

## Storybook Read-Alouds to Enhance Students' Comprehension Skills in ESL Classrooms: A Case Study

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### Abstract

The effectiveness of using storybooks during read-alouds to develop children's comprehension skills as well as in understanding the story has been widely studied. The reading aloud strategy has also been proven through numerous researches to be the most highly recommended activity for encouraging language and literacy. The study identified the comprehension strategies used by the teachers during their read-aloud sessions, matched teachers' current practices using the comprehension strategies to the identified practices for the approach, and obtained the teachers' perceptions of their current practices of the comprehension strategies during reading aloud in their English language classrooms. The teachers' comprehension strategies were matched with a research-based strategy for comprehending texts during read-alouds proposed by (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, & Angell, 1994). Three primary school English language teachers teaching in the rural schools participated in this study. Qualitative research methods were used in this study. Primary data was obtained through observations using an observation protocol; while secondary data was obtained through interviews from teachers. Findings from the study revealed that the three teachers employed a few of the comprehension strategies that were proposed by researchers in the field.

The findings also indicate that the teachers utilized only the strategies that they thought were relevant to their teaching context and as such, proposed the need to provide teachers with knowledge on the best practices for conducting reading aloud to develop ESL students' comprehension skills.

**Keywords:** Read-aloud, comprehension skills, reading, comprehension strategies, literacy

### **A. Introduction**

In Malaysia, where English is taught as a second language, educators, policy makers and parents have voiced concern over the declining performance of the English language among pupils, especially those in the rural areas. As there is a need for extensive learning of English in the country, the Minister of Education has called for the improvement of teaching techniques and promises of support for English teachers in terms of facilities and resources in order to enhance English language performance amongst students especially those in the rural areas (Curriculum Development Centre, 2003). One of the techniques that English language teachers have been trained to implement in the English language classroom is the read-aloud technique. The read-aloud technique allows teachers to interact with their pupils when reading stories to them and provide opportunities to the pupils to respond as well as to comprehend the story using the English language. As the teachers interact with them, the teachers provide ample opportunities for their students to learn vocabulary, varied sentence structures and story structures in order to enhance their second language performance and at the same time enhance their reading and comprehension skills.

Reading aloud is stipulated in the Malaysian English language syllabus (CDC, 2003), however, research has not been conducted on how this technique is implemented in the classroom. The reading aloud technique using researcher-designed methods proposed by Whitehurst et al., (1994) involves the teacher reading a story to the pupils and interacting with the pupils by posing questions or prompting to them about the story. When students respond, they use the language and their responses show that they have understood the story (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Clearly, if the reading aloud technique is properly conducted by the teachers in the second language classroom, children as early as primary two level should be able to acquire the English language and scaffold the English language learning experiences right up to year six. This would undoubtedly help to improve the pupils' performance in learning the English language.

Thus this study aims to explore whether the teachers' current practices of using the read-aloud technique when reading stories to their pupils matched with

the identified read-aloud practices in order to assist primary two students in enhancing their comprehension skills as well as learning the English language.

## **B. Literature Review**

Reading aloud while reading stories to children has been used for decades as part of teachers' instructional practice to encourage their children's literacy development (Hancock, 2000; Hahn, 2002; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Trelease, 2001; Gordon, 2007; Sipe, 2008). Researches have acknowledged that the best methods for reading aloud to children increased vocabulary growth and comprehension performance of second language learners (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Hickman et al., 2004). Read-aloud techniques that integrate and encourage analytic talk help stimulate interactions which would assist in developing children's vocabulary and comprehension performance (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Beck & McKeown, 2001).

The primary reason to recommend reading stories in the ESL classroom is that not only are the stories motivating and extremely interesting, but they can attract listeners as well as promote interaction. Reading stories provides the excitement and drama in a context that holds students' attention. It provides meaningful contexts that "not only stimulates imagination, it inspires talk" (Gruegon & Gardner, 2002). Stories are a massive language treasure as thousands of stories have been created and passed down from one generation to another. Children from different language levels and age groups can find interesting and suitable stories to read or tell (Hancock, 2000; Booth & Barton, 2000). The teacher's role is then to promote thoughtful response, to allow and encourage children to make all kinds of meaningful connections based on the words heard or read in the stories. Teachers who read aloud with spirit and enthusiasm, who tell stories that envelope the listeners in the richness of language are providing models of excellence for their learners (Booth & Barton, 2000).

Researchers have confirmed in their studies that reading aloud affects the development of vocabulary (Whitehurst et al., 1999), assists children in acquiring literary sentence structures and vocabulary (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995) and allows for children to be sensitive to the linguistic as well as organizational structures of literary texts (Duke & Kays, 1998). Besides that, researchers have shown that a varied number of activities have demonstrated an increase in the children's comprehension of texts and language development such as: reading several types of books on a similar topic and inviting children to play with objects related to the concepts or characters introduced in books (Wasik & Bond, 2001); inserting short definitions for some difficult words while reading (Collins, 2005); and employing the ability to describe the illustrations in the books (Reese & Cox, 1999). Several researchers have also revealed that effective read-alouds can enhance children's language development and their

vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002), improve their listening comprehension skills (Morrow & Gambrell, 2002), encourage the development of their sentence structures (Chomsky, 1972) and increase their ability to recognize words (Stahl, 2003). As such, the researchers have demonstrated that effective read-aloud sessions promote a variety of skills and abilities which assist students in developing their comprehension skills as well as in their learning of the English language.

Children are not passive learners of language. Instead they construct and reconstruct their language in the process of learning. Research has shown that children play an active role in their language acquisition by constructing their language (Gaskins, 2003). Cognitive development theory builds on the principle that children develop language through their activities (Morrow, 2005). By engaging in various activities through read-alouds, children develop their cognitive processes, including language development. Thus, teachers should resort to teaching methods that actively involve their language learners and provide challenging activities during read-alouds which are feasible to enhance cognitive as well as language development (Morrow, 2005; Hancock, 2000).

One significant contribution into the understanding of language acquisition research is Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development – ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). When children perform a task, parts of the task can be done on their own while some parts will require the help of a more knowledgeable person, who scaffolds the new ideas by assisting the children in completing the task. The ZPD is “a range of social interaction between an adult and a child” (Morrow, 2005), 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, in this case, the teacher in the classroom, is crucial in the children's language development.

Vygotsky's ZPD influenced Krashen's comprehensible input, which constitutes part of his second language acquisition theory (Krashen, 1985). Krashen constituted his Input Hypothesis as “the most important part of the theory” (Krashen, 1985). 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  $i$ , then the next level can be presented as  $i + 1$ , where understand 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 (Krashen, 1982) his/her abilities. Clearly, Vygotsky's idea of internalizing the language and Krashen's idea of acquiring the language are based on the same principle, interaction with others. Thus, during the read-aloud sessions, teachers should try to interact with the children and elicit responses from them so that they bring meaning to the story being read to them.

Krashen's (2004) current language acquisition theory refers to the comprehension hypothesis which is subconscious acquisition and not learning

the language consciously. The comprehension hypothesis states that one acquires language when one understands messages, when one understands what is said as well as communicated and when one is able to understand what one has read (Krashen, 2004). The comprehension hypothesis also claims that one acquires language by input and studies have shown consistent increases in acquisition with more input (Krashen, 2003). Besides that, Krashen (in press) also comments on the “Din in the Head” hypothesis where it is associated to the critical stage that turns receptive knowledge into productive knowledge. The hypothesis claims that the din is the result of stimulation of the language acquisition device. This acts as signal that second language acquisition is taking place (Krashen, 1982).

According to Kamhi-Stein (2003), reading comprehension in a second language is influenced by the language learner’s background knowledge as well as their cultural background. Toddlers acquire language through play, social interactions without formal instruction. Providing children with a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development (Clark, 2000). Clark (2000) believes that engaging the children and giving them confidence to express themselves interactively is an effective way to build on their language experience. As such, teachers should encourage interaction between the pupils and themselves during story reading to encourage the pupils to use the second language.

Teacher read-alouds are viewed as the most consistent activity used by teachers that provide opportunities to enhance the literacy of English language learners (Hickman et al., 2004). In their study with Spanish English language learners, Hickman et al. (2004) found that the teachers guide their students using different types of open-ended questions in order to gauge their students’ comprehension of the story. Besides giving their students opportunities to draw conclusions and inferences and make predictions, the teachers also encouraged them to elaborate upon their ideas and thoughts using higher level language skills. The teachers then extended on their students’ comprehension by getting them to discuss the story in relation to their own experiences. Making text-to-self connections allow students to think about their own experiences as they read and making personal connections that would help them make reading more meaningful, thus becoming better readers (Mitchell, 2003; Sipe, 2008).

Having reviewed the publications in the area of read-aloud using stories to develop the second language based on the theories of second language acquisition, it is evident that reading aloud has a positive influence on children’s second language development.

### **C. Research Methodology**

The study employed a case study approach as the researcher observed the teachers and their students in real-life classroom setting. Detailed descriptions and in-depth study of the read-aloud technique used during the story reading

sessions are highlighted and discussed. This was an appropriate design for the study (Creswell, 2001) as the goal of the study was to explore and describe whether the teachers implemented the best practices of the read-aloud technique when reading stories to their year two (eight year old) pupils. Field observations provided the researcher with an opportunity to explore the read-aloud techniques that the teachers used in the classroom while interviews with the teachers provided information on their understanding and reasons for using the read-aloud technique during their English language lessons. Analysis of data from observation field notes, interviews, and the researchers' personal reflections allowed for a thick description of the read-aloud technique that English language teachers used with their year two pupils (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

This study was conducted in three year two classrooms selected from three schools which are situated in the rural area of Tanjung Malim town in the state of Perak, Malaysia. Participants for the study were three teachers selected using purposeful sampling. The participants in this study were selected based on their willingness to cooperate and participate in the research as well as the location of the schools.

### **1. Research Questions**

In an attempt to understand the teachers' read-aloud sessions in the year two English language classroom, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

- 1) How is the read aloud technique to enhance reading comprehension implemented in the year two classrooms?
- 2) How closely do the teachers follow the identified practices for this approach?

### **D. Findings**

The read-aloud sessions in the three different classes had some similarities in terms of how the three teachers conducted their read-alouds. The data would reflect on the strategies teachers employed during their read-aloud sessions and this data would refer to the first research question. The data collected were also analyzed based on the read-aloud research-based model adapted from Whitehurst et al. (1994). The model allowed the researchers to better understand how the English language teachers in the year two primary classroom conducted their read-aloud sessions when matched against the model. This data analysis focused on the second research question in the study that was matching the teachers' practices using the read-aloud technique in story reading to the identified practices for this approach.

Table 1: *Teachers' use of Read-Aloud Strategies*

Participant	Read-Aloud Strategies Employed				
	Drilling	Prompting	Vocabulary Building	Print Referencing	Translation
Teacher A	√	√	√	√	X
Teacher B	√	√	√	√	X
Teacher C	√	√	√	√	√

The three teachers employed several strategies during their read-alouds which were typical in all their five sessions. The strategies were as follows:

1. Drilling – pupils were drilled to pronounce difficult words several times throughout the read-aloud sessions.
2. Repeated readings – Pupils were instructed to read the story repeatedly sentence by sentence as a class, in large groups and individually.
3. Promptings – The teachers prompted to the pupils after they have read the text a few times to gauge their understanding of the stories.
4. Vocabulary building – The teachers explained the meanings of the difficult words using illustrations in the texts, explanations and translation using the pupils' L1.
5. Print referencing – The teachers instructed the pupils to point to the words in the stories as they read. The teachers also pointed to the words and illustrations in the stories when she prompted to them.
6. Translation – Only Teacher C resorted to translating the stories using the pupils' native language.

The strategies that the three English language teachers employed during their read-aloud sessions seemed to focus mainly on their pupils' pronunciation and fluency in reading. The pupils were made to read the story a few times as a whole class, in groups and individually and their pronunciation corrected throughout their readings. The difference in how teacher C conducted her read-aloud sessions, that is, translating the story and difficult words using pupils' L1, showed the teacher's differing styles to meet the needs and interests of her students.

## 1. Teacher's Use of Prompt Types

Data analyses of the teachers' use of the prompt types during their five read-aloud sessions with their year-two pupils are summarized in the table below.

Table 2. *Teacher's Use of Different Prompt Types*

Prompt Types	Teacher A					Teacher B					Teacher C				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. Completion Child fills in the blanks at the end of the sentence.	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
2. Open-ended Teacher encourages child to tell what is happening in the picture.	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
3. Recall Teacher asks questions about a book a child has read.	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
4. Distancing Teacher relates pictures and words in the book to child's own experiences.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

*Note.* 1-5 = Number of sessions; / = Prompts conducted; X = Prompts not conducted. Prompt Types adapted from "A picture Book Reading Intervention in Day Care and Home for Children from Low-Income Families," by Whitehurst, G.J., Arnold, D.S., Eipstein, J.N., & Engell, A.L. 1994, *Developmental Psychology*. Copyright 2007 by the International Reading Association.

Based on the observations, all the three teachers used three prompt types which were completion, recall and open-ended in their read-aloud sessions. The use of these prompt types was to assist the pupils in comprehending the stories read. However, the teachers assisted the pupils in their responses by pointing to the sentences in the story as well as referring them to the illustrations in the book. To reinforce their comprehension and vocabulary skills, the teachers also prepared written exercises for the pupils to complete at the end of their lesson. The comprehension questions used the same three prompts types while the vocabulary exercises involved matching words to pictures or meanings and also unscrambling alphabets to form words.



The three teachers, however, did not utilize the fourth prompt type which was distancing whereby the teacher would relate the pictures and words in the book to the child's experiences. This type of prompt is supposed to provide the child the opportunity to relate the content of the book to his or her own life outside the book. Distancing prompt type would also allow the pupils to be involved in meaningful discussions with the teacher as it challenges the pupils' knowledge and language skills when they attempt to respond to their teachers.

Based on an interview with the three teachers, they felt that the read-aloud sessions had benefitted their pupils in terms of acquiring and learning the English language.

- Teacher A : Reading aloud stories have helped my pupils to improve their pronunciation and reading. I make sure that the stories are interesting and the language is not that difficult. When they read the stories repeatedly, they are not as bored as when they have to read passages in their textbook.
- Teacher B : During the read-alouds, my pupils use English in their reading and when they answer my questions. They learn new words in context and I think reading-aloud is a good strategy to improve my pupils' English language. I have seen some improvement and also they enjoy reading stories.
- Teacher C : Reading stories during my English lesson seem to motivate my pupils as they love stories. I conducted repeated readings using the stories and my weak pupils were able to recognize the print which assisted them in reading simple sentences. The stories also increased their vocabulary as they could recall the words in other English lessons.

The teachers were able to provide their pupils with opportunities for them to use the language through repeated readings. Repeated readings conducted during the read-aloud sessions focused on getting pupils to pronounce correctly and read fluently. They were able to expand on their pupils' vocabulary through the read-aloud sessions as the pupils were able to understand meanings of difficult words through explanations using the illustrations in the text.. The teachers also felt that making their pupils point to the words while they read was a good strategy to assist pupils in developing their print concepts and concept of words. However, interactions between the teachers and their pupils took place after a few sessions of repeated readings thereby indicating that the read-aloud sessions were focusing more on reading the text out loud rather than reading with understanding. Although the teachers prompted the pupils, it was done towards the end of the lesson and not during the story reading itself.

## E. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the teachers used the identified research-based read-aloud techniques as proposed by Whitehurst et al. (1994) when reading stories with their year-two pupils in the second language classrooms. The findings of the study indicated that there were some similarities in the way the teachers conducted the read-aloud sessions. The findings also revealed that the teachers also adopted only some elements of the prompt types and vocabulary building when matched with the best practices proposed by Whitehurst et al. (1994). The discussion of the results will be presented based on the two research questions.

***Implementation of the Read-aloud Technique.*** Throughout the duration of the study and based on the researchers' observations, the researchers observed that the three teachers conducted their read-aloud sessions in a similar manner. The teachers focused on getting their pupils to do repeated readings with the aim of getting their pupils to read fluently, that is, with the correct pronunciation, stress and intonation. The teachers reported that getting students to read fluently was an important aspect that they needed to focus on as it was stipulated in the curriculum specifications which states that "teachers can use the whole language approach by reading aloud stories from a book and allowing children to follow the words being read so that they may get to know how words are pronounced" (CDC, 2003). Grabe & Stoller (2002) & Gibson (2008) contend that re-reading activities such as group and paired reading help to develop reading fluency amongst children and improve pronunciation however, Chun (2002) cautions that too much listening and imitating during reading aloud can bore students as they become quickly tired of it.

The researchers felt that the teachers should have also provided opportunities for their pupils "to read with understanding and enjoyment" (CDC, 2003) which could have taken place if the teachers were to practice interactive read-alouds during their read-aloud sessions. McGee & Schickedanz (2007) revealed research which showed that reading books aloud is not sufficient to improve children's vocabulary development and listening comprehension skills. The authors stated that the way the teachers share the book with the children matters and suggested that teachers engage them in analytical thinking by asking them thoughtful questions.

The researchers observed that the three teachers interacted with their pupils after the repeated readings using different prompt types to elicit responses from them and at the same time checked their understanding of the story. According to Harvey & Goudvis (2000), it is important that teachers choose the right strategy of asking questions before, during and after reading in order for students to comprehend the text. They posit that when the students ask questions and search for answers, they are actually monitoring comprehension and interacting with the text to construct meaning.

***Adherence to Research-based Practice.*** The findings for the second research questions looked into how closely the teachers followed the identified frameworks for effective read-aloud practices proposed by Whitehurst et al. (1994). The findings revealed that the teachers adopted only some elements of the prompt types and vocabulary building steps when matched with the two identified practices. The teachers felt that their set of pupils were weak in the English language and had difficulty in expressing themselves in the language.

Based on the findings of the teachers' use of the different prompt types during the read-aloud sessions, the teachers only used three prompt types which were completion, recall and open-ended prompt types. These three prompt types were used after the pupils had done several repeated readings of the story. Research has demonstrated that the most effective read-alouds were those in which the students were actively involved in asking and answering questions, giving comments and making predictions through the guidance of the teacher (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Teachers' prompts allowed students to engage in analytical thinking when they provided answers or make comments about the story heard. Analytic talk during read-alouds involved the teacher encouraging students to make predictions and inferences that explained a character's motivation as well as connected events in different parts of the story. Such analytic talk would have to involve the teachers using the distancing prompt type which was not utilized during their read-aloud sessions. When students are able to engage in analytical thinking, the teacher is actually tapping into their cognitive skills and eventually assisting in accelerating their literacy development (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Thus, the pupils in the second language classroom would be able to develop their English language learning and academic performance if teachers were to engage them in analytical thinking through the use of the different prompt types.

In order for reading aloud to be beneficial to pupils, teachers should attempt to interact with their pupils and engage them in understanding the story through a variety of prompt types during the story reading sessions. Teachers can encourage the use of the fourth prompt type which is distancing to provide opportunities for them to relate events in the story to their own lives. When teachers use the distancing prompt type with their pupils, they are allowing the pupils to make text-to-life connections and these connections form the "basis for informing and transforming" the pupils' (Sipe, 2008) lives. Making these connections would make the story reading sessions become more meaningful for the pupils. Literary questions such as *why, what do you think, how, discuss, describe* allow readers to "consider multiple possibilities, examine the text more carefully, raise additional questions, and listen to other points of view". Such prompts would engage the pupils in higher-level thinking as well as allow pupils to become better readers.

The findings of the study thus indicated that teachers need to conduct the reading aloud sessions with their pupils in an interactive manner so as to provide

opportunities for the pupils to benefit in terms of improving their receptive and expressive skills in English (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Beck & McKeown, 2001) as well as develop their cognitive and emotion skills to become better readers (Mitchell, 2003).

The study recognizes the difficulties that teachers in the rural areas may have when conducting read-aloud with their pupils especially in their interactions and discussions of the story due to the pupils' low proficiency in English. However, implementing the read-aloud using effective read-aloud practices been shown to have beneficial effects on the children's second language performance (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Beck & McKeown, 2001; Hahn, 2002; Trelease, 2001). Thus, there is a sense of urgency for teachers and policy makers to understand the strengths of the read-aloud so as to provide an enriching and stimulating environment that promotes and develops the English language amongst children. Effective read-aloud practices would expose children in the rural areas to a language-rich environment and eventually when they would complete their primary level education, they would have a strong foundation of in language skills to assist them at the secondary and tertiary levels. This would also close the discrepancy gap of the English language performance of pupils in urban and rural schools in the country as well as address the declining standard of English especially in the rural areas in the Malaysia.

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