

## ***Teacher Read-Alouds in an ESL Context***

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L1 and L2 practitioners and researchers advocate teacher read-alouds in the English language classroom as they can bring about numerous language learning benefits. Read-alouds not only motivate students to read but also develop a variety of skills that makes them proficient readers. However, there are limited studies describing how read-alouds are carried out for the purpose of achieving specific objectives. In view of this, this paper showcases a teacher read-aloud session in an English as a second language (ESL) context designed with three objectives in mind, namely to promote comprehension and therefore language acquisition, to convey reading as a joyous activity and to demonstrate how to engage with a book effectively. The session is deemed to be worthy of showcasing as the read-aloud has been designed on the basis of principles of good reading instruction and focuses on objectives that are valued in ESL classrooms.

**Key words: L2 reading; teacher read-alouds**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within first language (L1) learning contexts, there is now a general consensus on the benefits of teacher read-alouds on learners' literacy development. According to Hoffman, Roser, and Battle (1993), read-alouds help increase students' knowledge of a topic and motivate them to read. Read-alouds also increase students' comprehension abilities which in turn

impact language acquisition (Krashen, 2004). Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) state that read-alouds are important as they provide the essential knowledge for success in reading. Other benefits are that read-alouds introduce students to the joy of reading (Cambourne, 1988) and the art of listening (Morrow, 2003) and help students develop their vocabulary and understand the conventions governing print and story (Hedrick & Pearish, 2003). Children's understanding of the structure of written language can be developed through read-alouds (Lapp & Flood, 2005). Read-alouds lead to an improvement in language expression throughout all curriculum subjects (Barnes, 1992; MacLure, 1988). Finally, the experience of read-alouds enables students to express themselves as individuals, connect with others and make sense of the world.

Within English as a second (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning contexts, there is now a growing interest among L2 researchers to understand the nature of teacher read-alouds and to look at the potential role that teacher read-alouds can play in L2 learners' language development. Amer (1997), for example, investigated the effects of teacher read-alouds on his beginning EFL students' reading comprehension. Compared to the control group who read silently, the experimental group to whom the same stories were read performed significantly better on the reading comprehension post-test. Elley and Mangubhai's (1983) book flood study in Fiji Island provides more compelling evidence for the hugely positive impacts of an interactive reading aloud activity (called the shared book methodology in the study) not only on the students' reading development, but also on their general English proficiency.

More recently, Zhang (2005) provided her middle school students in China with a large amount of comprehensible and highly interesting stories read aloud by the teacher. During the read-aloud sessions, the teacher made sure that the speed was appropriate to her beginner level learners of English and that the language was comprehensible so that the students could follow the stories fully. At the end of the six-week long experiment (approximately 42 hours of teacher read-aloud sessions), Zhang's read-aloud students performed

significantly better in the cloze and recall listening tests than the students in the control group who received intensive and systematic listening strategy training. In addition, they also outscored the students in the control condition on the picture story-telling test – a measure that required a productive use of the language.

The growing body of literature on teacher read-alouds within ESL contexts has also shown that read-alouds can be used to motivate students to read (Krashen, 2004), to model fluent reading (Day, 2009; Day & Bamford, 1998) and to demonstrate to students how to undertake text explorations effectively (Jacobs & Loh, 2001). There is however limited literature that describes in sufficient detail how read-alouds can be effectively conducted in an ESL classroom. In view of this, this paper describes a teacher read-aloud session carried out as part of a School-based Reading Innovation Project<sup>1</sup> in a Primary Two<sup>2</sup> classroom. This session was deemed to be worthy of showcasing for two reasons: firstly, it was designed according to objectives highly valued in ESL classrooms and secondly, it embodied principles and features that have been recognised by reading theorists as being part of a good reading instruction.

Before embarking on a description of the features of the read-aloud session, we will first describe the objectives of the session and the context in which it was carried out as both of these played important roles in determining the nature of the read-aloud session.

## **CONTEXTUAL DETAILS OF THE CLASS**

The read-aloud session was carried out in a Primary Two classroom in

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<sup>1</sup> The School-based Reading Innovation Project is a research project funded by the Ministry of Education, Singapore. Its main objective is to enhance teacher development in the area of reading instruction.

<sup>2</sup> In Singapore, students in Primary Two are eight years of age. The students in Singapore start school the year they turn seven.

Singapore at the beginning of the school year. The class comprised 30 Singaporean students who were of Chinese, Malay and Indian origin. All of the students were reading and comprehending at least at age appropriate levels as measured by Benchmark Kit 2<sup>3</sup>.

Although the medium of instruction in Singapore is English, English can be argued to be a second language for these students as it is not the native language of their parents. The students in this class come from homes where lap reading (Klesius & Griffith, 1996) is not part and parcel of the home culture and where there is little joint book exploration between adults and children. When books are explored together, the focus tends to be more on decoding rather than comprehension and book enjoyment. This orientation of the parents has a spill over effect on the students who were observed to approach books in the same manner. Book reading for these students was mostly a race to finish decoding the book. They hardly asked any questions about the content of the books they read. Neither was there any discussion about the book content. The children also did not know how to respond to books read aloud to them, which means that many did not know how to engage in text exploration and engagement. An informal reading attitude survey also revealed that the majority of the students didn't enjoy reading and read books only because they were asked to. However, it is not uncommon for parents to invest in phonics lessons so that their children will have a head start in Primary One as they will be able to decode fluently at age appropriate levels.

## **TEACHER'S OBJECTIVES OF THE READ-ALLOUD SESSION**

Given the profile of the class described above, the teacher had three objectives for the read-aloud session. First, since many of the students come

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<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive reading assessment resource for measuring the reading and comprehension abilities of Emergent – 12.

from homes where book reading was encouraged only for decoding purposes and not its enjoyment, one of the objectives of the read-aloud was to convey how joyful reading could be. This did not only necessitate the selection of interesting and well-written books for reading aloud but also the need to demonstrate to the students how book explorations could be highly enriching and engaging. Such book explorations fulfilled the second objective which was to demonstrate to students how they could undertake rich book exploration when reading independently. A common finding in reading research in ESL is that students' comprehension abilities tend to lag behind their decoding abilities over the years. Addressing this issue was another objective and therefore the read-aloud session was designed in such a way that the students were engaged in comprehension of extended content. As successful comprehension is also dependent on the students' vocabulary knowledge, the read-aloud session was also utilised to introduce words to expand their vocabulary knowledge. Conducting this during the read-aloud session allowed words to be introduced in context rather than in isolation.

## **FEATURES OF THE READ-ALLOUD SESSION**

Given the above contextual situation and the objectives to be achieved, the read-aloud session was designed with several features. To convey the features clearly, a description will first be given of each feature. This will be followed with illustrations of the feature with classroom transcripts from an authentic read-aloud session of *Cinderella's Rat*<sup>4</sup> (Meddaugh, 2002). Next, each of the illustrated features will be discussed in the light of theories and research on reading instruction.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key objectives of the read-aloud session was to enhance the student's comprehension. To achieve this objective, the read-aloud session made use of predictive and global questions. These

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<sup>4</sup> For synopsis see Appendix 1.

features are described in further detail below.

*Asking predictive questions* - During the read-aloud session, the teacher stopped at different points in the book to ask students to predict the story using the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) technique. In the exploration of Cinderella's Rat, the teacher began the read-aloud session by reading the title of the book and getting students to predict what the story is going to be about based on the title (Transcript 1). Apart from getting students to predict the story from the title, she also divided the text into chunks and asked predictive questions at various junctures of the story (see Transcript 2). After the students made their prediction, the teacher often responded to the students' prediction on the basis of its plausibility and rather than what actually happens in the story.

#### TRANSCRIPT 1

Teacher	Now let's come back to this story, Cinderella's Rat. What do you think will happen? Can you guess what the story will be about? Yes?
Student	<i>(raises hand)</i> The rat, Cinderella's rat ... pet is in trouble.
Teacher	Cinderella's rat is in trouble. So you mean the rat is actually a pet kept by Cinderella?
Students	Yes.
Teacher	Yes. So this book is about Cinderella's pet rat. What about the others? Any suggestions? Yes?
Student	The rats are Cinderella's friends.
Teacher	The rats are ...
Student	Cinderella's friends.
Teacher	Ok. What about you?
Student	The rats will help Cinderella. One day Cinderella is lost and the rats tried to find her. But then a wicked witch came and caught the rats.
Teacher	So, you mean Cinderella was missing and she was caught by a wicked witch. Okay. How about you?
Student	Maybe Cinderella has been changed into a rat.
Teacher	Oh so you mean a wicked witch has transformed Cinderella into a rat? <i>(laughing)</i> Okay. Let's find out.

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**TRANSCRIPT 2**


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Teacher	<b>“My sister, Ruth and I were always hungry. One day, hunger drove us to do a foolish thing.”</b> What do you think they are going to do? It’s a trap and what do you think the rats are going to do?
Student	They are going to go inside and eat the food. Then the owner of the house will go and close the box and go throw it somewhere else.
Teacher	Yes. The rats are starving. And there is a nice piece of cheese there. So will they be attracted?
Students	Yes.
Teacher	Yes. What do you think would happen to the rats if they did that?
Student	(raises hand) They will get trapped.
Teacher	Yes. They will be trapped because this is actually a mouse trap. Once they lift up and eat that piece of cheese, the mechanism will cause the door to shut and they will be caught. You are right. They are, the two pitiful rats. Do you think they are frightened?

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Getting students to predict the story has an impact on the students’ comprehension abilities (Lapp & Flood, 2005) because to be able to answer the predictive questions, the students have to listen attentively in order to know what has happened so far in the story and predict what will follow. This fosters extended comprehension which according to Krashen’s (2004) comprehensible input theory promotes language acquisition. The predictive questions also arouse the students’ interest levels (Farrell, 2009) and encourage logical thinking because their responses are available for evaluation by fellow classmates and the teacher.

*Asking global comprehension questions* - Once the book has been read-aloud, as a concluding activity, the teacher asked several global comprehension questions. Global comprehension questions relate to the whole texts rather than isolated sentences or paragraphs (Walmsley, 2006). One of the global questions that the teacher chose to ask the students was what values they had learnt from the story. In response to the teacher’s question, one of the values discussed by students was perseverance (see Transcript 3). The teacher then elaborated on the students’ responses and stressed the importance of persevering to achieve one’s life goals.

**TRANSCRIPT 3**

Teacher	Other than the aspect of telling the truth, what else have you learnt?
Student	Persevere
Teacher	You mean perseverance. How?
Student	The wizard couldn't get the spell right at first but he did not give up.
Teacher	Okay, what your friend meant was the wizard didn't manage to transform the rat into a girl with a human voice. He actually tried three times. So in that sense, yes, the wizard has persevered, because he tried a few more times before giving up. In life it is important that we persevere and do not give up easily when we want to achieve certain goals.

Asking global comprehension questions at the end of the book allows the students to revisit the book as a whole and gives the teacher opportunities to assess how much of the content has been comprehended by the students. For students to be able to answer global comprehension questions about the book, it is necessary to be aware of the entire content of the book. This results in students comprehending extended discourse, which plays an important part in language acquisition (Pica, 1994).

*Exploring vocabulary in context* – Since word knowledge is an integral part of successful comprehension, during the read-aloud the teacher stopped at different parts of the book to explore words and phrases that might not be familiar to the students. When exploring the words/phrases, the teacher at times paraphrased (Transcript 4) the word/phrase in passing or stopped to do a more extensive exploration (Transcript 5). In Transcript 4 for instance, the teacher paraphrased the word 'huddled' as 'sit closely together'. In Transcript 5 however, since the student asked the meaning of the word 'hunk', the teacher carried out a more extensive exploration of the word.

**TRANSCRIPT 4**

Teacher	<b>“A rat in a trap has usually enjoyed his last bite of cheese. Ruth and I huddled together as the trapdoor was opened.”</b> What is the meaning of 'huddled'? Yes?
Student	Hug?
Teacher	Actually 'huddle' means that they sit closely together.



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**TRANSCRIPT 5**


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Teacher	<b>“And they became friends now. So the boy taught the rat how to eat. It tastes better like this, he said. And to my surprise he handed me a hunk of bread.”</b>
Student	What’s ‘hunk’?
Teacher	A ‘hunk’ of bread means ... a thick slice of bread. You just have a loaf. A thick hunk of bread is a thick slice. It’s like a loaf of bread and you only cut it into 2 or 3 parts. Okay. ...

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Exploration of words/phrases in the context of a book is recommended by research on vocabulary acquisition (Hennings, 2000; Nation, 2008) as it results in words being explored in context rather than in isolation. Teaching vocabulary in relation to a book allows children to remember the new words better as there is a story or text connected with it. These words do not only have to be words that the students do not know, they could also be words that are used figuratively or metaphorically. Thus, the teacher could help the students expand their vocabulary breadth and depth.

To convey the joy of reading through enriching and engaging book exploration, it is not sufficient just to disseminate the story to the students. It is also important to demonstrate to students that reading a book allows numerous connections to be made to life, self and other texts so that the book exploration becomes an engaging experience. This feature is described and illustrated below.

*Extending the selected text to other texts, self and life* - During the read-aloud, the teacher primarily focused on the selected text, namely Cinderella’s Rat. But this did not prevent the teacher from connecting the text to other related texts. For instance in Transcript 7, the teacher related the story Cinderella’s Rat to the fairy tale, Cinderella. Making such inter-textual connections is important for literacy development (Gunning, 2005).

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**TRANSCRIPT 7**


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Teacher	Let’s look at this title. Cinderella’s Rat. Does a particular fairy tale come to mind? What is that?
Student	Cinderella.
Teacher	Ok. How many of you have read the book Cinderella?

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Teacher Read-Alouds in an ESL Context

Students	<i>(raising hands)</i>
Teacher	Very good. Can you tell me something about the story?
Student	Cinderella had a father and a mother. Then later, her mother got sick. Her father brought her to live with her stepmother and stepsisters. The stepmother and stepsisters treated her badly.
Teacher	Alright. So Cinderella's mother was very very ill and maybe she died. So her father remarried. And this time she had a stepmother and stepsisters. Do you think Cinderella enjoyed staying with her new family?
Students	<i>(in unison)</i> No.
Teacher	No. What happened? What makes you say that she does not like her new family? What have they done to her?
Student	<i>(raises hand)</i> Her stepmother made her clean all the bowls and didn't let her go out .....

Apart from making inter-textual connection, the teacher also made connections between the text and the personal lives of the students and the world in general. This is illustrated in Transcript 8 where the teacher talked about scarcity of food and examined if it is an issue in the lives of the students in class as well as others around the world.

**TRANSCRIPT 8**

Teacher	<b>"It is very difficult task, looking for food and therefore the rats are always hungry".</b> They have little food to eat, okay? What about us? Do you think food is scarce for us?
Students	No.
Teacher	No? Maybe not for you. All of you have breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, correct? Do we have enough to eat everyday?
Students	Yes.
Teacher	Do you go hungry?
Students	No.
Teacher	So food is plentiful for you. But what about others? Have you watched documentary news clips?
Students	Yes.
Teacher	About hunger in third-world countries especially?
Students	Yes.

Teacher	Have you seen pictures of children going hungry? They are so hungry that they look ill and weak and some of them need to hold onto something or, they will just fall down. How many of you have seen such pictures?
Students	<i>(Some raising hands)</i>
Teacher	Have you? What do you think? Do you think food is scarce for them? Yes?
Student	<i>(raises hand)</i> When I see them, I can see that they are as thin as my bones.
Teacher	They are very skinny. They look as if they are walking skeletons. You can see their ribs on their body. What else?
Student	They look very hungry and then if they are unable to eat, they are very sad.
Teacher	Yes. They are very hungry and there is no food. And your heart goes out to them, right? So make sure you do not waste food.

Making connections between the selected text and other texts, the text and personal experiences of students and, the text and the larger world, increases students' interests and engagement with the text (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). It can be argued that making such connections allows the text to come 'alive' (Wallace, 2006) as students interact with the text. It also enriches the reader's processes of text exploration, deepens text comprehension (Peterman, 1988; Teale, 2003) and prevents the reader from being a mere passive consumer of text (Wallace, 2006). These various extensions are highly recommended in language classrooms as they foster language development.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The read-aloud session was devised by the teacher to promote comprehension and the joy of reading, and to undertake book explorations in an engaging manner. To convey the enjoyment that books can bring about and to engage and interact with the book, connections were drawn between the text that was explored and other texts, the personal lives of students and the world they live in. To foster comprehension abilities, students were asked to predict the

story at different junctures of the book, and respond to global comprehension questions. The students also had an opportunity to discuss and learn new words in a meaningful context.

We believe, as do many other language educators, that teachers should conduct read-alouds on a regular basis. A growing body of literature now exists in second and foreign language reading demonstrating that teacher read-alouds can be an effective way to introduce L2 learners to the joy of reading, to help them read with deeper comprehension, and to promote independent reading (Blok, 1999; Jacobs & Loh, 2001). A regular read-aloud can also enhance L2 learners' vocabulary (Elley, 1998) and general language proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

While empirical evidence reporting the effectiveness of teacher read-alouds is now available, the specifics of how to organize a read-aloud session are not as widely available. This paper is an attempt to describe the kinds of activities that can be included in a read-aloud session, which we believe reflect some of the key components of effective read-alouds identified by Fisher, Flood, Lapp and Frey (2004):

- Text selection. Texts are carefully selected based on the interest and needs of the students
- Teacher preparation. Teachers preview and practise the read-aloud text.
- Purpose. A clear purpose is established for the read-aloud, e.g., to model a comprehension strategy.
- Modelling a fluent reading. Teachers serve as models of fluent reading and read the text with animation and expression.
- Book discussion. Teachers direct students to specific features of the text through an interactive question-answer activity.

In conclusion, we encourage L2 teachers to explore ways in which teacher read-alouds can be fruitfully conducted in their classroom and incorporated into their language programmes. More than 20 years ago, Anderson, Hiebert,

Scott & Wilkinson (1985) concluded, “The single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.” We believe their conclusion is still valid today for both L1 and L2 learners.

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**Text Read**

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Synopsis of Cinderella's Rat**

The story is about a rat and his sister, Ruth, who are constantly hungry as food is scarce and they are perpetually threatened by cats. One day, the rat is caught by Cinderella's fairy godmother and turns the rat into a human coach boy who fetches Cinderella to the ball. At the castle, the rat befriends a boy who thinks that Ruth, the rat, is in reality a girl transformed into a rat by some powerful magic. He brings them to a wizard who transforms Ruth the rat into a girl who barks. When the spell on the coach boy wears off, he is restored to its original form while Ruth remains a human. From then on, Ruth is able to provide shelter and food for the rat and their family and they are safe from cats as Ruth's bark frightens them off.