# IMPACT OF READ-ALOUD IN THE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

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This study was conducted over ten weeks with fifty three 5 to 6 year-old kindergarteners from economically disadvantaged homes learning French as a second language. The read-aloud strategy consisted of two teachers reading storybooks to children and explaining unfamiliar words. The teachers engaged children in meaningful discussions about the text, involving logical and critical thinking. Data were collected through observations, conferences with children, and children's writing samples. Findings revealed gains in children's vocabulary and comprehension skills.   Students were able to use the new vocabulary words and engage in analysis and synthesis as they participated in discussions of the real-aloud stories.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to examine the impact of a read-aloud strategy on children's vocabulary development and comprehension skills by recording their conversations and writings as they responded to the stories.

This study explores the effects of a read-aloud strategy on children's acquisition of vocabulary words and development of comprehension skills, through discussing story events and writing freely about each story.  The strategy involves reading storybooks aloud to students, explaining unfamiliar words, and leading them into thoughtful discussions around the text.  The study is conducted in a school that serves disadvantaged children in Beirut, Lebanon.  No similar study was previously conducted in Lebanon.

The children in this study are in their second school year in the 'Grande Section' (GS). They learn French as a second language and spend seven hours a day in school, with only one or two hours dedicated to their native Arabic language. The emphasis is placed on the second language.  Children learn the various subjects in French in a rich language environment.

The kindergarten curriculum combines two methods: whole language and the phonics approach. Children are helped to read words and sentences from classroom charts, labels, and reading book. They are also encouraged to write about several other topics using their inventive spelling to describe pictures and portray their feelings about a certain event. Children are trained to relate the letters to their sounds, blend letters to form short words, and segment or decode words. This curriculum constitutes the building blocks in all subject areas.

Story reading does not occupy a major place in the GS classes. Teaching of vocabulary is done through explaining the new words encountered in the selections of the students' reading book. Even though the words are found in context, the sentences are not related and do not constitute one whole paragraph to test comprehension. Direct teaching of vocabulary is also done through interpreting enlarged pictures, which neither stimulate students' thinking nor motivate their curiosity. The interactions around the enlarged pictures focus on recalling the actions depicted in each picture rather than analyzing and synthesizing the ideas, so children work at the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Story reading would have been another way to provide children with the basic literacy skills needed to develop as fluent readers and independent writers: a balanced approach that encompasses a variety of reading and writing techniques.

## Research Questions:

This case study attempts to answer the following two questions:
1. What is the impact of a read-aloud strategy on young children's vocabulary development?
2. What is the impact of a read-aloud strategy on young children's comprehension skills?

Kindergarten is considered the best place to help children develop as readers and writers and be prepared for all the literacy requirements of first grade (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Young learners, who face difficulties in their acquisition of the basic kindergarten literacy skills, might fall behind their peers in the primary grades (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Thus, it is recommended to use reading strategies as a way to prevent rather than fix reading problems (Burns et al., 1999). Schulman and Payne (2000) consider that "immersing students in a literature-rich environment, modeling reading and writing behaviors, and involving students in a variety of literacy activities effectively meets the needs of students at all stages of literacy development" (p.51). Therefore, every reading program need to allow children to read correctly and fluently and use appropriate strategies to comprehend the text.

Literacy development is enhanced through a variety of reading and writing strategies that build on each other and provide children with tools to develop as proficient readers and writers. Such strategies can be included in a proactive kindergarten literacy program which encompasses shared reading (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Franzese, 2002; Fisher & Medvic, 2000; O'Donnell & Wood, 2004; Parkes, 2000); guided reading (Callella & Jordano, 2000; Cunningham & Allington, 1999); independent reading (Callella & Jordano 2000 ; Rog, 2001); kindergarten writing strategies (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991); shared writing (Rog, 2001); interactive writing (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000; O'Donnell & Wood, 2004; Rog, 2001); journal writing (Leuenberger, 2003); phonics and phonemic awareness (Rasinski & Padak, 2000); and reading-aloud.

## Reading aloud

It is recommended that reading aloud be used as a teaching routine in every class especially in classes which include students with reading difficulties (Razinski & Padak, 2000) as such strategy allows learners to become more familiar with literacy (Wood & Salvetti, 2001). Read aloud is when children listen to an adult read different types and genres of texts (Franzese, 2002) and then engage in talking about the book. The material to be read aloud may be fiction and nonfiction books, poems, articles or book chapters (Razinski & Padak, 2000). Reading aloud establishes a mutual relationship between the teacher and the students through encountering the same stories and characters and experiencing common reactions towards the events. Leuenberger (2003) believes that reading aloud is the foundation of a well-balanced kindergarten literacy curriculum. .

Rog (2001) states that reading stories aloud also means to develop children's "concepts about print, story structure, and other elements of text" and "provides the child with a wealth of information about the processes and functions of written language" (p.49). It develops children's attention span and listening skills (Dragan, 2001) and improves the precision of recall, sequencing ability and ease in writing (Reed, 1987). Reading aloud to children gives them new understandings on various subjects that they encounter only through books (Terblanche, 2002).

Martinez & Roser (1995) add that talking about books gives children a "chance to say what they think, to share their connections with text, and to collaborate in group-constructed meanings" (p.33). Students acquire 'habits of the mind' that they would use throughout their life (Hahn, 2002). Talking about text ideas rather than listening only to them does not involve quick or one word answer but allows children to think deeply and analyze the story events and ideas (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Teale & Martinez, 1996). Book talk is considered efficient when children work hard to grasp principal ideas, observe and compare, ask questions and relate the story to their life (Martinez & Roser, 1995). Moreover, McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas (2000) point out that read aloud stories introduce students to new topics that they can use when they engage in writing and provide a good model of how writers express their thoughts.

Terblanche (2002) explains that reading aloud also expands children's repertoire and teaches a large number of new vocabulary words in context rather than in isolation (Franzese, 2002) which affects their reading ability as teachers involve them in discussions about the content of the book. Teachers encourage them to use the words and expressions from the text in their responses and guide them to talk about the book using higher order thinking skills (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004).

Reading aloud also has positive effects on the development of vocabulary reading comprehension. Primamore (1994) argues that learners benefit more than others when they are read to because they often enter school lacking the necessary tools of literacy, and may be 'at risk' in developing their reading and writing skills. Reading aloud to children can be used proactively to avoid problems in reading such as poor vocabulary and lack of comprehension and motivation towards reading in general and would guarantee reading success (Primamore, 1994). Wood and Salvetti (2001) report that the 'Project Story Boost' designed to help children who were considered at risk of reading failure due to poverty and provided story read-aloud sessions for several weeks. Children who took part in this project improved in vocabulary development and participation in discussions, and reading and writing activities. Children who remained longer in the project improved in retelling stories by sequencing events and using details, and vocabulary of the stories. The positive effects of the storybooks read-aloud were also transferred to the primary grades where children scored higher in reading fluency and comprehension than

those who did not participate in the project.. Along the same lines, Hargrave and Sénéchal (2000) examined whether economically disadvantaged children who participated orally during storybook reading made gains in language. They found that preschool children from low-income homes who responded to open-ended questions around the text had better results than children who listened passively to stories; in four weeks, children achieved an increase in vocabulary which would usually take four months.

Teachers differ in their read-aloud strategy mainly in the amount of discussion during and after the reading. Some encourage children to discuss the story during the read aloud session; others leave the discussions until the end.  Involving students interactively while reading the story aloud helps improve comprehension and engagement, and post reading discussions encourage students to link the story events to their personal experiences (Terblanche, 2002).

Students benefit from this strategy when teachers establish clear and daily routines and plan for the read-aloud sessions seriously.  When employed as an on the spot activity, students would not profit from any of the positive effects that this strategy provides (Terblanche, 2002). Despite the great advantages that the storybook read-aloud provides, it can have no effect if it is not well implemented. Rog (2001) warns teachers that read aloud storybooks would not turn students into readers by simply listening to stories. Success would be determined by the good selection of books and the method used in reading.

## Methodology

This qualitative case study is exploratory and its research design includes the above focusing questions which guided data collection and analysis.  Decisions concerning purposive sampling; using observation, interviews (student conferences) and documents (students' writings) were related to the purpose of the study (Burns, 2000).

## Participants

The sample of participants in this case study consisted of fifty three 5 to 6 year-old kindergarteners (27 girls and 26 boys) from economically disadvantaged homes.  The children spoke Arabic as their first language and learned French as a second one.  The children were in two different GS classes taught by two different teachers.  The majority of the children entered school lacking the basic home literacy experiences that parents provide to their children.

## Procedures

The read-aloud sessions were conducted on a daily basis over a period of ten weeks from mid February until the end of April. The children listened to five fiction stories, four of them were carried on over two weeks each and the fifth story was read in one week only. The tenth week was devoted to conferences conducted with seven students selected randomly from the two classes participating in this study for collecting additional data. During the read-aloud sessions, each class was divided into two groups (three groups of thirteen and one group of fourteen children). Each read-aloud session was conducted twice in each class.

The two teachers involved in the study planned for sessions ahead of time and discussed their planning with the language coordinator. Planning included the estimated time for reading and discussing each storybook, the vocabulary to be introduced, and one sample question for each part of the story. Every read-aloud session started with predictions based on the title and the illustrations of the story. The children were also introduced to some literary terms such as the author, illustrator, title, and cover pages. Throughout the sessions, the children actively

interacted with the teacher, predicting possible events, commenting on the actions, explaining vocabulary words, and answering questions which trigger their analytic and synthetic skills. By the end of every week, the students were asked to draw their favorite part in the story and then write something about it.

## Data collection methods
## Observation

One of the researchers observed classes as a non-participant observer for eight weeks to increase the reliability of the observation. The teacher and the students were not intimidated by the presence of the researcher, as she has always conducted observations in their classes even before starting this study.  A diary and an audio tape were used to transcribe the conversations that occurred among the children and the teachers during the read-aloud sessions.  The focus was on the type of responses provided by children.  During the first week of the study, the teachers were not observed in order to allow them to get used to the new read-aloud strategy. Starting from the second week, each teacher was observed for two to three times a week.

## Students' writings

The second instrument for collecting data was the analysis of students' writings that took the form of response journals in which children wrote freely about each story. The writings reflected whether children have used the newly learned words in context. The researchers did not examine the mechanics of writing and did not check the spelling since they neither serve the purpose of this study nor answer the research questions.

## Conferences

The third instrument was short conferences with seven students from both classes. Students were selected from each class depending on their general academic performance in the class. The students were divided into three categories: high achievers, average, and with learning difficulties.  The conferences were audio-taped then transcribed.  Each story was reread to each child separately who was then asked to define vocabulary words in his/her own words.

## Criteria for using the data collection instruments

The reviewed literature focused on evaluating the effects of storybook read-aloud on vocabulary acquisition based on pre-tests and post-tests, but in this case study, classroom observations and students' response journals were selected as instruments to collect data for several reasons. First, observations would permit the researcher to watch the children in a natural setting, conversing and interacting freely, and expressing their opinions about the story. Response journals were selected because they involve the strategy of independent or inventive writing which occupies a major part in the two classrooms' curriculum and thus was familiar to the students. Finally, conferences helped investigate children's recall of the definitions of the target words after the story has been read and discussed.

## Reliability

Reliability in case study focuses on triangulating evidence, reporting any personal bias by the researcher and stating the study steps and procedures in detail. This also improves validity.

Moreover, external validity is not as important in case studies as is offering in-depth understanding of the explored phenomenon (Burns, 2000)

**Ethical issues**
   The school principal and the two teachers involved in carrying out the read-aloud strategy in their class were informed about the nature and the purpose of the study.  The name of the school was not disclosed, and the names of the students were changed for anonymity.

**Data analysis**
   The analysis was guided by the initial research objective, questions and design. Pattern matching showed consistency in the data obtained by the different instruments.  Coding is "an integral part of the analysis, involving sifting through the data, making sense of it, and categorizing it in various ways" (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p.145).  The data collected from observing the classroom interactions were in the form of dialogues between the participants in this study. The data were categorized and then coded based on the repeated patterns of students' definitions of new words and expressions and their responses to open-ended questions. Students' responses to open-ended questions were further given more specific codes based on Haden, Reese, & Fivush's model (1996)  (Cited in Reese, Cox, Harte, & McAnally, 2003). The model involves dividing utterances into "labels, picture descriptions, evaluations, inferences, general knowledge, whole book, confirmation-correction, and personal experiences" (p. 43). The selected codes were inferences, evaluations, and personal experiences. Codes such as opinions, debates and background knowledge were also added.
   The data gathered through response journals took the form of students' writings. These were numerous as every child produced one drawing along with one sentence every week. They were categorized into two piles of students' writing that expressed their comprehension of major or minor events in the stories.  Both piles were more intensely analyzed as to whether students had used the target vocabulary or expressed their ideas with simpler words. Finally, the data gathered from the conferences were transcribed and analyzed as to whether the selected students were able to define newly learned vocabulary in their own words.

   The three data collection instruments provided sufficient data to answer the two research questions

**Question 1**
 What is the impact of a read-aloud strategy on young children's vocabulary development?

**Observations**
The classroom observations revealed that children were able to explain target words when they were asked to, as it is shown in the following interaction between the teacher and one of her students during a read-aloud session:

Ms. J:  Que dit grand-père?
    *What does grandpa say?*

Zeina :  On ne 'zobéit' jamais à son grand-père.
    *We never 'sobey' our grandpa.*

Ms. J:  Oui, on dit on ne désobéit jamais à son grand-père.
Mais qu'est-ce ça veut dire ?
*Yes, we say we never disobey our grandpa.*
*But what does that mean?*

Zeina:  ça veut dire on fait ce que le grand-père dit.
*It means that we do what the grandpa says.*

Such interactions occurred while the teacher conducted the reading, pausing to ask questions and clarifying ambiguous points. The student was able to recall the meaning of the verb 'disobey' from previous sessions when the same word was introduced and then repeated throughout the whole week, hence, the importance of repeated readings and reviewing of vocabulary words for retention. Daily explanations of target words also allow students to provide the necessary word:

Ms J:  On a vu que Lucas a emporté le cochon. Ce cochon ne fait pas attention, comment l'appelle-t-on?
*We saw that Lucas kidnapped the pig. This pig doesn't pay attention. What do we call him?*

Nadine:  Imprudent.
*Reckless.*

Furthermore, the acquisition of vocabulary is fostered through reading related stories or stories encompassing similar characters. Students could recall adjectives from a previous story and attribute them to characters in the new one which meant that students synthesized information from the two stories to reach their answer: the word 'sentimental' was introduced in another story in the context that the wolf is sentimental since he feels good being with other animals and does not try to eat them.

Ms. N:  Vous vous rappeler de notre ami le loup dans l'autre conte?
*Do you remember our friend the wolf in the other story?*

Maya:  Oui, il est sentimental.
*Yes, he is sentimental.*

Ms. N :  Et pourquoi il n'est pas sentimental ici?
*Why isn't he sentimental here?*

Yara:  Parce qu'il aime les cochons.
*Because he likes the pigs.*

Jad:  Madame, il est un peu sentimental parce qu'il veut tuer le cochon et le manger.
*Miss, he is a bit sentimental because he wants to kill the pig and eat him up.*

Other interactions revealed that storybook reading gave students the opportunity to figure out the meaning of words on their own by relying on picture clues. Such opportunities help children build strategies that they can use when they engage in independent reading.

Ms. N :          "Antoine habite une maison gigantesque
                 Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire gigantesque ? Vous pouvez regarder l'image.
                 *Antoine lived in a gigantic house*
                 *What does gigantic mean? You can look at the picture.*

Several kids
 together
(after looking
at picture) :       ça veut dire grand.
                *It means big.*

Some children were also able to use their own definitions to illustrate certain words to their classmates.

Ms. N:         "Oh non, il jette des clous sur la route! "
               *"Oh no, he throws nails on the road!"*

Reine:          C'est quoi les clous?
               *What are the nails ?*

Ms. N :         Qui peut lui dire c'est quoi les clous ?
               *Who can tell her what the nails are?*

Ahmad:        Si on veut que quelque chose se répare, et le mur est cassé, on prend le
(using his       marteau pou rentrer les clous dans le mur.
hand as a      *If we want to fix something, and the wall is broken, we take a hammer*
hammer)       *to get the nails into the wall.*

Ahmad used one hand as a hammer, the other as a nail, and tried to pound the make-belief nail in the wall. Classroom observations provided adequate data about students' acquisition of vocabulary.

**Students' writings**
      The writing samples collected from the students addressed the first research question about the use of vocabulary. A first look at the students' writings conveyed a sense of satisfaction that the majority had used target words from the stories read aloud. After examining the samples and eliminating the ones that do not use the new words, the researchers found that for every story an average of 34 out of 53 students had used one of the target vocabulary words in their response journal every week. The others managed to compose a sentence that described their drawing, and their sentences included words they already knew. Even though these students did not include the target vocabulary words in their writing, they composed meaningful sentences that reflected an idea about the story and portrayed their favorite part. Furthermore, those who did not use the selected words in one of their response journals used them at other

times. Some students were moving across the two groups; those who used at least one new vocabulary word, and those who composed their idea using words they already knew.

The samples of students' writings revealed that all students used vocabulary in context, in meaningful and interesting ways. Some words were repeated in several pieces of writing. Other words and expressions were used more often. The repeated ones constituted the core of the read stories. The writings demanded much effort from children, since they had to execute several tasks to produce their sentences. Children had to think about the idea, mechanics of writing, and spelling. A few children were able to successfully use the new vocabulary in their writing.

**Conferences**

Conferences revealed important data about children's acquisition of vocabulary. The selected students had different results concerning defining the vocabulary words chosen from each story. Two of the high-achievers gave correct definitions to almost all the selected words (37 out of 38). Three average students had similar results. Two of them gave 33 correct definitions while the third one provided 34 correct ones. The two slow learners answered respectively 28 and 25 out of the 38 selected vocabulary words. The last groups' number of correct definitions was less than the other two groups, but it indicated that slow learners could also benefit from this read-aloud strategy. This third group took a longer time to retrieve and provide definitions for words. These students also needed guidance to answer the researchers' questions about the new vocabulary. They hesitated and spoke in a low voice. During the conferences, all students were defining words in context; they were relating most of the words to the story characters. Students who missed some definitions either gave a wrong definition, said that they did not know, or could not remember.

## Question 2
What is the impact of a read-aloud strategy on young children's comprehension skills?

**Observations**

The observations revealed much about the type of interactions occurring in the two classes. For example, the two teachers often posed questions that required learners to infer about the text.

Ms. J:      Que vont faire les cochons pour que le loup ne les mange pas?
            *What will the pigs do so that the wolf wouldn't eat them?*

Yara:       Ils vont faire de la musique.
            *They will play some music.*
Zeina :     Ils vont se cacher dans la maison.
            *They will hide in the house.*
Jad :       Peut-être ils ont construit une grande maison, ils ont fermé la porte à clé et le loup
            ne peut pas rentrer par la cheminée.
            *Maybe they have built a big house, they have locked the door, and the wolf*
            *cannot enter through the chimney.*
Hamzah :    Ils vont dire si tu nous manges on ne peut pas faire de la musique pour nos
            amis les cochons, si tu nous manges nos amis seront tristes.
            *They will say if you eat us we will not be able to play the music for our*
            *friends the pigs, if you eat us our friends will be sad.*

Ms J :      Est-ce qu'il va réussir à les manger ?
            *Will he be able to eat them?*
Nawal :     Non, parce qu'il est trop sentimental !
            *No, because he is very sentimental!*

Through the use of one question the teacher has succeeded to elicit four different responses from four students who predicted what will happen in the story. The interaction revealed how the students succeeded in giving reasonable hypotheses or plausible answers to an open-ended question.

Another subcategory of open-ended questions is *evaluations* which "requests or provides a judgment or state an individual's personal preference" (Reese, Cox, Harte, & McAnally, 2003, p.43). Evaluations took the form of asking students about what they liked the most about a certain part.

Ms. J:      Qu'est ce que vous avez aimé le plus dans cette partie du conte ?
            *What did you like the most in this part of the story?*

Rola:       Quand il est parti à la forêt.
            *When he went to the forest.*

Fadi:       Quand maman et papa et grand-mère et grand-père on dit au revoir.
            *When mom and dad and grandma and grandpa said goodbye.*

Tala:       Quand son grand-père lui a donné la montre.
            *When his grandpa gave him the watch.*

Even though such responses appear to be very simple in nature, they are in fact describing students' most preferred parts about the story after they evaluate different ideas.

Similar to evaluations is *opinions* that students are encouraged to give about characters' feelings and actions. This entails synthesizing and evaluating information in order to reach a final decision. Students provided their opinion about how characters in stories feel about each other.

Ms. N:      A votre avis, que pense Lucas à propos de Maurice ?
            *In your opinion, what does Lucas think about Maurice?*

Rami :      Il pense peut-être qu'il ne va pas inviter sa famille.
            *He thinks perhaps that he will not invite his family.*

Tala :      Il pense que peut-être il n'a pas grossi pour le manger.
            *He thinks that perhaps he didn't gain enough weight in order to eat him.*

Students freely expressed their point of view without any constraint or hesitation. Students felt that there was no one single correct answer; everything they said was accepted and acknowledged.

Personal experiences constitute the fourth sub-category which lead students to build strategies that facilitate their reading comprehension skills. Personal experiences "request or provide a connection between the child's experiences and the text" (Reese, Cox, Harte, &

McAnally, 2003, p.43). They help students relate their own life to the events in the story and become better able to recall the story events, the new vocabulary introduced in the course of the interaction. Children would easily recall the expression 'se sentir triste' (to feel sad) since they have related it to their own life.

Ms. J:        Qui va me rappeler pourquoi Antoine est triste?
               *Who can remind me why Antoine is sad?*

Omar:         Parce qu'il ne peut pas acheter la lune.
               *Because he cannot buy the moon.*

Ms. J:        Oui, c'est vrai. Maintenant vous allez me dire quand est-ce que vous vous sentez triste?
               *Yes, this is true. Now you will tell me when do you feel sad?*

Louna :       Je me sens triste quand mon frère prend mon jouet.
               *I feel sad when my brother takes my toys.*

Mazen:        Je me sens triste quand maman a marre.
               *I feel sad when my mom gets fed up.*

Ziad:         Je me sens triste quand papa ne m'achète pas un ballon.
               *I feel sad when dad does not buy me a balloon.*

Similar interactions help students build a two-way relationship between their own life and that of the story characters, share the characters' feelings and problems and identify with their mode of living.

The fifth sub-category is *background knowledge*. Learners are encouraged to use background or previously known information to contribute to the classroom discussions.

Ms. J:        Que préfère-tu que ta maison s'envole comme la maison de Clarisse ou bien qu'elle reste à sa place ?
               *What do you prefer, that your house flies away like Clarisse's house or that it stays in its place?*

Samer:        Je préfère que ma maison s'envole pour regarder le ciel
               *I prefer that my house flies away so that I look at the sky.*

Rania:        Moi, pour aller au ciel.
               *Me, to go to the sky.*

Ms. J:        Si vous arrivez au ciel est ce que vous pouvez toucher quelque chose là-bas ?
               *If you reach the sky can you touch anything there?*

Ahmad:        Les nuages.
               *The clouds.*

Ms. J:        Est-ce qu'on peut toucher les nuages et la lune?
              *Can we touch the clouds and the moon?*

Ahmad:        Oui, avec la fusée on peut monter à la lune mais on ne peut pas la toucher.
              *Yes, with the rocket we can reach the moon, but we cannot touch it.*

        The teacher succeeded to scaffold students' thinking and make them relate the text to already known information. She provided students with multiple opportunities to employ their background knowledge when discussing text, which is a strategy employed by older students to construct meaning and comprehend any given text.
        The last sub-category is *debates* through which students participate in discussions without the help of the teacher. In one of the read- aloud sessions, students engaged in a two-way debate about the existence of a gigantic hen:

Ms. N:        On a vu le mot gigantesque, qui a vu quelque chose de gigantesque?
              *We saw the word gigantic, who has ever seen something gigantic?*

Hadi:         Moi, j'ai vu une poule gigantesque.
              *Me, I saw a gigantic hen.*

Jana:         Il rigole.
              *He is kidding.*

Ms. N:        Non, il ne rigole pas.
              *No, he is not kidding.*

Hadi:         Tu n'as pas vu la poule dans Dora? Elle est gigantesque!
              *Haven't you seen the hen in Dora? It  is  gigantic!*

Jana:         Si, je l'ai vu, c'est la poule rouge, mais elle n'existe pas!
              *Yes, I have seen it, it's the red hen, but it does not exist!*

Hadi:         A la télé de Dora.
              *On TV, Dora's show*.

Jana :        Oui à la télé, mais ça n'existe pas! Les poules ici elles sont petites, mais à la télé il
              y a des poules gigantesques.
              *Yes on TV, but they don't exist! The hens here are small, but on TV there are
              gigantic hens.*

        In this discussion, Hadi and Jana were both trying to show their own point of view to be the most adequate. Jana was certain that gigantic hens do not exist in reality, and that they only exist on TV or in stories. Based on such interactions, we can conclude that young children are building the notion of real and make-believe.
         Furthermore, students engaged in talk during the read-aloud sessions and employed meaningful sentences in their second language. Such significant interactions lead children to

develop reading strategies and construct meaning through analysis and synthesis which are the necessary tools for reading comprehension.

**Students' writings**

Students' writing showed that the majority composed a sentence that described a major or a key event in every story. Few students wrote about minor events:

Student 1 –     La grenmère di a luca tu é le solèi de ma vi.
                *The grandma says to luca you are the sun of my life.*

Writing samples that reflect students' understanding of major events in the stories were several:

Student 1-     Le van fonse sur la fenètre et la fenètre ecclate.
               *The wind dashes on the window and the window breaks up.*

Student 2-     Le von a désidé de dérasiné la méson.
               *The wind has decided to uproot the house.*

Sorting writing samples into two piles, sentences depicting major events and sentences describing minor ones revealed the following. In every class, an average of 21 out of 26 and 27 students wrote about a major event in the story, i.e., an average of 42 out of 53 students was aware of at least one major event in the story. Events are major or minor depending on how much they affected the story line. In the previous three samples, the wind that dashed through the window and broke it, and the wind that uprooted the house were the cause of all the subsequent events in the story *La Tempête* (The Wind).

## Discussion

In this case study, the researchers explored whether reading storybooks aloud improves young children's vocabulary. Findings are similar to those found by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) who indicate that young children's listening and speaking abilities are more developed than their reading and writing and that children can easily develop their vocabulary through listening to stories. The gains in vocabulary were detected through the three instruments used to collect data.  Students were able to define words and guess the appropriate word when a definition was provided. They used the learnt adjectives to describe characters in the new stories and the new words in their answers to teacher's questions. Moreover, students figured out the meaning of unfamiliar words using the strategy of employing picture and context clues. Such opportunities would allow students to apply the same techniques to define words on their own when they would engage in independent reading at a later stage.  Another finding was that students acquired words through repeated exposure. This is similar to findings of Elley (1989), and Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley (1996).  Teachers can increase vocabulary acquisition when they explain unfamiliar words during storybook reading. It is also similar to Biemiller's (2004) findings that the amount of vocabulary kindergarten children possess is a great predictor of reading comprehension in the primary years, hence, the importance of this study's findings about students' acquisition of vocabulary.

In addition, findings provided insight about the type of questioning that helps students construct meaning from text and learn about strategies that help them comprehend texts. The question/response technique is a way to enhance students' "meaning-making and creative

thinking" (Neuman & Roskos, 1998, p. 177). Furthermore, Cooper and Kiger (2003) add that questions and prompts employed during the interactions when reading stories aloud would connect ideas together and build relations among them. The mostly used questions during the read-aloud sessions were open-ended questions to encourage imagination and not limit students' answers. Beck at al. (2002) stress that talking about text improves comprehension by answering different open-ended questions and makes children think about the ideas in the story, talk about them, and then connect them together.

The several types or sub-categories of responses led students to analyze and synthesize data drawn from the storybooks. Findings also show that inferences based on predictions allowed students to expect probable story events and think of multiple and possible answers for one single question without any concern about failing to give the correct answer to a knowledge question. Evaluations at the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy were clear in students' statements of preferences about whatever they encountered in the stories. Students' opinions were very much similar to evaluations as students think about different events and synthesize them to reach a final decision. Personal experiences facilitated making connections between students' lives and story events and helped remember the vocabulary encountered. This idea is congruent with Cooper and Kiger's (2003) that students learn more when they connect new learning to their own lives and background knowledge to construct meaning from text. Debates were also employed by students though much less than other types of responses. Debates are usually used by older students to offer their divergent points of view about a certain topic. Read-aloud discussions provided children with such language use opportunities. These various opportunities to use language would no doubt contribute to second language development, and build the necessary skills required to comprehend texts. This idea is congruent with Neuman and Roskos's (1998) that "it is critical that we teach children not only the technical skills of literacy, but also how to use these tools to better their thinking and reasoning" (p. 14).

The conferences conducted in the tenth week of the study, directly after listening to and discussing the last story, and after eight weeks from listening to the first story, offered data about students' ability to recall the definitions of the target words. Moreover, they revealed that when students defined the words, they related them to the story characters. Along the same lines, the number of correct definitions was similar for the first two high achievers as they defined almost all the words correctly. The average students had similar numbers of correct definitions and missed only a few. Furthermore, results indicate that students who show early signs of reading and writing difficulties can also benefit from a read-aloud strategy in vocabulary development. Consequently, these children must be exposed to stories to enrich their vocabulary. Beck et al. (2002) point out that educators "certainly must not hold back adding vocabulary to children's repertoires until their word recognition becomes adequate" (p. 48).

Conferences required students to figure out the meaning on their own, and think of appropriate words to accomplish this task. This showed that children at a young age are able to recall the definitions of words they encounter through the reading aloud of storybooks.

Data analysis also indicated that an average of 34 out of the 53 participants used one of the new vocabulary words each time they composed a written response about the stories they listened to. The writing samples showed that the students, who did not employ one of the words at a certain time, did include it in another written response. Similarly, some of the words were found to be used by several students, some by only a few, and others were not used at all in students' written responses.

Finally, the task of writing a response for each story was hard for these young children. It demanded multiple tasks in addition to thinking about how to employ the words they have in an appropriate context. Robb (2003) maintains that "for children drawing pictures, scribble writing, printing letters and/or numbers, writing words using spelling inventions and print in their room is hard work because as they draw and write, they must also hold mental images and words in their memory" (p.134). In addition, the examination of the written responses conveyed evidence about students' comprehension of major events and ideas of the stories read aloud. The majority could compose sentences portraying major events in the five stories, demonstrating a great ability to reflect about ideas before composing. Usually, linking reading and writing develops students' critical thinking (Cooper & Kiger, 2003). Students wrote a main idea in each story using the vocabulary words taught earlier during the reading. Others were able to share important ideas using words from their own repertoires. This explains the exceeding number of writing samples depicting major events and including the use of the new vocabulary.

Finally, the findings revealed the impact of a read-aloud strategy on vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension for young children which will hopefully allow them to grow as independent learners and build strategies to deduce or acquire the meaning of new words when they read independently. Students will thus expand the number of words they can employ when they speak and write (Cooper & Kiger, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

The researchers have examined one of the several reading strategies used with students in schools. The read-aloud strategy could be employed with students of all ages in schools and at homes. Its importance lies in the multiple benefits offered to children.

*Recommendations*

This study has several implications for educators of young children especially those learning a second language. Thus, it is recommended that reading stories aloud be conducted on daily basis to become a main activity in a kindergarten curriculum. Furthermore, teachers need to be aware of the appropriate ways to implement such a strategy, plan for each read-aloud session, decide on the vocabulary to be introduced, and think about ways to engage children in discussions of the text. In fact, reading books to children has multiple rewards, so teachers need to carefully select the books to be read, explain difficult words or scaffold children to figure out the meanings of words by themselves. Teachers must also ask challenging questions to trigger students' thinking and lead them to construct meaning through analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating ideas with the teacher's support.

This case study has successfully employed instruments other than those in the reviewed studies which examine the effects of reading storybooks on the development of vocabulary and comprehension. Similar studies have used multiple-choice tests to collect data, while this research employed observations, conferences with students and students' written responses. This study has also selected a sample of second language learners of French while similar research studied the effect of reading storybooks aloud on native-language speakers.

*Limitations*

The study addressed the two research questions, but some limitations could be detected. The duration of the study should have been longer than 10 weeks in order to observe more classroom interactions and collect more data about the types of responses. Furthermore, this study does not check the long term effects of the read-aloud strategy in the primary grades; its results are confined to a limited period of time. Another limitation is the lack of comparison data

against which to judge whether it is the read aloud approach which si resulting in the observed processes of teaching and learning.  Furthermore, the researchers are aware that although they believe that the findings are the characteristic of using the read-aloud strategy in the classroom, further research is yet needed to make sure that using more 'traditional' methods will not lead to the same results.

## **Implications**

Special attention must be given to storybook reading. Neuman and Roskos (1998) hold that enjoying and understanding of literature are not inborn skills.  Children build such strategies through "skillful interactions with good literature" (p. 176).  Storybooks must be a main component of kindergarten curricula along with other reading and writing strategies. This strategy must also be carried out in the primary grades to ensure constant gains in vocabulary and constant students' engagement in critical and logical thinking.

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