

Contextual Vocabulary Learning and Early Reading Achievement in Preschool: A Focus on Read-Aloud Strategies

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Article Info

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

*Membaca nyaring;
prasekolah;
konteks kata;
literasi;
pembelajaran kosakata*

Penelitian ini mengkaji dampak aktivitas membaca nyaring terhadap pembelajaran kosakata kontekstual dan pencapaian membaca awal pada anak prasekolah. Melalui observasi kelas, wawancara dengan guru dan orang tua, serta diskusi kelompok terfokus, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi strategi membaca nyaring yang efektif dalam mempromosikan penguasaan kosakata. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pertanyaan interaktif, keterkaitan konteks cerita dengan dunia nyata, dan pendekatan yang sensitif terhadap gender dapat meningkatkan pembelajaran kosakata. Selain itu, penelitian ini menyoroti perbedaan gender dalam keterlibatan dan penguasaan kosakata, dengan anak perempuan menunjukkan perhatian yang lebih berkelanjutan dan anak laki-laki menunjukkan output verbal yang lebih tinggi. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya strategi membaca nyaring yang disesuaikan dalam mendukung perkembangan literasi awal.

Keywords:

*Read aloud;
preschool;
word context;
literacy;
vocabulary learning*

Abstract

Early vocabulary acquisition is a strong predictor of later reading comprehension and academic success, which is why it is so important to encourage children to learn new words from an early age. This study examines the impact of read-aloud activities on contextual vocabulary learning and early reading achievement in preschool children. Through classroom observations, teacher and parent interviews, and focus group discussions, the research identifies key read-aloud strategies that promote vocabulary acquisition. Data from observations, interviews, and FGDs were transcribed and coded using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software. The findings reveal that interactive questioning, real-world connections, and gender-sensitive approaches enhance vocabulary learning. These insights underscore the importance of tailored read-aloud strategies in fostering early literacy development. The findings offer valuable insights into the dynamics of read-aloud activities in preschool classrooms.

1. INTRODUCTION

The early development of literacy skills is crucial in determining children's cognitive and linguistic capabilities, establishing the foundation for lifelong learning and academic achievement. In particular, vocabulary acquisition is a strong predictor of later reading comprehension and academic success. Among diverse instructional approaches, read-aloud activities have emerged as one of the most effective strategies for fostering language acquisition, comprehension, and reading motivation in young learners (Ahrens, 2017; Wasik & Hindman, 2020; Weisleder et al., 2018).

Read-aloud provides a valuable background where kids are exposed to spoken language, story structures, and vocabulary that they might not come across in regular interactions. It also allows teachers and parents to scaffold children's understanding through questions, gestures, and elaborations that foster deeper engagement (Dickinson et al., 2019; Thomas, 2019; Vaahtoranta et al., 2018). For preschool-aged children, whose literacy development is still emerging, read-aloud experiences serve as an essential bridge between oral and written language, facilitating both word learning and early reading performance (Peterson et al., 2018; Takacs & Bus, 2018). However, the effectiveness of read-alouds in promoting vocabulary learning may be influenced by various factors, including the strategies employed by educators and the engagement levels of children (Sofyan et al., 2021).

Theoretically, read-aloud activities function as scaffolded learning experiences where educators facilitate meaning-making through strategic questioning, gestural support, and semantic elaboration (Dickinson et al., 2019; Lenhart et al., 2018). For preschool-aged children navigating emergent literacy, these interactions create essential bridges between oral and written language systems, catalyzing both lexical acquisition and foundational reading skills (Peterson et al., 2018; Takacs & Bus, 2018).

Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental to early reading, as it underlies language development by enabling the learning of new words, meanings, pronunciations, and contextual usage. It occurs both via direct instruction and through exposure to language-rich social interactions (Dickinson et al., 2017, 2019). Experiences like read-aloud expose children to vocabulary in context—supporting decoding, comprehension, and application of new words (Håland et al., 2021; Riordan et al., 2022). Strong vocabulary development in children is crucial for academic and cognitive growth. Better vocabulary leads to improved reading comprehension, problem-solving, and communication skills (Hattan et al., 2024; Mol & Bus, 2011). Early vocabulary serves as the foundation for later literacy and school readiness. Evidence shows that read-aloud and exposure to rich vocabulary enhance both oral language and literacy, preparing children for education (Mol & Bus, 2011; Pullen & Justice, 2003).

Despite the well-established significance of vocabulary instruction in early childhood, classrooms often rely on traditional, less effective methods that lack context and engagement (Danita & Wirman, 2023; Ionescu & Ilie, 2018; Utami et al., 2020). Furthermore, emerging research reveals gender-related patterns in vocabulary learning, with girls typically demonstrating advantages in early literacy tasks (Loh et al., 2020), while boys exhibit heightened engagement with action-oriented or factual vocabulary related to vehicles, animals, and technology—content aligning with their experiential preferences (Adler et al., 2019; Brandlistuen et al., 2021; Thomas, 2019). However, the underlying mechanisms driving these differences including instructional design, material selection, and engagement strategies, remain insufficiently understood.

A critical gap exists in the literature regarding gender-responsive pedagogical approaches in early literacy instruction. While existing studies have documented gender differences in literacy task engagement (Shah et al., 2018), research examining how gender-specific engagement patterns influence vocabulary acquisition during read-aloud activities remains limited. Moreover, although home literacy environments significantly impact vocabulary development (Yue & Hanif, 2025), studies investigating the synergistic effects of home literacy practices and classroom read-aloud strategies are notably scarce. However, studies that specifically examine the intersection of home literacy practices and classroom read-aloud strategies in shaping children's vocabulary acquisition are scarce. This study fills gaps by investigating the impact of teacher-child interaction, gender differences, and home literacy involvement on early vocabulary learning during read-alouds. Although attention to read-alouds is rising, studies rarely examine how varying techniques and gendered preferences affect vocabulary growth.

This study aims to explore several research objectives. First, it will investigate the characteristics of read-aloud activities practiced by preschool teachers and their role in vocabulary acquisition. Second, it will examine gender differences in both engagement and vocabulary acquisition during read-aloud activities. Third, it will identify the impact of parental involvement on children's vocabulary development and how this interacts with classroom read-aloud strategies. Fourth, it will explore how interactive read-aloud techniques enhance children's comprehension and critical thinking skills. Finally, it will examine how read-aloud activities can address gendered learning preferences and improve early reading achievement.

This study addresses these gaps through an integrated examination of teacher-child interactions, gender-differentiated engagement patterns, and home literacy involvement in shaping vocabulary acquisition during read-aloud activities. By investigating how tailored read-aloud strategies can accommodate diverse learning preferences and leverage home-school literacy connections, this research advances understanding of equitable, effective early literacy instruction. The Indonesian context provides unique insights into how culturally situated literacy practices

interact with universal developmental processes, expanding the predominantly Western-focused read-aloud literature (Bruner, 2021; Håland et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

The novelty of this research is its integrated approach to vocabulary, gender, and teacher-child interaction. By analyzing how tailored read-aloud strategies meet the needs of boys and girls, these findings aim to enhance inclusivity and engagement in preschool literacy programs.

The findings of this study are significant in several ways. First, they contribute to the growing body of research on read-aloud activities by highlighting the specific strategies that promote vocabulary acquisition. Second, by examining gender differences in engagement and vocabulary learning, the study provides insights into how educators can tailor read-aloud activities to meet the needs of both boys and girls. Lastly, the study emphasizes the importance of the home literacy environment, offering practical recommendations for parents and educators to work together to enhance early literacy development.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The case study design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the read-aloud activities and their influence on early literacy development in a specific preschool setting. This design enables the examination of multiple factors, such as gender differences, teaching strategies, and the role of the home environment, in shaping children's engagement and vocabulary acquisition during read-aloud sessions. The design aligns with (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) emphasis on qualitative inquiry as a means of understanding phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly in early childhood settings where behaviors are socially embedded and developmentally dynamic.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a five months period through the classroom observations, teacher interviews, parent interviews, and focus group discussion. The observation was conducted in one preschool class in Depok West Java, consisting of 15 children aged 4-6 years. These children were observed during read-aloud sessions, and their engagement levels, verbal responses, and vocabulary acquisition were recorded. The class was chosen because of its diverse group of children, including boys and girls with varying levels of literacy skills. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers to gather information on their read-aloud practices and their perceptions of how children develop their vocabulary. Interviews with parents aimed to shed light on the home literacy environment and its impact on children's vocabulary acquisition. A focus group discussion with preschool teachers was held to explore collective insights into read-aloud practices and their effectiveness.

Data Analysis

Data from observations, interviews, and FGDs were transcribed and coded using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software. The transcriptions were analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to the research questions. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data, enabling it to be interpreted and presented in a structured manner. Figure 1 were involved in the data analysis

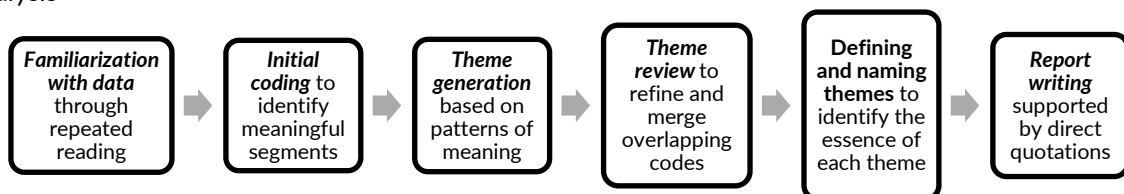


Figure 1. The process of Data Analysis

Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines were adhered to strictly in this study. Informed consent was collected from all participants (parents and teachers) prior to data collection. Confidentiality was preserved throughout the study, and the identities of all participants were anonymized to safeguard their privacy. The participants were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates how read-aloud activities influence early reading achievement and vocabulary learning in preschool children, particularly examining gender differences in engagement and vocabulary acquisition. The findings, which are based on classroom observations, interviews with parents and teachers, and focus group discussions, highlight several key themes and sub-themes that demonstrate how read-aloud activities contribute to children's language and literacy development. This section presents an integrated analysis of these findings and contextualizes them within the broader academic discourse.

Read-Aloud Characteristics and Vocabulary Acquisition

The first significant finding revolves around the characteristics of the read-aloud activities observed in the preschool classroom. Several strategies emerged as particularly effective in promoting vocabulary acquisition during read-aloud sessions. Interactive questioning, teacher engagement, and the use of expressive intonation were all noted as key practices that enhanced children’s understanding and retention of new vocabulary.

“When we read aloud and point to the text, they start becoming curious about writing—like air-writing letters. I also use questions like ‘What’s this picture?’ to get their attention, and they begin to associate the pictures with the words.”

This practice was particularly effective when the teacher used questioning to guide children’s attention to specific vocabulary. Children responded well to direct prompts, often recalling words they had seen or heard during previous sessions, indicating that repetition and active engagement were vital for learning new words.

Furthermore, scaffolding emerged as an important technique. Teachers often followed up on children’s responses to ensure their comprehension. For example, when a child encountered the word “uncomfortable” during a story, the teacher explained its meaning in context, linking it to the child’s emotional state. This strategy aligns with the findings of McKeown & Beck (2014), who emphasized the importance of contextualizing new vocabulary within children’s everyday experiences. There are several strategies for reading aloud that teachers use to make reading aloud more interesting. Figure 2 shows some of the reading strategies used by teachers observed in this study.

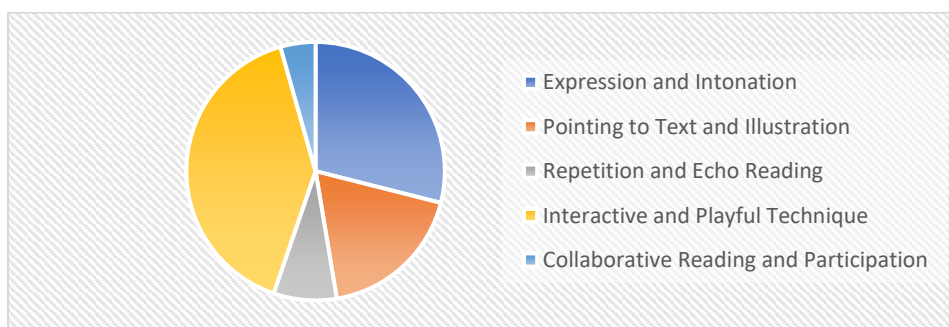


Figure 2. Different Teacher’s Reading Strategies during Read Aloud Sessions

There are at least three reading strategies frequently used by teachers in this study. These strategies are Interactive and playful techniques, Pointing to text and illustration, and Expression and intonation. Teachers explained in group discussion sessions and separate interviews examples of how they implemented reading strategies.

When I pointed to something in the book, like a picture of a foot, and asked the children “What is this?”, they could answer “foot.” I usually reinforce it by saying, “This is called a foot.”

Sometimes we try to pull the children back into focus by asking things like, “N, what is this picture?”

In my class, I usually say, “Ms. R has a new book! Let’s look at the cover—what do you think it’s about?” The kids guess, and then I say, “Let’s see if your guesses were right.” That’s one way to build interest first and spark their curiosity—then I start reading.

From this interview excerpt, it can be seen that teachers try to get children interested in reading aloud. The method used by teachers is to encourage children to interact and mention their names so that they become interested in the stories being read.

Data from parent interviews and classroom observations emphasised the significant impact of home literacy practices on children's early reading achievements. Parental involvement was repeatedly identified as a key factor in vocabulary development and reading skills. Parents who read regularly to their children at home were found to have children who were more engaged during read-aloud activities and more expressive in their responses (Zhang et al., 2025; Zulaeha & Setiasih, 2025). For example, in this research, one teacher shared,

“I noticed that children who are regularly read to at home tend to recognize letters more easily. Even without being explicitly taught “this is B, A, etc.” they remember the letters more quickly. They learn to recognize, remember, and even spell faster.”

This suggests that home literacy practices lay a strong foundation for children's language skills, which is reinforced by school-based read-aloud sessions. Meanwhile, parents also reported the benefits of reading aloud that they could observe from the development of their children's language skills.

"I noticed a huge improvement in his vocabulary after attending school...he uses many phrases he's learned at school, and he uses them in daily life".

These findings indicate that mutual support between schools and home environments has a very positive impact on children's language development. Therefore, good communication between home and school needs to be maintained.

Gender Differences in Engagement and Vocabulary Acquisition

The data revealed distinct patterns in engagement and vocabulary acquisition based on gender. Boys and girls showed different levels of engagement with read-aloud sessions. Girls generally displayed a greater interest in books containing narrative text and illustrations. However, boys—though less enthusiastic about reading—often displayed higher levels of active participation once engaged. Data from classroom observations showed that boys tended to be more kinesthetic and action-oriented during read-aloud sessions, often asking questions related to the story's plot or characters. In contrast, girls were observed to be more reflective, frequently discussing the moral lessons or emotions of the characters in the story. These gender differences were not only seen in the children's engagement levels but also in the types of vocabulary they acquired.

"Boys like Z would always ask 'What's this?' when they saw something new in the story, while girls tended to comment on how the characters felt. Both genders learned vocabulary, but they learned different types of words based on what interested them the most."

"The girls are more focused on the emotional aspects of the story, whereas the boys tend to be more interested in the action and what happens next"

Boys, such as Z, exhibited greater curiosity about action-oriented vocabulary (e.g., "train," "jump," "run"), while girls tended to engage more with socially or emotionally charged vocabulary (e.g., "tolerant," "sad," "friend"). This pattern reflects findings from previous studies, such as those by Brandlistuen et al. (2021), who observed similar differences in language preferences between genders at a young age. This finding is consistent with the idea that gender influences both the types of vocabulary children acquire and their engagement levels during read-aloud sessions. By recognizing these differences, educators can tailor read-aloud sessions to better meet the needs and interests of both boys and girls.

Interestingly, despite these differences in focus, both genders demonstrated significant vocabulary growth during read-aloud sessions, especially when the content was engaging and relatable to their experiences. For example, when stories connected to their daily lives were read aloud, children of both genders responded with greater enthusiasm and vocabulary use. Both genders appeal quite similarly to books from the Pilar program, which mainly focus on character education and its application in the daily lives of children, applicable both in school and at home.

The study also found that boys and girls had different preferences for reading materials. Boys were more likely to gravitate toward books with adventure themes, such as dinosaurs or superheroes, while girls showed a preference for books that involved social interactions or characters with emotional depth, such as princess stories. This finding was consistent with the data from the gender-based analysis of reading preferences. The differences in genre of reading preferences between genders can be seen from Figure 3.

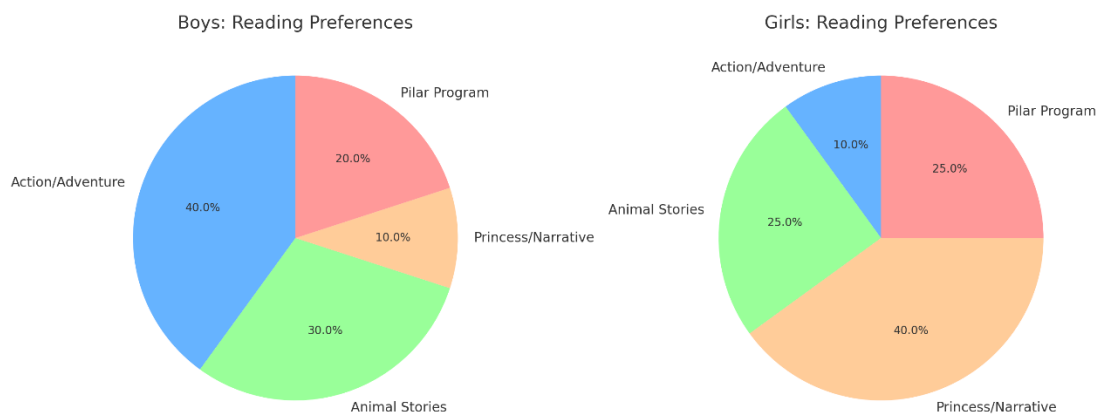


Figure 3. Different Reading Genres between Genders

The study also examined how children’s engagement with different types of reading materials influenced their vocabulary learning. Both boys and girls showed preferences for particular genres, which in turn affected their engagement levels and vocabulary acquisition.

“Boys like reading stories about trucks or dinosaurs, but girls were more interested in stories about animals or relationships. This showed in their ability to remember and use the vocabulary from the story. Boys would often talk about ‘speed,’ ‘big,’ and ‘strong,’ while girls focused more on ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ and ‘sadness.’”

This finding is consistent with research suggesting that children’s interests significantly influence the vocabulary they acquire. For example, boys’ preference for action-oriented stories led them to learn words related to movement and objects, while girls’ focus on social stories enhanced their vocabulary related to emotions and relationships (Brandlistuen et al., 2021).

Additionally, the role of illustrations in fostering engagement was highlighted. Children who were exposed to visually rich books, especially those with detailed pictures and interactive elements, were more likely to engage with the story and its vocabulary. This finding supports the work of Torr (2020) who argued that illustrations not only attract children’s attention but also help them make connections between words and their meanings.

The Role of Contextual Vocabulary in Read-Aloud Sessions

Contextual vocabulary learning, which occurs when children learn words within the context of the story, was a central finding in this research. Children who were consistently exposed to stories with clear contextual clues were able to grasp new vocabulary more effectively than those who encountered words in isolation.

“When Z saw a new word like ‘uncomfortable,’ I explained it in the context of the story, linking it to how the character felt. Z could then use that word when talking about his own experiences. This helps him remember the word and use it in everyday conversations.”

This strategy of teaching vocabulary in context is effective because it ties new words to experiences that children can relate to. As children learn words in context, they are more likely to retain them and apply them in new situations (Wasik & Hindman, 2020).

From the classroom observation, the teacher explaining difficult or new words such as "Kukuh" (meaning strong) and "Iba" (meaning pitiful) during the read-aloud session is also an example of contextual vocabulary learning. The teacher explicitly highlights challenging vocabulary in context, helping children focus on words whose meaning might not be immediately clear. These words are presented within the story, not in isolation. This technique supports comprehension by helping students understand vocabulary in context. Moreover, by discussing the book cover, the teacher encourages students to engage with the material and think critically about the story’s context. The teacher’s questions about the possible background of the events encourage students to speculate and make predictions, fostering engagement and critical thinking.

The study found that teacher instruction was crucial for vocabulary acquisition. Teachers employed various strategies, including interactive questioning and contextual explanations, to assist children in understanding new vocabulary. Teachers particularly emphasised contextual vocabulary learning when explaining the definition of new words in the context of a story. Even to introduce difficult words, teachers can elaborate on them during read

aloud activities. Additionally, teachers strive to relate these challenging words to contexts that are familiar to students in their daily lives. For instance, one teacher stated,

"When we come across difficult words like 'trembles,' we make sure to explain it in context so that the children understand it better".

Parents also shared information about the strategies they used to introduce new or difficult words. The approach of using complex vocabulary such as "turbine" followed by exposure to the relevant picture in the storybook encourages exposure to new words, fostering a rich language environment.

"Even if he doesn't fully understand words like turbine, I still say them. I figure it's okay if he doesn't get it yet. I'll just keep repeating them".

By acknowledging that it's okay if the child doesn't understand certain words yet, parents provides positive reinforcement, which can help build the child's confidence in language learning. This finding is in line with that of (Romeo et al., 2018), who found that increased discussion between parents and children about abstract, non-present concepts – decontextualised language – led to greater conversational turn-taking between family members during home meals several weeks later.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of read-aloud activities in vocabulary acquisition and early reading success. Through engaging and interactive read-aloud practices, children can acquire new vocabulary, especially when the content connects with their daily lives and interests. Furthermore, the study reveals that vocabulary acquisition follows gendered patterns, with boys and girls showing distinct engagement levels and vocabulary learning styles based on their personal interests and developmental stages.

In addition to these findings, the research emphasizes the critical impact of teacher-child interaction and motivation on vocabulary learning during read-aloud sessions. Gender differences were also found to influence how children engage with and benefit from these activities, highlighting the need for tailored approaches to reading instruction. Moreover, the study explores how factors such as the home literacy environment and specific teacher strategies further enhance vocabulary development and early reading achievement. While these insights provide valuable contributions to the understanding of read-aloud dynamics in preschool classrooms, generalizability may be limited due to the small sample size—which included only two teachers, two parents, and one classroom of 15 children. This limitation may prevent the findings from fully reflecting the diversity of preschool settings across different regions. Future research with larger and more diverse samples is essential to verify these findings and improve their external validity. Educators can maximise the effectiveness of read-aloud sessions in promoting early literacy by tailoring them to address the particular needs of boys and girls. Future research could explore the long-term effects of read-aloud activities on vocabulary retention and reading achievement, as well as how these activities impact other aspects of literacy development, such as comprehension and critical thinking.

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