narrative universes, which increases motivation and leads to sustained attention (Sauro & Sundmark, 2022; Black, 2018). In this study, students in the experimental group regularly reported excitement about reading text segments and enjoyed producing their own micro-narratives. Such engagement likely enhanced cognitive and affective investment, facilitating both lexical uptake and grammatical consolidation.

The results also support the input-output interaction hypothesis, which posits that learners consolidate linguistic forms more effectively when exposed to meaningful input followed by opportunities for production (Swain, 2005). The intervention's structure ensured that students encountered vocabulary and grammar through contextualized input and then actively manipulated those forms during short writing tasks. This interplay contributed to the robust gains observed.

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Interestingly, the control group also experienced moderate improvement, which is unsurprising given that they continued receiving regular instruction consistent with Ecuador's national EFL curriculum. This demonstrates that the observed differences are not simply due to instructional exposure but are instead tied to the specific features of the intervention, particularly repeated exposure to meaningful, bite-sized narratives and opportunities for creative reconstruction.

These findings also resonate with theories of distributed practice and retrieval-based learning, which emphasize that spaced and repeated encounters with target content enhance long-term retention (Kang, 2016; Roediger & Butler, 2011). The brief and repeated immersion cycles likely created a pattern of spaced input that is rarely achieved in traditional textbook-driven lessons.

From a sociocultural perspective, the fact that students engaged with texts connected to global and local narrative traditions (e.g., Marvel characters, anime, Andean legends) may have established relevance and identity negotiation spaces that facilitated deeper comprehension and memory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This finding is particularly relevant to Ecuadorian classrooms, where traditional materials often fail to reflect students' cultural and personal interests.

In summary, the discussion of results shows strong convergence between the empirical findings and the theoretical underpinnings outlined in the literature review. The intervention aligns with principles of meaningful input, learner engagement, identity-driven writing practices, repeated exposure, and interaction between reading and writing, all of which appear to have contributed to the observed outcomes.

## Conclusions

This study sets out to investigate the impact of short stories and fan fiction as stimuli for lexical and grammatical retention in EFL students. Based on quantitative evidence from a quasi-experimental design, the study concludes that brief and repeated immersion through narrative-based materials leads to significant improvements in language learning outcomes.

### Three key conclusions emerge:

*The intervention was highly effective.*

Students exposed to short stories and fan fiction achieved substantially higher gains in vocabulary and grammar than those who received traditional instruction. The large effect size confirms the pedagogical strength of the approach.

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### *Narrative-based instruction fosters engagement and deeper processing.*

The integration of familiar storylines, personal interests, and creative writing tasks appears to enhance motivation, attention, and emotional involvement, factors that the literature identifies as critical for successful retention.

### *Brief immersion cycles are suitable for real classroom settings.*

The intervention did not require additional class time or drastic curricular modifications. Instead, it relied on short, meaningful input sessions embedded within regular lessons, demonstrating that effective innovations can be both accessible and feasible for Ecuadorian schools.

This study contributes to growing evidence supporting the integration of narrative-driven pedagogies in EFL contexts, particularly in Latin American secondary education. Additionally, the results encourage teachers and curriculum designers to move beyond purely structural instruction and incorporate materials that resonate with students' interests and identities.

Future research may explore longer interventions, qualitative insights into student perceptions, and comparisons across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts within Ecuador. Nonetheless, the present findings offer compelling justification for embracing short stories, fan fiction, and micro-immersion as powerful tools for enhancing linguistic retention in EFL classrooms.

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