



## Improving Primary Students' Reading Engagement and Critical Literacy through Interactive Read-Aloud

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Received: 2024-09-18; Approved: 2024-10-30; Published: 2024-10-31

### Abstract

This study explores reading activity using the Interactive Read-aloud approach to foster students' reading engagement and critical literacy. It also examines teachers' strategies to make interactions easier in an EFL classroom. In order to address the research problems, an exploratory sequential mix method was used, which included classroom observation, written papers, and an experiment in the classroom. The result of the study revealed that several strategies in applying critical literacy during interactive read-aloud were identified: juxtaposition, problem-solving, bookmark technique, say something, connection stem, switching and thinking hats. The test score of the experimental group has shown significant improvement from using the Interactive read-aloud approach, from 71.47 on the pretest to 87.47 on the posttest. The students also expressed varied enthusiasm and agreement regarding the benefits and enjoyment of Interactive Read-aloud. It is hoped that the practice of Interactive read-aloud can be widely used by teachers, parents, or educational practitioners to engage students in reading, enhance their motivation, and foster their critical literacy.

**Keywords:** Critical Literacy; EFL Young Learners; Interactive Read-aloud; Students Engagement.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kegiatan membaca menggunakan pendekatan membaca nyaring interaktif guna menumbuhkan keterlibatan membaca siswa dan literasi kritis. Penelitian ini juga mendalami strategi yang digunakan guru untuk membuat interaksi lebih mudah di ruang kelas pelajaran bahasa Inggris. Untuk menjawab rumusan masalah penelitian, studi ini menggunakan metode campuran berurutan eksplorasi, yang meliputi kegiatan pengamatan kelas, jurnal refleksi, dan eksperimen kelas. Hasil penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa beberapa strategi yang digunakan untuk meningkatkan kecakapan literasi yang teridentifikasi yaitu juxtaposisi, pemecahan masalah, teknik *bookmark*, katakan sesuatu, batang koneksi, beralih dan topik berpikir. Skor tes kelompok eksperimen menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dari menggunakan pendekatan membaca nyaring interaktif dengan skor 71,47 pada pra-tes meningkat menjadi 87,47 pada post-test. Para siswa juga menyatakan beragam tingkat antusiasme dan kesepakatan mengenai manfaat dari membaca nyaring interaktif. Diharapkan bahwa praktik membaca nyaring dapat digunakan oleh guru, orang tua, atau praktisi pendidikan untuk membuat siswa terlibat dalam membaca, meningkatkan motivasi mereka dalam membaca, dan menumbuhkan literasi kritis mereka.

**Kata Kunci:** Keterlibatan Siswa; Literasi Kritis; Membaca Nyaring Interaktif; Siswa Sekolah Dasar.

## INTRODUCTION

The learning activities must be fun and relaxing. It is believed that to acquire a second language (Stoimcheva-Kolarska, 2020). Young learners are characterized as the ones who love exploring, playing, and owning high curiosity (Ariawan & Pratiwi, 2017). However, making EFL young learners cognitively involved in learning is difficult (Cameron, 2003). Cameron (2003) explains that prospective teaching to young learners should allow children to construct meaning in the language they encounter by incorporating it into purposeful action and interaction. Additionally, a suitable lesson design for teaching language to EFL young learners is needed since the range of language experiences each young language learner gets in their foreign language lessons will likely influence how their language develops (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). The lack of implementation of innovative models and media in the learning process will cause low critical thinking skills (Devi et al., 2020).

Reading engagement among primary students is often hindered by several challenges that affect their motivation and ability to connect with texts. One significant issue is the lack of interest in reading materials that resonate with their experiences and interests (Ericson, 2023). Another fact also suggests that many classrooms rely on traditional texts. As a result, this teaching strategy may not engage young learners, which, according to Saffian (2022), will lead to disinterest and disengagement. Meanwhile, according to Brandt et al. (2021), students with low reading motivation tend to read less, leading to slower development of essential skills like decoding and fluency. Furthermore, many students struggle with the basics of reading due to inadequate support, leading to disengagement and a reluctance to participate in reading activities.

According to a survey about TEYL teaching practices conducted by Garton et al. (2011), teaching using new methodologies is the most important factor to enhance teaching and learning in this context. Interactive Read-aloud (IRA) can be seen as a new method that engages young language learners cognitively in their learning. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2006, cited in Johnston, 2015), interactive read-aloud (IRA) is a structured and straightforward approach to reading in which the teacher demonstrates vocabulary growth, fluent reading, and comprehension strategies to the entire class. The teacher then encourages students to participate in discussions and become engaged learners actively. According to Mikul (2015), the participation of teachers and students in Interactive Read-

aloud is believed to foster interactions that provide young learners with opportunities to engage in vocal exchanges with the text, their classmates, and the teacher.

However, being interactive alone cannot prepare students for this globalization era. Students must be able to be critical in reading the text, and independent reading does not promote critical thinking (Hall & Piazza, 2008); thus, Interactive Read-aloud (IRA) presents a supportive environment to read books in a fun and interactive way. According to Lennox (2013), interactive read-aloud is an instructional approach that involves reading aloud a text to foster deep understanding and critical thinking. It goes beyond the mere acts of deciphering the words written on the page and motivates pupils to actively interact with the text in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Literacy is the ability to read and write (Critical literacy is another important part of students' reading engagement of students even for the primary students. Bishop (2023) points out that critical literacy gives the students the power to criticize and question the texts they deal with and thus understand the world more critically. In developing the students' critical literacy, they can identify biased arguments, evaluate the source of the information, or express their thoughts and opinions. Not only does this enhance their comprehension skills, but it also allows students to engage with the texts on a deeper level. According to Suzanne (2016), when students are equipped to think critically about what they read, they become active in learning, not just passive receivers of information. This active engagement is important in this age where media literacy has increasingly become important, in which students are bombarded with information from different types of media that cannot be assured its truth. Including critical literacy in reading instructions through interactive read-aloud approaches will help nurture these important skills and improve reading engagement to achieve better academic success.

Critical Literacy Theory allows teachers to improve students' thinking and reflection skills. There are seven strategies for fostering critical literacy proposed by McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004). These are Juxtaposition, Problem Posing, Bookmark Technique, Say Something, Connection Stems, Switching, and Thinking Hats. Juxtaposition, according to McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004), means putting together different texts or media in a way that highlights their differences and helps people understand other points of view. Problem-posing is another helpful method. In this method, students ask questions beyond what the text says directly to discover missing views, the author's intention, and the text's effects on social justice. The bookmark method helps

students keep track of their understanding and engagement by letting them know which parts of the text interest or confuse them.

Another strategy McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004) mentioned is saying something, in which students pause reading to talk with a partner about important points. Students are asked to connect the text to their own lives or to other books they have read. Switching, on the other hand, lets them see things from different points of view by changing things like the setting or the gender of the characters. Lastly, thinking hats has students look at a story critically from the point of view of different characters. These strategies work together to help people think more deeply about and critically connect with texts.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the individual effects of Critical Literacy Theory and the interactive read-aloud method. For instance, Cummins and Early (2011) demonstrated that Critical Literacy Theory can promote critical thinking skills, cultural understanding, and social awareness among students. Additionally, research by Hsu (2015) found that the IRA method positively impacts reading comprehension and student engagement in various educational contexts. In their study, Ceyhan & Yıldız (2021) also mention that engaging in interactive read-aloud techniques enhanced students' reading comprehension, motivation, and fluency skills. According to Senawati (2021), reading aloud in an EFL context has positively affected children's English language development. It includes improvements in their vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension, listening skills, reading skills, speaking skills, communication skills, motivation, literacy, and critical thinking abilities. The findings suggest that reading aloud is a pertinent practice to incorporate today due to its advantages in enhancing children's English skills.

Revealing how classroom interaction in Interactive Read-aloud engages young language learners in active learning in their classroom is essential. However, the empirical study on teacher's strategies in implementing interactive read-aloud in class to enhance students' critical literacy skills and engagement, especially in the Indonesian EFL context, remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore how teachers use strategies to employ Interactive read-aloud in reading activities and determine its impacts on students' critical literacy and attitude towards the reading-aloud activity.

## **METHODS**

The study used a mixed-methods approach, which, according to Creswell (2021), means that quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are used. The design applied in this study was exploratory sequential design. This approach involves

collecting qualitative data to explore the experiences and perceptions of students regarding reading engagement and critical literacy through interviews, focus groups, or observations during interactive read-aloud sessions and collecting quantitative data to find significant differences in critical literacy before and after the program.

This study was conducted in April and May Academic Year 2023-2024. The place of this study was conducted in one of the private elementary schools in Bandung, West Java, namely Pribadi Bandung Primary School, and involved students in the third grade. As many as 30 students aged between 8-9 years old who are learning English as a foreign language and one English teacher were chosen to participate in the study. This study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect the data before and after reading comprehension tests from Reading A-Z were used to collect quantitative data. Meanwhile, to collect the qualitative some instruments were used, such as observations, questionnaires, and students' reflections. The observation was done during four weeks of the program, and the researcher took notes and recorded the classroom teaching. The questionnaire was adapted and customized from the Likert Scale following the framework by Harter (1982), who has ensured that questions are developmentally appropriate for young children, adaptations made with emoticons, more straightforward language, or fewer response options.

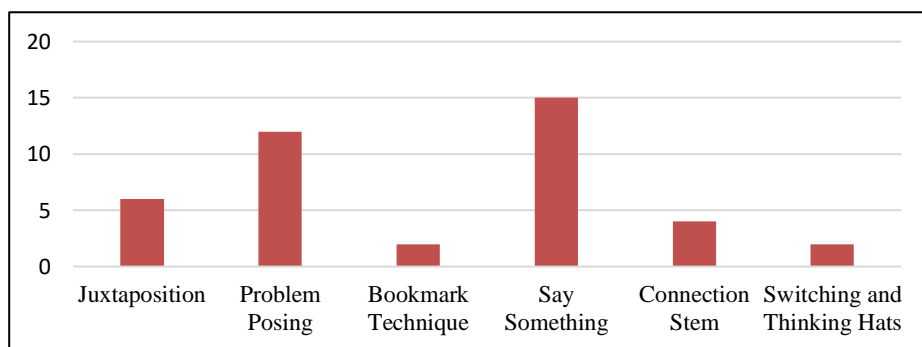
During the four weeks of this study, the experimental group students were exposed to an Interactive Read-aloud program using a book from the Reading A-Z platform twice a week; meanwhile, the control group students accessed the Reading A-Z without given the treatment of IRA. The quantitative data were analyzed by comparing pretest and posttest scores within each group to measure individual progress and use statistical tests to determine if there are significant differences in critical literacy between the experimental and control groups. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were collected from observations, questionnaires, and students' reflections using thematic analysis to identify common themes related to teacher's strategies in fostering critical literacy during Interactive read-aloud programs.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study aims to identify primary English teachers' strategy in implementing interactive read-aloud and seeking the role of Interactive Read-aloud in enhancing students' critical literacy and engagement in reading activities.

### Teacher's Strategies in Fostering Critical Literacy through Interactive Read-aloud

Seven strategies proposed by McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004) aim to develop critical literacy skills during interactive reading activities. These strategies are Juxtaposition, Problem Posing, Bookmark Technique, Say something, Connection stem, Switching, and Thinking Hats. Figure 1 depicts the Critical Literacy Strategies used by the teacher during Interactive Read-aloud sessions as proposed by McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004). Examining the teacher's pedagogical methods reveals a complex strategy for fostering critical literacy, aligning with the model suggested by McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004). Among the strategies used, "Say Something" was the most implemented, which underlines the importance of student interaction and discussion during reading. The frequent use of this strategy coincides with the findings stating that an active approach to reading will help students develop their critical literacy skills (Lewison et al., 2008).



**Figure 1.** Teacher's Strategies in Fostering Critical Literacy through Interactive Read-aloud

It can be seen from the figure that the teacher employs different strategies to foster critical literacy. The most commonly used strategy is "Say Something," with a frequency of 14 occurrences. "Problem Posing" follows closely, being used 10 times. "Juxtaposition" and "Connection Stem" are moderately utilized, with 5 and 4 occurrences, respectively. Other methods, like "Problem Posing" and "Juxtaposition," were used moderately to have the students critically interact with the text through questions about the author's intent and multiple perspectives (Behrman, 2006). On the other hand, the least frequently employed strategies are "Switching and Thinking Hats" and "Bookmark Technique," with frequencies of 2 and 1, respectively. The following is one example of how critical literacy strategy, juxtaposition, is employed in the interaction between the teacher and the students during Interactive Read-aloud with the book "Rabbit and Fox."

T: "Why do you think the rabbit hesitated to help the fox? What might the rabbit be feeling?"  
S4: "Maybe the rabbit thinks the fox will trick them again, like before."  
T: "Interesting. What makes you think that? Is there anything in the story or from earlier that makes you feel that way?"  
S1: "Yeah, because the fox tricked them the last time they met. So, maybe the rabbit is scared."  
T: "That's a great observation. What about the fox? Do you think the fox has changed, or could it still be up to something?"  
S6: "I think the fox needs help. It sounds different from before."  
T: "So, you're comparing how the fox acted before with how it's acting now. That's an important way to think about it."

It is an implicit use of juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is a method that which two characters, their actions, or their points of view are taken up comparatively and contrastively. In the above dialogue, the instructor invites students to compare the acts and feelings of the rabbit and the fox; the differences between the characters and how their backgrounds influence their behaviors are highlighted. The usage of this concept is implicit here. Another strategy is also observed during the interaction as follows.

T: "Let's take a moment to think about what's happening. Turn to your partner and talk about what you notice in this part of the story. What's the most surprising thing for you so far?"  
*\*Students turn and discuss with their partners for a moment.\**  
S5: "I was surprised the rabbit has the idea to fix everything."  
S6: "I thought the fox would solve it, but he didn't."

This strategy involves students pausing to discuss key moments with a partner during reading. Mikul (2015) mentioned that the participation of teachers and students in conversation during reading is believed to foster interactions that provide young learners with opportunities to engage in vocal exchanges with the text, their classmates, and the teacher. The teacher pauses the reading and asks students to discuss their thoughts with their partners, which is an implicit use of the *Say Something* strategy. By contrast, methods such as "Switching and Thinking Hats" and the "Bookmark Technique" were used infrequently, perhaps because these authors relied on other approaches believed to be more accessible or more appropriate for children at this age. This difference in strategy use suggests that, although teachers are adopting multiple approaches, some methods may require further development or confidence if their full potential in providing critical literacy instruction is to be tapped. The following is the Interactive Read-aloud program in the class.



**Figure 1.** Interactive Read-aloud Program in the classroom.

### Students' Critical Literacy Skills through Interactive Read-aloud

This study also explores to what extent Interactive Read-aloud impacts the development of students' critical literacy competencies by comparing the results of two groups: one control group, which did not experience the treatment, and one experimental group, which experienced IRA activities. Both groups were pretested and posttested to explain their development concerning critical literacy.

**Table 1.** The Paired sample statistics of the pretest and posttest results of the control group  
Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pretest	70.13	15	8.568	2.212
Posttest	78.53	15	6.479	1.673

**Table 2.** The Paired sample statistics of the pretest and posttest results of the experimental group  
Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Pretest	71.47	15	12.011	3.101
Posttest	87.47	15	10.378	2.679

Table 1 and 2 compares the critical literacy competence of the two groups of students, namely control and experimental, through pretests and posttests. The control group has a mean of 70.13 with a standard deviation of 8.568 in the pretest, and in the posttest, it rises to 78.53, with a standard deviation of 6.479. It reflects an increase in scores from the pretest to the posttest. The experimental group, however, has a pretest mean score of 71.47 but with a more significant standard deviation of 12.011, showing that the pretest scores spread more. Again, this group's posttest mean score significantly increased to 87.47, with a standard deviation 10.378. These results indicate a significant gain in critical literacy skills within the experimental group, which shows higher posttest scores but, at the same time, higher score dispersion than its control counterpart.

The comparison of the control and experimental groups proves that the interactive read-aloud sessions are effective in enhancing critical literacy. While there is an increase in









the posttest scores of both groups, this is significantly higher for the experimental group. It is in line with the literature, which states that interactive read-aloud activities can significantly improve students' reading comprehension and analytic abilities when enmeshed with strategies in critical literacy (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The enormous variation in posttest scores from the experimental group suggests a possible differentiated effect of the intervention: lower and higher achievers also benefited. This finding corresponds with research that has emphasized the potential of interactive read-aloud activities to attend to various educational needs of learners (Sipe, 2008). While both groups have shown some progress from pretest to posttest, the experimental group has evidenced more pronounced growth in critical literacy skills.

### Students Attitudes on the Interactive Read-aloud Activities

To further explore the impact of Interactive Read-aloud (IRA) activities on students, a questionnaire was distributed to assess their attitudes and perceptions about these sessions. The survey included ten statements that aimed to evaluate students' enjoyment of reading, their level of engagement during IRA sessions, and their perceived enhancement in reading abilities. Responses went into three discrete categories: "Not Really Fun/Not Really Agree," "Fun/Agree," and "So Much Fun/Strongly Agree." The table below shows the students' responses to different aspects of the reading experience.

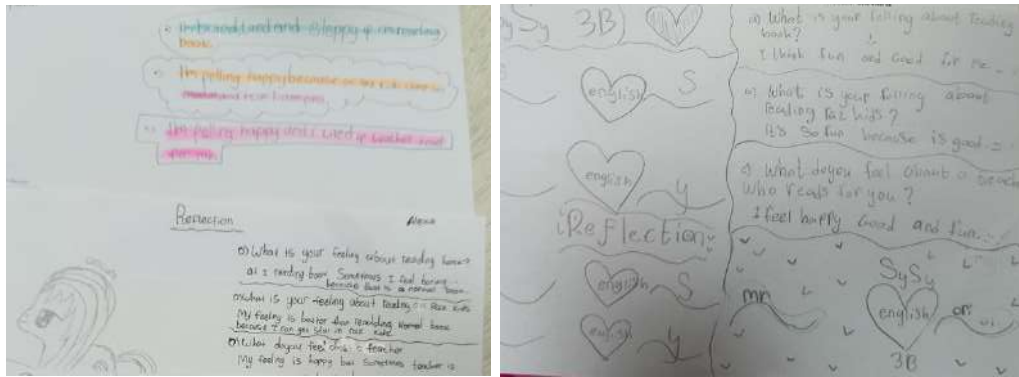
**Table 3.** Students Attitudes on the Interactive Read-aloud Activities

No	Statements	 (Not Really fun / not really agree)	  (Fun / agree)	   (So much fun / strongly agree)
1	Reading is fun	26,67 %	40%	33,33%
2	I like spending time reading books	53,33 %	26,67%	20%
3	Reading helps me learn new things.	26,67 %	60%	26,67%
4	I enjoy when my teachers read me the story.	20 %	40%	40%
5	Interactive read-aloud helps me understand the stories better.	13,33 %	53,33%	33,33%
6	Interactive read-aloud makes reading more interesting for me.	6,67 %	46,67%	46,67%
7	I join in and have fun during Interactive read-aloud activities.	0 %	33,33%	66,67%
8	Interactive read-aloud makes me feel like I'm a part of the story.	13,33 %	53,33%	33,33%
9	I want to have more Interactive read-aloud sessions.	0 %	40%	60%
10	I feel like I'm getting better at reading because of Interactive read-aloud	20%	40%	46,67%

From Table 3, it can be said that students expressed varied enthusiasm and agreement regarding the benefits and enjoyment of Interactive Read-aloud. When asked if "Reading is fun," 26.67% of students are not convinced, 40% find it fun, and 33.33% find it very enjoyable. Regarding how reading helps them learn new things, 26.67% disagree, 60% agree, and 26.67% strongly agree. Students generally enjoy their teachers reading to them, with 20% not enjoying it, 40% finding it enjoyable, and 40% strongly agreeing. The perception of Interactive Read-aloud aiding in story comprehension shows 13.33% disagree, 53.33% agree, and 33.33% strongly agree. The majority felt that Interactive Read-aloud makes reading more attractive, with only 6.67% of students not agreeing, 46.67% agreeing, and 46.67% strongly agreeing.

Regarding participation and enjoyment during sessions, none of the students disagree that they have fun; 33.33% agree, and 66.67% strongly agree. Feeling like part of the story is endorsed by 13.33% as untrue, 53.33% agree, and 33.33% strongly agree. A desire for more Interactive Read-aloud sessions is expressed by 60% who strongly agree, 40% agree, and none disagree. Finally, 20% feel they are not improving in reading, 40% agree that they are improving, and 46.67% strongly agree that their reading skills are enhancing due to Interactive Read-aloud activities. The students' attitudes toward the interactive read-aloud activities also show the positive influence of the activities on their reading. Most students indicated that they found reading more exciting and important when their teacher read to them.

The results are consistent with earlier studies indicating that interactive read-aloud sessions increase students' enjoyment of reading and promote a sense of community within the classroom (Fisher et al., 2012). It aligns with a study by Donasari & Rofiah (2023), who claimed that children's learning characteristics are compatible with the joyful learning concept, which connects learning to happiness. Notably, many students concurred that engaging in interactive read-aloud activities improved their comprehension of stories, reinforcing that interactive reading facilitates understanding by prompting students to engage in critical thinking and establish connections with the text (Serafini, 2014). Nevertheless, the research indicates that a minor proportion of students did not demonstrate significant enthusiasm for reading, which could be affected by external influences such as previous reading experiences or individual variations in motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The following pictures show examples of students' perceptions in their reflections after the program.



**Figure 2.** Students' reflection on the read-aloud program

It can be seen from the pictures that the students mention that they feel happy when they have someone read a book for them, and one student mentions that she feels bored and sleepy when she reads the book for herself. The findings from this study contribute significantly to the understanding of interactive read-aloud activities in ensuring reading engagement and critical literacy among elementary students. The present study examined precisely how teachers promote critical literacy during IRA and such impacts on students' reading capabilities and interest levels. Generally, the findings align with past literature that identifies interactive reading as a key factor in promoting student participation and developing students' critical thinking skills (Fisher et al., 2012; Serafini, 2014).

Notwithstanding the encouraging outcomes, this research is enveloped by many limitations. The relatively small sample size-the 15 students in each group- means that results cannot be generalized to wider audiences. Further research with larger samples would allow for more generalizable results and determine whether the trends found in this study continue to hold across different types of student populations. The research also focused strictly on short-term results, and it is unknown if such gains in deep literacy and reading interest would remain stable over time. Further studies would help determine the sustained impacts of interactive read-aloud experiences and how those impact the reading development in students. Furthermore, subsequent studies may examine how various combinations of critical literacy strategies can be optimized to further improve student learning, especially in heterogeneous classroom environments characterized by differing levels of reading proficiency (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The current study demonstrates that using interactive read-aloud practices, especially those focused on critical literacy approaches, may significantly improve young

students' reading motivation and critical literacy skills. The findings contribute to the growing body of research that supports the significance of interactive reading for developing a deeper and more analytical engagement with texts. However, further research is needed to explore how these interventions could be enhanced and adapted to meet the varied needs of a broader range of students and how their potential impact could be sustained over a more extended period. It is hoped that the Interactive Read-aloud approach can be widely used by teachers, parents, or educational practitioners to make the students engage in reading, enhance their motivation, and foster their critical literacy.

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