

## **Using Read-Alouds in Promoting Early Literacy Development: A Case Study of a Class of ESL Preschoolers**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the results of a study that examined the response of a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) preschoolers towards reading aloud and the experience and perspectives of their teachers regarding this practice. Data were collected through three primary sources: in-depth (participation) observation of the preschoolers; analysis of their drawings and worksheets, and the semi-structured interviews of the teachers. The findings are subsequently discussed with particular emphasis on how reading aloud fosters the preschoolers' engagement and participation, their comprehension of the story, and their critical thinking ability. The teachers' feedback also provides valuable input towards improving the preschoolers' participation, comprehension, and confidence in reading aloud; and for the future enhancement of read-aloud programs. The paper concludes with a discussion of some practical strategies for teaching reading aloud and how it can enhance English language teaching to ESL preschoolers.

**Keywords:** *Reading aloud, Read alouds, Early reading, Early literacy development, Reading for Preschoolers, ESL Preschoolers*

## INTRODUCTION

Research has demonstrated that children exposed to a rich literacy environment achieve higher literacy levels than those who are not and children lacking such an environment typically struggle to catch up with their peers who possess stronger literacy skills (Goldstein, 2011; Dong et al., 2020). The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association have emphasised the significance of teaching young children reading and writing—both of which are fundamental in fostering their language development (Newman et al., 2000). According to Bortnem (2008), there is an increase in the expectation among parents and educators for preschoolers to possess key skills before starting formal schooling, and the early years are *critical* for developing reading abilities. Hence, as stressed by Neuman and Dickinson (2002) interventions aimed at influencing literacy and language development should be introduced during the preschool years to have lasting effects on reading acquisition.

To promote early literacy development and boost reading habits, researchers contend that it is necessary to implement learning strategies that are aligned with these objectives. Numerous studies have demonstrated that one of the most effective ways to enhance literacy development and language proficiency in preschoolers is through reading aloud (Mavriqi & Alkaaby, 2022; Sajid & Kassim, 2019; Kaderavek & Justice, 2002, as cited in Omar, 2016; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Despite being considered a traditional teaching strategy, research has consistently shown that reading aloud stands out as one of the most powerful and effective instructional strategies for enhancing children's literacy achievement (Heubeck, 2024; Moussa & Koester, 2022; Acosta-Tello, 2019; Omar & Saufi, 2015). Indeed, reading aloud plays a *pivotal* role in enhancing children's comprehension skills, enriching their vocabulary, fostering language development, and intensifying cultural understanding (Rahayu & Mustadi, 2022; Senawati et al., 2021; Haland et al., 2021; Wong & Neuman, 2019; Ledger & Merga, 2018)—especially for children whose first language is not English (Omar & Saufi, 2015).

### *Why teach Reading Aloud?*

Research has elucidated the positive impact of reading aloud on children, particularly on their comprehension abilities. Specifically, it has been found that reading aloud plays a crucial role in nurturing children's comprehension skills as they actively engage in the essential aspects of reading such as prediction, inference, and making connections (Acosta-Tello, 2019; Wong & Neuman, 2019; Omar, 2016; Santoro et al., 2016; Brown, 2014). By engaging students in the analysis and synthesis of text through open-ended questions, reading aloud can also help children develop a deeper understanding of the story and its themes, which can foster imagination and creative thinking, leading to improved comprehension of the material (Oueini et al., 2008). Research further suggests that many below-average and average readers prefer being read to over reading independently, which can lead to improved comprehension (Ceyhan & Yıldız, 2021; Clark & Andreasen, 2013). This support can be significant for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those who may face additional challenges in developing their reading skills (Hazzard, 2016).

During their preschool years, children have an impressive ability to absorb new vocabulary as they acquire approximately five new words per day between the ages of one and a half and six, resulting in a vocabulary of around 10,000 words by age six (Bortnem, 2008). A study by Kindle (2009) found that vocabulary development during reading aloud can be improved through primary practices, such as discussing word meanings and using context clues. Reading aloud is a valuable practice that exposes children to a wide range of words, including those less common in everyday conversations (Cunningham, 2005). This exposure can help children learn new words and expand their vocabulary, particularly through the reading of picture books that offer more diverse vocabulary than child-directed conversations (Yaden et al., 1989). Indeed, using read-alouds during the preschool years significantly contributes to vocabulary growth, with studies demonstrating that children exposed

to read-alouds exhibit notable improvements in vocabulary acquisition (Penno et al., 2001, as cited by Batini et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2019; Wright, T. S., 2019).

Finally, in addition to the numerous benefits of reading aloud for vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, it should be mentioned reading aloud to children can also foster empathy and cultural understanding. As emphasised by Morgan (2009), incorporating read-aloud sessions that expose children to a diverse range of literature, cultures, perspectives, and experiences presents a valuable opportunity for developing a deeper understanding of oneself and others. By gaining insights into the lives of individuals, children can cultivate their *narrative imagination* (Nussbaum, 2010), which involves the capacity to empathetically experience the emotions and desires of others, leading to a deeper understanding of different cultures and experiences, and thereby fostering empathy and tolerance (Rizzuto & Steiner, 2022; López & Friedman, 2019; Hibbin, 2016; Lennox, 2013).

### *Role of Teachers in Fostering Early Literacy through Read-Alouds*

Given the importance of reading aloud, teachers play a crucial role in fostering early literacy—a foundation for learning before formal schooling (Senawati et al., 2021; Johari & Yunus, 2019; Hendi & Asmawi, 2018). However, many early childhood teachers set aside only a limited classroom time to reading aloud, diminishing language and literacy development (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021) as they view read-aloud sessions as mere entertainment, missing their instructional potential (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; McCafrey & Hisrich, 2017).

However, far from being mere entertainment, reading aloud, in fact, plays a key role in developing early literacy. To enable read-alouds to optimally foster language development in children and preschoolers, teachers should select quality books, use interactive reading methods, ask thought-provoking questions, encourage discussions, and provide feedback, thereby creating an interactive learning environment (Gillies, 2019; Rog, 2001). To promote active engagement during read-aloud sessions, Acosta-Tello (2019) proposed several effective strategies for teachers to capture the attention of even the most reluctant and shy children. One approach is to build anticipation by using the storybook's cover to prompt students to observe the characters' expressions and actions, encouraging them to infer personalities and speculate on the story's progression. Establishing connections between the story and children's own experiences or current events can also spark lively debates and maintain engagement through discussions that link the narrative to their lives. Reading with enthusiasm, inflection, and emphasis is crucial; and teachers should practice reading aloud beforehand to master pronunciation and convey the narrative's true meaning through prosody and cadence, using distinct voices for characters to add liveliness. Additionally, incorporating dialogic reading—characterized by interactive dialogue between the teacher and children—immerses them in the read-aloud experience. This involves asking progressively complex questions that encourage inferences or predictions, as well as inviting children to complete repetitive phrases within the story. These strategies actively involve children in the reading process, enhancing their engagement and fostering a deeper connection to the text. Given the crucial role that teachers play in implementing effective read-aloud practices, they should be explicit and intentional about the instructional benefits of reading aloud and use strategies that can significantly impact children's literacy growth and a strong foundation for their future academic success (Hazzard, 2016).

### *Rationale of the study*

Given the well-documented benefits of read-aloud practices in early literacy development, we decided to implement a reading-aloud program for a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) preschoolers as a means to enhance their literacy skills. The primary objective of this study was to examine how they respond before, during, and after read-aloud sessions. Additionally, the study aimed at exploring the experiences and perceptions of the teachers regarding the implementation of reading aloud in their lessons. Grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory (1978), which

highlights the importance of social interactions between teachers and students in literacy development, the study investigated the interactive dynamics between the preschoolers and the texts, the teachers and the texts, and the teachers and the preschoolers during the read-aloud sessions to gain an insight into how reading aloud might help these ESL preschoolers in their English literacy development. This paper describes the results of this study.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Method

To accomplish the study's goals, a qualitative research design was utilised because we considered it ideal for investigating individuals and events in their natural environments as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of phenomena and context as well as the exploration of non-quantifiable aspects through observations and open-ended questioning (Caggiano & Weber, 2023; Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2020). To provide us with a clearer picture of how the children responded before, during, and after the read-aloud sessions, a comprehensive approach was taken through extensive classroom observations of reading-aloud sessions conducted at a preschool in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Classroom observation serves as a valuable tool for gaining insight into situations as highlighted by Kothari (2004), and functions as a means of data triangulation to corroborate findings (Loughland & Vlies, 2016). Our objective was to examine the children's engagement, attentiveness, comprehension, and any developmental changes or improvements in their responses over time. Throughout the study, we played the role of participant observers, reading stories aloud to the preschoolers and coordinating subsequent activities. Each session of the program was meticulously recorded to enable us to conduct a thorough analysis of the data thereupon.

To identify the possible benefits of reading aloud for early literacy, we also examined the children's demonstrations of understanding by analysing their drawings and responses on worksheets. The constant comparative method, a commonly used approach for analysing qualitative data (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005), was applied to scrutinise the drawings. As suggested by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008) this method enables the assessment of similarities and differences among pictures by coding sections and grouping them to identify overarching themes. We used this analysis to explore the preschoolers' responses to reading aloud so that we may postulate its effects on their vocabulary development, comprehension skills, and overall literacy skills if this were to be carried out for the long term

Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted among the preschool teachers to collect information about their perceptions of the effectiveness of reading aloud and their personal experiences in implementing it—specifically the challenges they may have faced in implementing the program. This approach, as described by Longhurst (2009), involved asking essential questions to guide the exploration of areas of interest and foster in-depth discussions. Hence, multiple sources of gathering data such as participant classroom observation, children's illustrations and responses on worksheets, and interviews were utilised to allow for triangulation, which would allow us to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Moon, 2019; Fusch et al., 2018).

### Study Participants

The study was conducted at a preschool of a particular university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The investigation involved a total of 45 preschoolers, all six years of age, of different nationalities—Malaysian, Indonesian, Indian, and Pakistani. Before commencing on the study, the school administration—including the principal, parents, and teachers—were fully briefed on the research objectives and requirements; and verbal and written consent were obtained from all involved parties.

The primary language of instruction at the school was English, but some Malay students preferred to communicate in their native language. Nevertheless, they were still able to respond to some extent in English when answering questions or sharing their opinions. We took these language dynamics into account to ensure effective communication throughout the study. On the final day of the program, three teachers volunteered to be interviewed to fulfil the third objective of the research. To maintain their privacy, we have used the pseudonyms, Miss Norly, Miss Syida, and Miss Rin in reporting their perceptions of teaching reading aloud to help children develop literacy skills as well as their experience in conducting the sessions.

### **The Books Used**

Loysen (2010) asserts that proper book selection is critical in maintaining children's attention during read-aloud events. Hence, choosing enjoyable books is key (Green, 1996; and Bortnem 2008). Taking these factors into account, we decided to select six classic folktales: "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Cinderella," "The Three Little Pigs," and "The Gingerbread Man." The stories were carefully chosen to take into consideration the participants' age and language proficiency levels. Recognising children's preference for stories featuring animals, humour, and relatable characters (Greene, 1996), these books were selected to captivate the students and foster a connection with the narratives. The chosen books were well-written and adorned with beautiful illustrations, and conveyed valuable moral lessons.

### **How the Study was Carried Out**

Before we started our research, we thoroughly briefed the teachers on the study's objectives and the reasons behind its implementation. Detailed discussions were held regarding the flow of the program as well as the planned activities. Understanding the potential challenges of managing a large group of children independently, the teachers volunteered to act as facilitators, contributing to the seamless and effective execution of the program.

The design of the program is aligned with Lev Vygotsky's theory of social development, which underscores the significance of post-reading activities in facilitating learning and development (Kirk, 2020). After each reading session, three activities were incorporated to enhance comprehension, encourage the application of new knowledge, and foster connections between the story and the children's previous experience or prior knowledge. As emphasised by Tarim (2015), a well-structured read-aloud program incorporates three fundamental elements: pre-reading activities, during-reading activities, and post-reading activities. To enhance the students' excitement and engagement, we implemented Acosta-Tello's (2019) strategy of commencing each session with activities such as reading the book's title, discussing the front cover, and eliciting predictions about the story. For the during-reading activities, we actively engaged the preschoolers by asking them questions related to the pages being read and encouraging them to participate in the "chants" found in some of the books such as, "Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo", uttered by the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*; "Fee-fi-fo-fum" by the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*; "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down", by the big bad wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, and "Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man!" by the Gingerbread man in, *The Gingerbread Man*.

The during-reading activities were then followed by post-reading activities, which were aimed at determining if the students understood the stories that they had read aloud. The post-reading activities consisted primarily of asking students questions about the stories, as well as incorporating some Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions. This was done to encourage the preschoolers to critically analyse the text, evaluate different points of view, and generate new ideas based on the read-aloud material (Wisrance & Semiun, 2020). In addition, worksheets were also utilized to assess the children's understanding of the stories. The worksheets covered different aspects such as shapes, sizes, sequencing, matching, categorization, and the five senses—each one of which focussed on a

particular story. The primary goal of such activities was to help children improve their literacy skills through the examination, comparison, and discussion of the concepts (Brown, 2014). These activities are elaborated on in the Results section.

Finally, but not the least important, individual interviews were conducted with the teachers, each lasting approximately 20 minutes to allow us to get an insight into the teachers' experiences and perspectives on teaching reading aloud as a means to improve the children's literacy in English.

## RESULTS

The primary aim of this research was to examine how children responded before, during, and after read-aloud sessions. The research also aimed at exploring the experience and perceptions of the teachers regarding the implementation of reading aloud in their lessons. The results of the study are presented in the following sections.

### **Children's Engagement and Responses Before and During Read-Aloud Sessions**

The preschoolers were initially shy and reserved at the start of the program. However, as we introduced ourselves, explained our roles, and described the program's activities, the children's interest was aroused, and they began to smile more. Every day upon our arrival, some of them greeted us with excitement, while others eagerly offered their assistance or curiously peeked into our bags to find out which book we would read that day. Each day, the children enthusiastically entered the classroom and left with a sense of accomplishment, eagerly anticipating what we had in store the following day. Before the read-aloud sessions started, we asked the preschoolers questions related to the book covers, and some children enthusiastically shouted out the titles. Even those who remained silent showed keen interest through their expressions.

During the read-aloud sessions, we utilised interactive facial expressions, body gestures, and engaging intonations to bring the stories to life and captivate the students' attention. For example, in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," the researcher who was reading aloud used different voices to distinguish the three bears, adapting her tone and inflexion for each character. This technique injects drama into the reading experience, allowing children to visualise the characters and at the same time encourage active participation. It was truly gratifying to witness the preschoolers gradually emerging from their individual shells and responding appropriately to the different voices. They displayed fear and nervousness when it came to characters such as Daddy Bear, the Giant, or the Big Bad Wolf, while they giggled and laughed when the lines pertaining to Bear, Little Red Riding Hood, or the Fairy Godmother were read out to them.

The children also enthusiastically imitated various actions from the stories, such as slurping, knocking, stomping, running, chopping, crying, and blowing. They eagerly repeated chants from the tales and even sang along with the teacher who was reading aloud and singing. Chants or repetitive phrases such 'bibbidi-bobbidi-boo' in Cinderella, 'fee-fi-fo-fum' when the giant appeared in Jack and the Beanstalk, and 'Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down', in The Three Little Pigs, captured their attention and encouraged active participation. One particular chant, 'Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man!' prompted the children to jump up, chant together, and run quickly on the spot. Such chants helped the children to remember the stories and associate specific chants with each tale. These interactive elements made the sessions fun and engaging; enabling us to hold the students' attention until the end.



### Evaluating Children's Comprehension and Creativity Through Post-Reading Activities

After each read-aloud session, we conducted post-reading activities to assess the children's comprehension of the stories and their ability to relate them to their personal experience. We posed questions, including a few HOTS questions to encourage critical and creative thinking among the children. The children were enthusiastic about answering the questions, and sharing their responses with their peers. Given the diverse backgrounds of the children, their answers and interpretations often reflected their own unique experiences. For instance, when asked the question, "If you were given a choice between a harp, a hen, and a bag of coins, which one would you take and why?", one girl responded that she would choose the harp so that her mother could use it to lull her newborn sister to sleep. This unexpected response showed her connection to the story where the giant fell asleep while listening to the harp. Another example is when the researcher asked, "Should Little Red Riding Hood have told the big bad wolf where she was going?" one boy confidently answered, "No! My mom told me not to talk to strangers."

We also asked questions such as, "What would happen if the gingerbread man crossed the river by himself?" The children enthusiastically responded with answers such as, "He would melt!" or "He would become soggy," and "He would drown." Additionally, when we asked, "Who did the second little pig buy sticks from?" the children shouted out the answers, "woodcutter" and "tree cutter," which were both correct. To provide a hint for the follow-up question, one of us asked, "What is another word for woodcutter? "It is mentioned in the book. It starts with an L," a few students excitedly exclaimed, "Lumberjack!"

Collecting meaningful data when conducting research with children can be challenging, given that they are still developing their oral and literacy skills. To overcome this hurdle, we conducted another activity where we used the preschoolers' drawings as the primary data source to analyse their responses to the story. In this story, the preschoolers were engaged in exercises and drawing tasks. They were provided with worksheets that focused on the different elements of the stories, such as the five senses (Little Red Riding Hood), sequencing (The Gingerbread Man), seriation (Goldilocks and the Three Bears), categorization (Jack and the Beanstalk), before and after (Cinderella), and matching



(The Three Little Pigs). By using these worksheets, we aimed at assessing the children's comprehension of the stories. Since literacy abilities are developed through the examination, comparison, and discussion of these concepts, we instructed the children to complete the provided worksheets to enable us to evaluate their understanding. The activity encouraged the preschoolers to think creatively and apply what they had learned from the stories to real-life situations. It also involved colouring and drawing, allowing their creativity to flourish. Just before the end of the program, the children were encouraged to showcase and explain their masterpieces to us and their teachers. This provided valuable insights into their thought processes and understanding of the stories. Using drawings as a data source allowed us to gain an insight into the children's comprehension and interpretation of the narratives, even in the absence of fully developed oral and literacy skills. The following activities illustrate how these insights were gathered across various stories:

### *Identifying Items of Seriating Sequences*

The story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears proved to be a valuable tool for introducing the concept of seriation to the children. Seriation involves arranging objects in a specific order based on size, location, or position, requiring the ability to discern differences and compare multiple items (Byington et al., 2016). The prepared worksheet instructed the preschoolers to draw and colour three different items in a seriating sequence: small, medium, and big. The items chosen from the story were porridge bowls, chairs, and beds. Based on their drawings, it can be concluded that the children comprehended the task well, as they successfully depicted small-sized items for Baby Bear, medium-sized items for Mummy Bear, and large-sized items for Daddy Bear. The preschoolers then were asked to imagine themselves as Goldilocks and think of suitable gifts to give to the three bears to make amends for eating their porridge. When we went through their drawings later, we were pleasantly surprised that the children were able to create seriating sequences for the gifts. Among the gifts they drew, following the order of size, were teddy bears, flowers, various foods, and beverages. Additionally, one girl drew honey as a gift for Daddy Bear and explained, "Because bears love to eat honey, just like Winnie the Pooh." These examples were endearing, as the child connected the task to her own experience through a familiar Disney character. Overall, the findings from the seriating sequence worksheet showcased the children's understanding and creativity in relating the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears to the concept of seriation. It was both enlightening and heartwarming to witness their attention to detail and their ability to draw connections between the story and their real-life experiences.

### *Recognising the Five Senses*

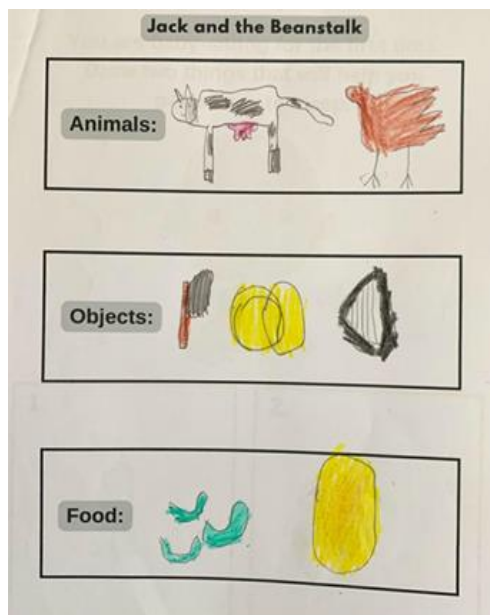
The worksheet on Little Red Riding Hood revolved around the five senses: touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight. This activity involved cutting and pasting, which not only enhance the children's fine motor skills but also foster essential social skills, as pointed out by Saraswati (2022). The preschoolers were tasked with cutting out pictures provided on the worksheet and pasting them onto the corresponding boxes associated with the respective senses. Recognising that some children faced challenges with reading, we read the words associated with the five senses with them before they began the activity. Interestingly, the children who could read assisted their peers in their groups who struggled with reading. The results showed that all the children completed the task without any errors. After the activity, we engaged in a mini role-playing exercise, where we played the role of Little Red Riding Hood, while the children assumed the role of the wolf. It was a pleasant surprise when they accurately recalled Little Red Riding Hood's exact words, when she exclaimed, "Oh, what big ears you have," upon which they responded with the wolf's reply, "All the better to hear you with, my dear." In addition, the children were asked to draw the food they would bring for their sick grandmother. Some of them drew fruits, while others depicted the foods that their mothers always cooked for them. Interestingly, some children drew a bowl of porridge, pointing out that their mothers would prepare warm and delicious porridge when they were feeling under the weather. This demonstrated how the



children associated the story with their own experience, adding a heartwarming touch to their drawings. Overall, these activities not only engaged the children but also allowed them to connect the story with real-life situations, making the learning experience more meaningful and enjoyable.

### *Classifying Items into Categories*

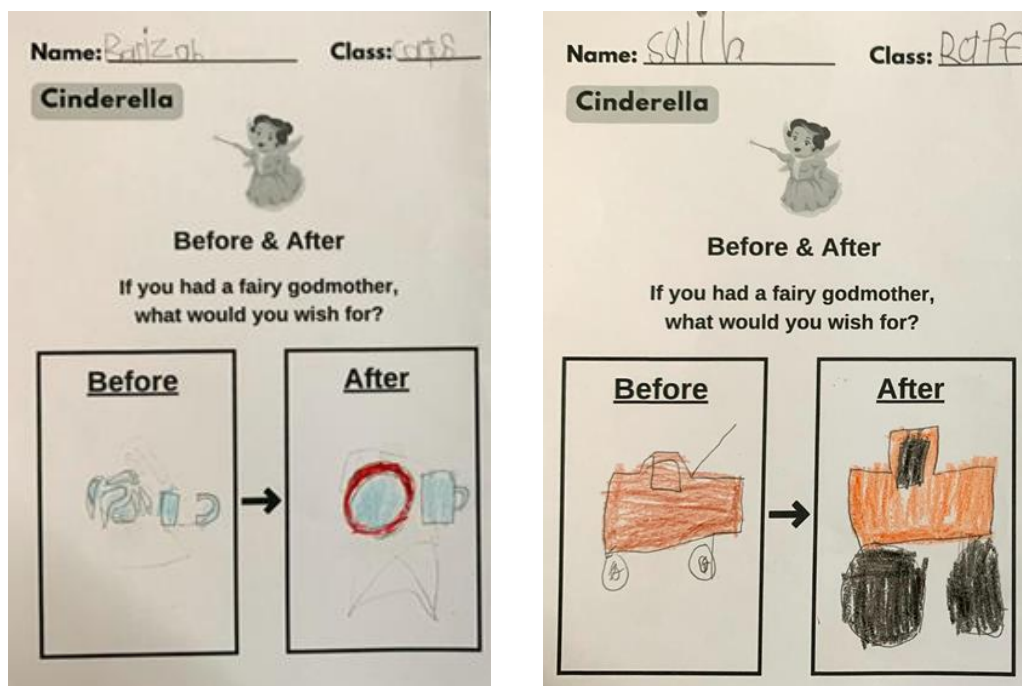
The worksheet on Jack and the Beanstalk centred on the categorization and representation of items from the story into three groups: animals, objects, and food. The preschoolers demonstrated their proficiency in identifying and drawing various animals, such as cows and hens, objects such as axes, harps, and gold coins, as well as food, including magic beans and golden eggs, as depicted in the story. The activity evidenced that all the children were capable of recognizing, classifying, and illustrating the items within their respective categories. Furthermore, the children were challenged to envision themselves as babysitters and generate two items that could assist a baby in falling asleep. Their creativity emerged as they sketched items such as milk bottles, teddy bears, pillows, blankets, and even harps. When asked about the inclusion of the harp, some children explained that it was because the giant in the story fell asleep to the music of the harp. Their responses revealed their ability to make connections between the different stories and apply the concept of the harp being used to soothe someone to sleep. It was delightful to observe how their imaginative ideas enriched the activity, showcasing not only their understanding of the narratives but also their capability to apply these concepts in real-life situations.



### *Imaginative Transformations: From Old to New*

The worksheet on Cinderella required the children to draw something old and transform it into something new. Most of the girls drew old, torn clothes in the "before" box and beautifully adorned, sparkling long dresses in the "after" box. However, one girl drew broken glass and plates, expressing her desire to mend the shattered pieces in the "after" box. When asked why, she responded, "Because I broke my mother's glass and plate once, and I didn't know what to do." In a similar vein, one of the boys drew a small, dull brown toy truck in the "before" box and a vibrant orange Hot Wheels monster truck in the "after" box. When questioned about his choice, he explained that he had always wanted a brand-new toy after seeing an advertisement on television. Additionally, the children were encouraged to unleash their creativity and become fashion designers, designing their dresses or

costumes to wear to a ball. The girls displayed remarkable creativity and spent a significant amount of time on the activity, whereas the boys quickly sketched casual attire.



### Matching and Identifying Visuals

The worksheet on *The Three Little Pigs* involved a matching exercise, designed to enhance visual recognition skills in children. The task required the children to draw lines, connecting the building materials to the houses they belonged to. The building materials included bundles of straw, sticks, and bricks. Based on their completed worksheets, the children demonstrated successful matching, as they correctly linked all the materials to their corresponding houses. Moreover, the children were also asked to imagine themselves as builders and create the strongest house for their families. Their creativity was truly remarkable, with each child showcasing their unique personality and preference in their designs. Based on their drawings, it was evident that the children understood that bricks were the best building material for constructing a sturdy house, as none of them opted for other materials. This demonstrated their comprehension of the concept and their ability to make informed choices based on their understanding of the story. Their imaginative ideas and preference for bricks further reinforced the lessons learned from the narratives.

### Understanding Sequencing

The story, *The Gingerbread Man* offers a wonderful opportunity to teach children about story sequencing. Therefore, the children were tasked with completing the story sequencing by placing the characters in the correct order as they attempted to catch the gingerbread man. Although a few students faced challenges with writing numbers, all the preschoolers exhibited strong memory skills and successfully and accurately completed the task. They were also encouraged to imagine themselves as bakers and design their unique versions of gingerbread men. The resulting artwork proved to be fascinating, reflecting each child's imagination, creativity, and personal touch. This activity allowed them to express their individuality and put their spin on the classic tale, adding a fun and creative element to the learning experience.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Aloud**

On the last day of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers. These interviews aimed at gathering essential information and gaining deeper insights into the experience of the preschool teachers with the read-aloud sessions. The interviewees were three female preschool teachers from the preschool whom we refer to (not their real names) as Ms Nor, Ms Syida, and Ms. Rin, to maintain their anonymity. To ensure a smooth and focused interview process, we conducted separate interviews with each teacher. The interviews allowed the researchers to understand their perceptions of the program, gather valuable insights, and further enrich our research findings.

#### *Fishing Students Towards Reading Aloud*

The findings from the interviews revealed that the teachers had prior experience in conducting reading-aloud activities with their students and used various strategies to actively engage them during these sessions. Ms. Syida mentioned that she conducts read-aloud sessions once a week, gathering all the students to sit together to capture their attention. By incorporating reading aloud at the beginning of the lesson, she successfully attracts the students' attention, as they are used to sitting at their desks during regular lessons. She utilises the existing storybooks used in the class but occasionally creates her own with larger and clearer words and pictures, ensuring that all students can see the materials, even those seated at the back. Another teacher, Ms. Nor, with her extensive 15 years of teaching experience, conducts read-aloud activities three times a week. She emphasised the importance of providing an overview of the story before reading, tailored to the student's age. For six-year-olds, she encourages them to read the title of the book and discuss the front cover illustration, while for four- to five-year-olds, she shows pictures and describes their content. These well-thought-out approaches aim to instil a love for reading, enhance comprehension, and empower the students to confidently retell the stories to their peers. It is apparent that the strategies used by both teachers demonstrate their dedication to creating engaging and meaningful read-aloud experiences for their students, promoting active participation and fostering a positive learning environment.

#### *How the Teachers Felt about the Reading Aloud Program*

The teachers' feedback on the reading-aloud program was overwhelmingly positive, with all of them expressing their intention to incorporate more reading-aloud sessions in their classrooms due to the success they had with it during the program. Ms Rin highlighted how the reading-aloud program managed to capture the children's attention and significantly improve their engagement and retention of information compared to regular lessons. She expressed her enthusiasm to conduct more reading-aloud sessions in her classes based on the students' positive reactions and feedback, indicating that they genuinely enjoyed the program's activities. Ms. Syida underscored the importance of incorporating engaging activities before, during, and after reading, as they proved to be interesting and captivating for students. She shared her plan to implement more reading-aloud sessions three times a week, carefully planning out activities and materials related to the stories she tells to ensure meaningful learning experiences. Ms Nor, on the other hand, appreciated how the reading-aloud program provided her with ideas on conducting effective sessions with children and presenting herself as a reader. She observed that when students enjoy the reading-aloud sessions, they become more actively involved and initiate conversations with the teacher, leading to their emotional development and improvement in their language skills.

*Teachers' Perceived Benefits of the Reading Aloud Program*

The teachers also observed significant growth and positive changes in their students throughout the reading-aloud program. Ms. Nor shared specific examples of students like Maryam and Raudhah, who became more confident and willing to interact during the sessions, breaking out of their individual shells and actively participating. Ms. Syida highlighted the notable improvement in students' vocabulary and their ability to express genuine emotions during the program, which is evident in their active and expressive participation. Ms. Rin was pleasantly surprised by the students' sustained focus and eagerness to answer comprehension questions, which is not always the case during regular lessons. When asked about their favourite stories, each teacher mentioned different titles, attributing the appeal to various factors such as the valuable lessons embedded within each story. However, Ms. Syida noted that "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" seemed to be a popular choice among the students, possibly due to its interesting storyline and the concept of seriation it teaches. Based on the teachers' observations, it can be concluded that the reading-aloud program had a positive impact on the students. They witnessed improvements in confidence, communication, vocabulary, and engagement. The students' sustained focus and enthusiasm for comprehension quizzes during the sessions also indicated their genuine interest in the stories and activities. Overall, the teachers' feedback and observations demonstrate that the reading-aloud program was successful in fostering student growth, confidence, and active participation in the classroom. The program's carefully designed activities and engaging storytelling approach proved to be effective in creating a positive and stimulating learning environment, enabling the students to benefit both academically and emotionally.

*Teachers' suggestions for future improvement*

All three teachers expressed their high regard for the reading-aloud program and offered valuable suggestions to further enhance student engagement. They recommended incorporating a diverse range of materials and technology to keep the program exciting and effective. Ms. Syida and Ms. Rin particularly emphasised the use of different activities such as puzzles and role-plays to stimulate student participation. They also highlighted the benefits of integrating technology into the read-aloud sessions to create a more immersive and captivating learning experience. Ms. Nor proposed a multi-faceted approach that combines various materials and technology to conduct the activities. She asserts that technology has the potential to make the program more enjoyable for students, comparing the experience to watching a movie in a cinema. By using a projector and a big screen, the activities could be presented in a visually engaging manner, sparking greater excitement and interest among the students. By incorporating a variety of materials and integrating technology, the program can continue to foster students' skills development, cultivate a love for reading, and create a positive and dynamic learning environment in the classroom.

**DISCUSSION**

This research provided some valuable insights into the teaching and practice of reading aloud in English in a Malaysian preschool where the students were non-native speakers of the language. As researchers, we saw how the children's confidence grew as the program progressed, and how it increased their cognitive engagement and critical and creative thinking skills, both of which are essential for improving literacy. While the study found strong evidence of the positive impact of reading aloud and the children's motivation to read, more research is needed to investigate a broader range of literacy benefits. Aspects such as multiple reading sessions, different delivery styles and materials, and a variety of stories and activities should be studied in terms of how they might affect preschoolers' interest in, and response to reading aloud.

This study adds to the growing body of research linking reading aloud to early literacy development and advocates for its continued use with children. The results of this research strongly suggest that post-story reading activities can enhance these literacy benefits even more. The children's drawings from these activities demonstrate their increased cognitive engagement—that is, their efforts and persistence in completing their tasks—as evidenced from their enthusiastic response when asked to draw items from "Jack and the Beanstalk". The children's involvement in the reading activities also fostered their critical thinking, which Schraagen and Van de Ven (2008) define as developing interpretations based on reasoning. This can be seen in the children's answers to the researchers' questions and their responses through their drawings—where they vividly depicted their comprehension of the stories and literacy skills—which included elements such as the five senses, seriation, categorization, sequencing, vocabulary, matching, and visual interpretation. For example, in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," preschoolers imaginatively depicted steam from hot porridge bowls, demonstrating their understanding of temperature. Essentially, the children conceptualised, visualised, and evaluated the information presented during the reading-aloud sessions.

Based on all the activities conducted during the program, it is quite apparent that reading aloud has significant literacy benefits. The students demonstrated increased attention and active participation by reenacting interactive actions performed by the story reader. For instance, during the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," when Goldilocks tasted Daddy Bear's hot porridge, the students mimicked the action by sticking their tongues out and waving their hands in front of their mouths to indicate the heat from the porridge. Likewise, when words describing facial expressions, such as "Cinderella was sad" and "The bossy sisters were very cross," were read during the story of "Cinderella," the children showed these expressions on their faces. Likewise, when verbs such as "climbed," "knocked," "grabbed," "roared," and "chopped" were read, the children acted out the corresponding actions.

In short, the fieldwork provides evidence for the numerous benefits of reading aloud. The program instilled confidence, cognitive engagement, and critical thinking among the students, highlighting the importance of incorporating reading aloud into early literacy development. Future research should investigate a variety of topics, including different delivery styles, materials, and activities to gain a better understanding of the wide-ranging benefits and their potential impact on early literacy development.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the fieldwork at the preschool provide strong evidence of the positive effects of reading aloud on preschoolers' literacy. The study found that the children improved significantly in their cognitive engagement, critical thinking skills, and self-assurance. The program created an enriching classroom environment in which students demonstrated enthusiasm, active participation, and increased curiosity. The teachers' feedback and observations revealed significant progress in the children's vocabulary, focus, and willingness to participate in conversations among the students. Post-reading activities such as sharing time, worksheets, and drawings improved the children's comprehension and personal connections to the stories, allowing them to relate what they have read to their own experience. The teachers' overwhelmingly positive feedback to reading aloud also demonstrates their growing awareness of and belief in its benefits, which has led them to want to incorporate more reading-aloud activities into their classrooms. They suggested utilising various materials and technology, such as puzzles, role-plays, projectors, and large screens, to further engage students with diverse interests. These recommendations highlight the potential for continuous improvement and innovation when conducting reading-aloud sessions.

In conclusion, the joy that reading aloud brings to children is a compelling reason for incorporating it into the classroom. It serves as a powerful and versatile tool for promoting early literacy development and fostering a love for reading, which lays a solid foundation for children's future academic success. When educators understand how to incorporate reading aloud across the curriculum, it can lead to significant academic gains and boost student confidence. Educators shape children into their best selves, bridging the gap between where they are now and the heights they aspire to achieve.

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### **RESEARCH ETHICS**

The research obtained approval from the participants, with due consideration given to ethical concerns, including safeguarding participants' confidentiality, and respecting their right to withdraw from the study.

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