

## **READ-ALoud TECHNIQUE TO ENHANCE PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S VOCABULARY IN A RURAL SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Vocabulary knowledge and acquisition plays an important role in learning a second language as well as developing children's literacy skills. The effectiveness of the read-aloud technique to increase children's vocabulary knowledge and construction of meaning has been widely studied. Teachers need to employ effective instructional strategies to foster growth in vocabulary learning among pre-school children during the read-aloud sessions. Given this, this study has identified the vocabulary strategies that a teacher employed during her read-aloud sessions with her pre-school children in a rural school in Malaysia. A pre-school teacher from a pre-school situated in a rural area participated in this study. Qualitative research methods were used whereby primary data was obtained through observations and field notes while secondary data was obtained through interviews with teachers. Findings revealed that the pre-school teacher utilized four vocabulary strategies proposed by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) as well as the children's L1 which is Malay language to explain meanings of words during storybook read-aloud sessions.

**Keywords:** read-aloud, vocabulary, language and literacy, translation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Researchers have confirmed in their studies that reading aloud affects the development of vocabulary (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995; Whitehurst et al., 1999; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Collins, 2005) and increase children's ability to recognize words (Stahl, 2003). Apart from that, the researchers have demonstrated that effective read-aloud sessions can promote many types of skills and abilities especially in enhancing children's vocabulary building skills which is crucial in assisting children to learn the English language.

Reading aloud is stipulated in the National Curriculum Standards for Pre-school (CDC, 2013), and pre-school teachers have been trained to implement reading aloud in their English language lessons with the contention that the technique would enhance children's vocabulary and comprehension skills. However, research has not yet been conducted in how this technique is implemented in the classroom in terms of vocabulary building. The read-aloud technique, as proposed by a number of researchers such as Trelease (2001), Meller, Richardson, and Hatch (2009), allows teachers to interact with their children when reading stories to them, and opportunities are provided for vocabulary development as well as for the children to respond and comprehend the story using the English language. Meller, Richardson, and Hatch (2009) contend that a purposefully planned read-aloud session provides children with experiences to make connections to the text and give meaning to the story. As such, teachers need to employ effective

vocabulary teaching strategies that would assist children in storing and retrieving words in the English language.

Some well-established instructional strategies during read-alouds used the direct instructional approach whereby it provides the second language learner the opportunity to hear stories they might not otherwise be able to read (National Reading Panel, 2000) as in the situation of pre-school children in the rural areas. Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) proposed an instructional strategy during read-alouds which involves the teacher reading a story to the children and interacting with the children by posing questions to them about the story as well as focusing on a few difficult lexical items in order for the children to comprehend the story. When children respond, they use the language and their responses show that they have understood the story (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002).

A research-based read-aloud strategy for vocabulary building involves text talk, developed by Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002), which focuses on vocabulary development and applies typically to the primary grades, that is children between the ages of 6 – 11 years old. This strategy involves the teachers using text-talk read-alouds to engage children in meaningful discussions about books. The text-talk read-alouds also provide a context for the teachers to teach new words. Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) explained the three tiers of word utility. Tier 1 words are everyday words with which children are probably familiar and that are common to them. Tier 2 words are less common words, but mature speakers of the language use these words and understand them readily. Finally, Tier 3 words are rather specific words that are mostly associated with specific fields or content area. Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) suggested that teachers use Tier 2 words for instruction. The authors proposed six vocabulary activities during text talk, which is an effective read-aloud strategy that focuses on vocabulary development:

1. The teacher reads and discusses the story with the children.
2. The teacher introduces target words one at a time.
3. The teacher asks the children to repeat each word.
4. The teacher introduces child-friendly definitions.
5. The teacher shares examples of the words in contexts that are different from contexts in the story.
6. The teacher engages the children in thinking about and using the meanings of the words.

(Adapted from Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002)

However, studies have shown that teaching using English may only be suitable for intermediate and advance children. Children in the rural areas have limited level of proficiency in English and the use of only English may cause problems in comprehending the language (Wong & Lim, 1982 as cited in Ramachandran & Rahim, 2004). Atkinson (1987) contends that in the case of teaching elementary level learners or low proficiency learners, there is a need to include one major methodology which is the use of the learners' first language (L1) in the classroom. Swan (1997) in his research reveals that one of the strategies good language learners tend to do is refer back to their native language. Ellis (1985) agrees with Swan as he states that "students L1 may act as a resource which learners use for translation to overcome their limitation" (p.37). Since all qualified pre-school teachers in Malaysia have received training on how to conduct read-aloud with pre-school children as read-aloud is stipulated in the pre-school curriculum, it would be interesting to get an insight of how vocabulary is taught to children in rural schools. Thus, the study conducted

explored whether the pre-school teacher's current practices of using the read-aloud technique when reading stories assisted with the vocabulary development of the pre-school children.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reading aloud to children has been used for decades as part of teachers' instructional practice to encourage their children's literacy development (Anderson, 2002; Booth & Barton, 2000; Gordon, 2007; Hahn, 2002; Hancock, 2000; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002; Sipe, 2008; Trelease, 2001). Researchers have acknowledged that the best methods for reading aloud to children also improve the vocabulary growth and comprehension performance of second-language learners (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Hickman et al., 2004; Holden, 2003). Read-aloud techniques that integrate and encourage analytic talk help to stimulate interactions that can assist in developing children's vocabulary and comprehension performance (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). Trelease (2001) states, "We read to children for all the same reasons we talk with children: to reassure, to entertain, to bond; to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, to inspire." (p. 6). As the teachers interact with the children, they provide ample opportunities for their children to learn vocabulary, varied sentence structures, and story structures in order to enhance their second-language performance.

Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer and Lowrance (2004) contend that storybook reading is one of the most studied formats for enhancing children's language learning and studies have shown that through shared storybook experiences, children seem to make significant achievements in areas of vocabulary and language development. Kaderavek and Justice (2002) and Snow (2001) reveal in their studies that story reading benefits children as they are provided with ample opportunities for the acquisition of language and literacy. Isbell et al (2004) cites Snow (1983) who states that besides acquiring language and literacy skills, children also experience wide vocabulary growth which assists them with their interactions and language learning. Further, when young children discuss the text and illustrations during story reading, they are engaged in meaningful interactions as they have the vocabulary needed to enable them to interact (Kaderavek & Justice, 2002).

Laminack and Wadsworth (2006) posited that, by reading to learners of all ages, teachers encourage children to make meaning, create imaginative pictures of the story, and linger with the language that has composed the story. Engaging children as active listeners provides opportunities for them to expand their vocabularies and broaden their understandings of the world around them. Gordon (2007) pointed out that second-language learners retain specific words most effectively when they read interesting books or when they listen to an English-language story. When learners pick up words unconsciously through exposure, it is known as "incidental vocabulary learning" (Gordon, 2007, p. 67). Elley (2005) reviewed a number of studies that compared incidental and intentional learning in children. The results indicated that young children learned more words when they listened or they were read to with interesting and exciting books than young children who performed only vocabulary exercises. As such, teachers can assist in their children's vocabulary acquisition and English-language learning by reading stories aloud to them and giving the necessary exposure for them to develop incidental word learning.

One significant contribution to the research about understanding language acquisition is Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. When children perform a task, parts of the task can be done individually; however, some parts require the help of a more knowledgeable person who scaffolds the new ideas by assisting the children in completing the task. The zone of proximal development is a "range of social interaction between an adult and a child"

(Morrow, 2005, p. 77); it is the difference between what children can do on their own and what they can achieve with the help of an adult. Therefore, the role of the adult (e.g., the teacher in the classroom) is crucial in the children's vocabulary and language development.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development influenced Krashen's (1981, 1982, 1985) comprehensible input, which constituted part of his theory about second-language acquisition. Krashen (1985) deemed his input hypothesis to be the most important part of the theory. In this hypothesis, Krashen attempted to explain how a second language is acquired. According to his hypothesis, if the current competence level of a language acquirer is Stage 1, then the next level can be presented as  $1 + 1$ , in which understanding means that the acquirer focuses on the meaning rather than the words in the message. In other words, the learner understands and acquires what is a little beyond his or her abilities (Krashen, 1985). Clearly, Vygotsky's idea of internalizing the language and Krashen's idea of acquiring the language are based on the same principle, which involves interaction with others. Thus, during the read-aloud sessions, teachers should try to interact with the children by focusing on the lexical items taught and elicit responses from them so that they bring meaning to the story being read to them. The interactions can further reinforce the usage of the lexical items taught and learnt within a meaningful context.

Story read-alouds have been regarded as one of the most highly recommended practices for promoting vocabulary acquisition among children. In a study by Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) on text talk, a technique used during read-aloud sessions, the teacher identified six new words in the story to be read and then explained the words using child-friendly definitions before the children interacted with their own examples of how to use the target words. This exercise was followed with the children's demonstration of their understanding of the words by relating the words to the events and characters of the story. Finally, the teacher wrote the new words on the word winner chart and tallied the marks based on the children's use of the new words throughout the week. The study showed that children who received instruction on a specific set of sophisticated words revealed a significantly higher gain in vocabulary acquisition than the students in the control group who did not receive instruction. As such, vocabulary instruction using text talk as a read-aloud technique can be effective in teaching children rich and robust vocabulary words.

Storybook reading also provides a range of experiences on vocabulary acquisition in terms of involvement in conversations and exposure to new and sophisticated words. Using storybook reading, Collins (2005) conducted a study involving 70 Portuguese preschoolers who were second-language learners of English. The findings revealed that rich explanations of new vocabulary words yielded significant gains in the ESL preschoolers' vocabulary acquisition. Rich explanations included the researcher pointing to illustrations, providing brief definitions, using synonyms and gestures, and using words in a sentence in a different context.

Read-alouds can help facilitate text-based discussions between teachers and students through the provision of contexts for learning new words. Apart from discussing vocabulary within the context of a story during read-alouds, vocabulary must also be taught directly (Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008). Using vocabulary-eliciting questions during storybook reading can benefit the children's receptive vocabulary and have positive effects on their expressive vocabulary (Walsh & Blewitt, 2006). Whitehurst et al. (1994), in their studies on the benefits of dialogic reading that involved asking vocabulary-eliciting questions during storybook reading, found significant effects on children's expressive vocabulary. Walsh and Blewitt (2006) also conducted a study on 35 children who were asked vocabulary-eliciting questions during story reading sessions and found that asking children questions about the new words in a story is more helpful than not

actively engaging a child in discussion involving new words.

However, there are very few supporting empirical evidence on vocabulary development during read-aloud with low proficiency children or children located in the rural areas in Malaysia. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Ramachandran and Abdul Rahim (2004) investigated on the use of L1 in the acquisition and retention of L2 vocabulary by elementary or low proficiency level ESL learners in Malaysia. In their study, they compared the acquisition and retention of twenty L2 vocabulary items by two groups of ESL learners. The first group (control group) was taught the targeted vocabulary items by a non-translation method in which the participants were provided with the meanings of the vocabulary items in the L2 (English). The second group, on the other hand, was provided with the meanings of the vocabulary items in both the L1 (Malay) and L2. A posttest of the targeted L2 vocabulary items was administered to both groups as a measure of the vocabulary acquisition. The results of the study demonstrated that the participants in the experimental group performed much better than participants in the control group for the recall of the meaning of vocabulary items as well as in the retention of the vocabulary items. In their study, Ramachandran and Abdul Rahim (2004) clearly showed that translation is a very effective tool for teaching and learning L2 vocabulary to ESL learners of low proficiency level.

Thus, the above studies on vocabulary acquisition and teaching have shown that teachers can employ strategies such as explanations, vocabulary-eliciting questions, definitions, illustrations and examples, as well as children's L1 to actively engage children in learning new vocabulary during read-aloud sessions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the study, the researcher has identified the issue to be studied, that is, how a teacher teaches vocabulary (Meller, Richardson & Hatch 2009; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002 ) to her pre-school children during the read-aloud sessions. The study has employed a case study approach as the researcher observed the teacher and her children in real-life classroom setting.

### ***Sampling***

This study was conducted in a pre-school classroom situated in the rural area of state of Perak, Malaysia. The pre-school was chosen as it is located in the outskirts of town as well as its year six national examination results for the English language subject had shown a decrease in the students' performance. Participants for the study was a pre-school teacher selected using purposeful sampling as the teacher was able to provide information to discover, understand, and gain insight into the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998). The participant in this study was selected based on her willingness to cooperate and participate in the research. The teacher is a qualified, college-trained pre-school teacher and has taught in the pre-school for eight years.

### ***Research questions***

The following research question was addressed in the study:

1. How is vocabulary taught during the read-aloud sessions in the pre-school English language lessons?

### ***Design of the study***

Case study and qualitative research methods were used in this study. This was an appropriate design for the study as the goal of the study was to explore and describe how the teacher taught vocabulary when reading stories to pre-school children during the read-aloud sessions. Doing field observations provided the researcher with an opportunity to explore the strategies that the teacher used in the classroom while interviews with the teacher provided information on her understanding and reasons for using the strategies to teach vocabulary during her English language lesson. Analysis of data from observation field notes, interviews, and the researcher's personal reflections allowed for a thick description of the strategies that English language teacher used with their children during the read-aloud sessions.

Classroom observations took place at an agreed time convenient to the teacher who took part in the study. The classroom observations took place twice a week and lasted between 40 minutes to an hour per session. The researcher observed the teacher as she read aloud to the class using an observation protocol and the observational variables and their behavior indicators were adapted from Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) which were the use of vocabulary building steps. Data was analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) tools for analyzing data which are: (1) noting patterns and themes, (2) making contrasts and comparisons, and (3) subsuming particulars into the general. In noting patterns and themes, Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that from the data collected, one can "expect patterns of variables involving similarities and differences among categories" (p. 246). For example, during the interactions between the teacher and her children, the teacher assisted the children through promptings. This pattern was noted and coded. The second tool, that is, making contrasts and comparisons, one draws a contrast or makes a comparison between two sets of things, persons, roles, activities, and cases as a whole that are known to differ in some other important respect (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As such, in this study, the researcher compared and contrasted the interactions that took place between the teacher with her children in the pre-school classroom during her read-aloud sessions. Subsuming particulars into more general classes is a conceptual and theoretical activity (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in which the researchers "shuttle back and forth between first-level data and more general categories that evolve and develop through successive iterations until the category is saturated" (p. 256). Thus, the researcher clustered the data and subsumed the particulars into general classes. For example, if the teacher mimed an action, the action was subsumed as a provision of clues.

### **FINDINGS**

The researcher conducted five observations on the teacher during her read-aloud sessions. The teacher read five different stories to her children using her own collection of Big Books. Based on the researcher's observation of the teacher, there was evidently a particular pattern in the way she conducted her read-aloud sessions, in particular her vocabulary building activities.

Firstly, the teacher started their read-aloud sessions by introducing the title of the story to her children. Secondly, the teacher read the stories and drilled her children to read after her, sentence by sentence. The reading of the story was done as a class, as a group and finally individually. The teacher pointed to the words in the story as she read. The teacher corrected her children's pronunciation as they read the story with her.

Besides focusing on the children's reading and pronunciation, the teacher also conducted vocabulary work during her read-aloud sessions. She drilled the difficult words and instructed her children to repeat the words a few times before providing the meanings of the words using pictures, illustrations in the book, actions and translation. The teacher would firstly translate the word using the children's L1 before referring to the illustrations in the books. At times, the teacher would also use actions to explain meanings of difficult words after translating the word. Then she used picture cards to elicit the words learnt from the children, irrespective if the children responded in their L1 or L2. Finally, the read-aloud session is followed with the children completing a vocabulary worksheet using matching and word completion exercises.

The researcher noted that the teacher do explain meanings of the difficult words in the stories to her children using child-friendly definitions or actions and sometimes using illustrations in the storybook. However, the steps are done only after the words are being translated. When the teacher translated and explained the meanings, the teacher also made the children read the sentences which contained the words to reinforce its use and meaning. In an informal discussion with the teacher, she stated that the vocabulary activities had a positive effect on developing her students' vocabulary acquisition. The translations of the words, illustrations, pictures, as well as actions assisted the children in understanding the meanings of the difficult words. Once her children were able to grasp the meanings of the words, they were also able to comprehend the story.

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) proposed that teachers try to get the children to use and interact with different words by thinking about its meaning and using the words in different contexts. This is to allow the pupils to "make word meaning explicit and clear and to engage students in actively thinking about and using the meanings right away" (p. 672). However, the teacher did not engage her children in thinking and using the words learnt. Towards the end of the lesson, the children's vocabulary knowledge was assessed through matching exercises and unscrambling alphabets to form words. As such, the teacher did not take advantage of the learning of the difficult words found the storybooks by using them as a source of explicit vocabulary activities.

In all her five read-aloud sessions, the teacher used four out of the six elements as proposed by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002). She read the story and after reading the story with her children, she introduced the target words to the children, made them repeat the words for phonological representation of the words and drilled the words a few times to ensure that the children were able to pronounce the words correctly. This was followed with explanation of the meanings of the words whereby the teacher used translation and different types of child-friendly definitions.

Teacher: struggling...look at Salim. Salim is struggling  
or bergelut [Translates to L1]...  
struggling means that dia sedang bergelut...tau tak?  
bergelut[Translates to L1]

The teacher also used the illustrations in the book to explain meanings of words.

Teacher: moustache...misai [Translates to L1]... See this man...  
he has a moustache...misai [Translates to L1 and points to  
picture of a character with a moustache].Can you see?...yes.  
misai [Translates to L1]or moustache.

The teacher also did actions after translating the words. She also made the pupils do actions to explain the meanings of the words and reinforced the meanings in complete sentences.

Teacher: moaned...mengeluh [Translates to L1].  
Look at this picture [points to the hunter's face].  
The hunter is moaning...mengeluh [Translates to L1]  
...Oh no, humph! [Teacher does action]

Teacher: [Teacher shouts for help...Help! Help!]  
Everyone, shout for help...jerit minta tolong  
[Translates to L1][Pupils shouts]. Yes...so what did  
we do just now? We shouted for help.

The teacher also did some actions to explain some difficult words.

Teacher: Taste...rasa [Translates to L1]  
See? I want to taste the mango...Umm [facial  
expression to show that the mango is sour]...  
sour..masamnye [translates to L1].

Finally, at the end of the read-aloud session, the children were instructed to complete a set of vocabulary exercise that required them to unscramble alphabets to form words.

An interview was conducted with the teacher after the five read-aloud sessions. When the teacher was asked about her use of translation to explain difficult words, the teacher revealed that her children's vocabulary building activities had a positive effect on developing their vocabulary acquisition. The teacher stated the following:

*Teacher: Yes, I do translate the difficult words to my children all the time. I think my children understand the words in the story when I translate them in Malay language...I do use the English word together with the Malay word so that they will understand the meaning better...If I don't use the Malay word, I know my children will not understand the story.*

When asked if the teacher had tried to use only English language throughout the read-aloud sessions, the teacher stated the following:

*Teacher: Oh yes, I did try. The children just looked at me blankly as though I was speaking in an alien language..ha..ha. When I translated the words in the story using Malay...ha, yes...I got some response from them...they were also able to do the vocabulary activities after that.*

To summarize, the teacher used translation to teach vocabulary to her children and utilized only four of the six elements in vocabulary building activities as proposed by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) during her read-aloud sessions. The children were instructed to repeat the difficult words which enhanced their phonological representation of the words hence their pronunciation and reading improved. The teacher also used child-friendly definitions to explain the meanings of the difficult words through the illustrations in the books, actions and giving the children examples. These forms of child-friendly definitions using children's L1 provided cues to children in

understanding the meanings of the words. However, the teacher did not reinforce and expand children's understanding of the words by using them in a variety of contexts. At the end of the lesson, the children were given vocabulary tasks which involved the children unscrambling alphabets to form words or to match pictures to the words.

During the read-aloud sessions, the researcher observed that the teacher conducted instructional activities for vocabulary building. The teacher introduced the target words, drilled the words for phonological representation of the words and introduced child-friendly definition of the words through translation. The findings revealed that providing the children with their L1 definitions, when learning English assisted the children in enhancing their vocabulary. The teacher's contention in using L1 during the explanation was to facilitate the children in learning new words. The use of L1 is likely to help students have a clearer picture of the new words and as a result may assist the children in comprehending the story. The teacher however did not share examples of words in contexts that were different from the contexts of the story nor did she engage the children in thinking about and using the meaning of the word. According to Hickman, Pollard-Durodola and Vaughn (2004) English language learners are one of the largest groups of students who struggle with vocabulary and comprehension. The authors posit that a student's level of vocabulary knowledge is an important indicator of reading fluency and reading comprehension. As such it is important that teachers integrate effective vocabulary development practices during their read-alouds and as suggested by Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002), teachers should follow each story with explicit attention to vocabulary so the children can build meaning into the text read. Furthermore by providing opportunities for the children to think and use the words after initial instruction, the children would most likely retain those words as part of their vocabulary repertoire.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how a pre-school teacher conducted her vocabulary building activities during her read-aloud sessions with her pre-school children during the English language lessons. The teacher's read-aloud sessions mainly focused on getting her children to read the text aloud and the primary objective was to get the children to read the text fluently. The findings of the study revealed that although the teacher introduced and taught the difficult vocabulary items, it was only done after a few repeated readings and the teacher focused on explaining the words using the children's L1. Also, only on four vocabulary building steps as opposed to six steps proposed by Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) were utilized throughout the five the read-aloud sessions. The findings of the study thus indicated that the teacher needs to conduct the reading aloud sessions with her students in an interactive manner and to provide more opportunities for the children to use the vocabulary items learnt in the English language and also in varied situations so as they would benefit in terms of improving their receptive and expressive skills in English (Whitehurst et al, 1994; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002) as well as develop their cognitive skills to become better readers (Mitchell, 2003).

The study recognizes the difficulties that teachers may have when conducting read-aloud with their children especially in their interactions and discussions of the story due to the pupils' low proficiency in English. Although researchers have acknowledge using of children's L1 can assist in vocabulary acquisition and learning (Ramachandran & Rahim, 2004; Ellis, 1985), however, implementing the read-aloud using effective read-aloud practices as proposed by Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002) have shown to have beneficial effects on the children's second language performance especially in developing their vocabulary (Whitehurst et al, 1994; Beck and

McKeown, 2001; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Hahn, 2002; Trelease, 2001; Lane and Wright, 2008). Thus, there is a sense of urgency for teachers and policy makers to understand the strengths of the read-aloud technique in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and learning so as to provide an enriching and stimulating environment that promotes and develops the English language amongst children. Effective read-aloud practices for vocabulary building would expose children in the rural areas in Malaysia to a language-rich environment and eventually when they would complete their primary level education, they would have a strong foundation in language skills to assist them at the secondary and tertiary levels.

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