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Using the Think Aloud Method in Teaching Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

There are many EFL students who still find learning English is difficult especially in comprehending the text passages being read. The Think Aloud Method is known to be one of the methods that are able to assist language learners in improving their EFL reading comprehension. The aim of this study was to find out whether students' reading comprehension, particularly in identifying the main idea, supporting details, references, making inferences and interpreting vocabulary, improve after the implementation of this method in the teaching and learning process. The sample was the eighth grade students of a junior high school in Banda Aceh. This study employed a one group pre-test and post-test design. The findings showed that the mean score from the pre-test was 38 while from the post-test was 79. The critical value from t-table was 0.05, while the t-test level of significance was 1.71, so the t-test value was higher than the critical value of t-table ($1.71 > 0.05$). The reading aspects that improved most were detailed information, main idea and understanding inferences. The two other aspects, vocabulary and finding references also improved, but not as much as the other three aspects. Thus the hypothesis was accepted that the use of this method could significantly improve the students' reading comprehension at the school under study, especially in comprehending meaning in a descriptive text. In conclusion, Think Aloud can be used to improve the ability of eighth grade students in EFL reading comprehension.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, teaching reading, Think Aloud Method, EFL students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a source of knowledge to gain knowledge as an input from the learning process. [Pang et al. \(2003, p. 6\)](#) state that reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity which involves the processes of word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to spoken language. This means that reading is not passive, as it involves the reader in active interaction with what is presented in the text in order to make sense of what is written. Reading comprehension deals with interactive strategies when the students must use their brains and the text for making meaning.

Broadly speaking, there are many EFL students who still find learning English is difficult especially the comprehension of passages being read. Co-operative learning is one solution to help students with reading comprehension difficulties. According to [Macpherson \(2007, p. 1\)](#), co-operative learning is a key strategy for students because it has potential to enhance learning amongst students. Co-operative learning itself has been declared as a method of teaching English as a foreign language that can help students and teachers build up an intimate learning and social atmosphere in the classroom. This strategy is expected to give alternatives when dealing with student problems in reading comprehension and to overcome boredom in reading class activities. The Think Aloud Method can be used in order to help solve students' problems in reading comprehension. This research focuses on the improvement of student's reading ability and skills by using the Think Aloud Method. The framework of this method was promoted by [Kimbell-Lopez and Cummins \(2010\)](#) in order to help students in sharing their ideas in group work and to build their confidence, and to encourage them to develop confidence in large classes.

Based on preliminary research conducted for this study, it was found that the results from reading comprehension tests given to grade eight students at SMPN 17 Banda Aceh were still far from satisfactory; the students still faced a number of problems in learning reading comprehension skills. Most of the students still do not know how to identify the main aspects of reading comprehension. Some of the factors that caused their poor reading ability were that it was difficult for them to determine (1) the main idea and (2) the supporting details in each paragraph, and also how to (3) draw implicit conclusions, i.e. inferences, (4) find appropriate references, and (5) to understand the text because of their limited vocabulary. Nevertheless, reading problems is basically faced by all EFL learners in Indonesia ([Erdiana et al., 2017](#); [Gani et al., 2016](#); [Komariah et al., 2015](#); [Sahardin et al., 2015](#); [Yusuf, et al., 2016](#)).

Hence, the Think Aloud Method was chosen for this research as it was believed to help the student readers to comprehend their EFL texts more easily. According to [Oster \(2001, p. 64\)](#) Think Aloud is a method in which students verbalize their thoughts as they read. In Think Aloud, students are encouraged to be fully aware of the differences between reading words and comprehending the texts by uttering what they think about the text. Through verbalization, students can monitor their thinking as they read and improve comprehension. This meta-cognition awareness process is important part of learning since it enables students to know how well they understand the text which by then they can adjust their strategies to excel.

In that sense, Think Aloud is appropriate for this study because through this method the students can monitor their comprehension processes. Think Aloud is one of the co-operative learning methods for learning EFL material. The students were divided

into small groups with 4 or 5 students. Then, the teacher provided the materials and asked the students to read and report their thoughts while reading. The teacher then asked the students what they know about the reading materials and helped them when they had trouble. This method can increase the student co-operation and communication skills in the groups and develop instructional opportunities. It not only increases their interactions but also their motivation to find the answer to the questions in their discussions. To summarise, the research question for this study was:

- Can the use of the Think Aloud Method significantly improve the reading comprehension of EFL eighth grade students?

Meanwhile, the hypotheses for this study are:

- Alternative hypothesis (H_a): The Think Aloud method can improve the students' reading comprehension.
- Null hypothesis (H_o): The Think Aloud method cannot improve the students' reading comprehension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading Comprehension

Reading is an active skill. Grellet (2010, p. 8) states that there are some meta-cognitive process happen during reading such as guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions. In line with that, Grellet (2010, p. 7) states that "reading is a constant process of guessing and what one brings to the text is often more important than what is found in it". The explanation above means that students do not only read the sentences of the text, but they have to get some clues or idea to comprehend the meaning of the text by relating their background knowledge with new words or information in the text. Therefore, the mastery of reading comprehension is the main point which can measure whether the students can be successful or not in learning language, particularly English.

Patel and Jain (2008, p. 113) state that reading is an important activity in our daily life to update our knowledge. Reading is important for academic success; by reading, one does not only to get new information but also combining the previous one and therefore extending knowledge. According to McNamara (2007, p. 4), comprehension is not always easy to achieve, readers sometimes need to slow down the reading to get meaning. Cognitive strategies are particularly important when there is a breakdown at any level of comprehension. Therefore, a successful reader is the one who is determined to use all effort and takes time to understand the difficult part of the text.

2.2 Teaching Reading

Alyousef (2005, p. 143) says that in teaching reading, contemporary reading tasks, involve three-phase procedures: pre-, while-, and last- reading stages. The pre-reading stage helps in activating the relevant schema. For example, the teacher can ask students questions that arouse their interest while previewing the text. The aim of while- reading stage (or interactive process) is to develop students' ability in tackling the text by developing their linguistic and schematic knowledge. The last-reading includes

activities, which enhance learning comprehension using exercises, close exercises, cut-up sentences, and comprehension questions.

The aim of teaching reading in English language classroom is to develop students' skill that they can read English text effectively and efficiently. For the purpose, readers should know exactly the purpose of reading before they start. Effective and efficient reading is always purposeful and tends to focus mainly on the purpose of the activity. Then the purpose of reading is implemented into the development of different reading techniques: scanning, skimming, mapping, jigsaw, etc. These can be real when the students read and interact with various types of texts, i.e. functional and monologue texts.

In teaching reading, a technique is necessary for the students particularly before reading to stimulate their interest and also their background knowledge to make them comprehend the text easier. Students could use reading technique to make their reading efficient and effective. Pre-questioning as reading technique is possible to be applied by the junior high school students in their reading, e.g. students are able to identify and look for the specific information in functional texts, especially descriptive text.

2.3 Think Aloud Method

Pressley et al. (1992), in McKeown and Gentilucci (2007, p. 1) state that Think Aloud acts as a bridge that connect teacher and students to work together to construct understandings of text. Through the interactions that think aloud promotes, students can gain better understanding of the texts. Afflerbach and Johnston (1984) as cited by McKeown and Gentilucci (2007) claim that Think Aloud functions as a way of measuring the cognitive reading process and as a metacognitive tool to monitor comprehension. According to Oster (2001), Think Aloud is defined as a method in which students verbalize their thoughts as they read. In Think Aloud students are encouraged to recognize the differences between reading the words and comprehending the text by talking aloud about what they are thinking. This meta-cognition awareness; thinking about thinking, is a crucial component of learning because it enables learners to assess their level of comprehension and adjust their strategies for greater success.

Jahandar et al. (2012) say that using the Think Aloud Method in teaching EFL reading comprehension will enable students to raise their awareness of becoming strategic readers. Also for teachers, using the Think Aloud Method will provide information about the needs of individual students and will enable them to provide appropriate instruction for students learning reading to improve their comprehension. Jahandar et al. (2012) also add that while joining in Think Aloud exercises, students will gain insight into the complexities of reading, and hence expand their understanding of what it means to become a good reader. Cassanave (1988) claims that by applying think aloud strategy, students are able to improve their reading quality by focusing on the main points and ask questions related to main ideas in the text rather than less important details.

Thus, this method is useful because students are verbalizing all their thoughts in order to create understanding of the reading texts. Therefore, as the students think aloud, they learn how to learn, and they develop into reflective, meta-cognitive, independent learners, an invaluable step in helping students understand that learning requires effort and is often not easy. The Think Aloud is also used to model comprehension processes such as making predictions, creating images, linking

information in a text with prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and overcoming problems with word recognition or comprehension.

3. METHOD

The research design used is quantitative research in for this study. Arikunto (2010, p. 124) states that quantitative research is a kind of research which requires the use of numbers, ranging from data collection, data interpretation and the appearance of the results. This is concerned with finding the improvement in students' EFL reading comprehension by using the Think Aloud Method. Moreover, the researchers used a one group pre-test – post-test design for this study. Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 148) state that “in an experimental study conducted with a single group for study without a comparative group, participants are given a pre-test to ensure comparability of the participant groups prior to the treatment and a post-test to measure the effects of the treatment”. The aim of this study was not to compare between two methods but only to prove the results from the method used in the study. This is called a one group pre-test – post-test design because two tests were administered to only one group.

Following Springer (2010, p. 30), the sample was selected by random sampling. The sample for this study was Class VIII-5 with 27 students. To collect the data for this study, tests were used. They were in the form of an essay to be read with 10 questions to follow. To ensure content validity, the learning materials and the items for the tests were taken from three books: *English in Focus for Grade VIII* (Wardiman et al., 2008), *PG PR Bahasa Inggris Kelas VII* (Kemendikbud, 2014) and *English on Sky, Book VIII* (Mukarto et al., 2007). The data from the pre-test and post-test were analysed by using statistics to get the results.

Treatments were done in three meetings. In each meeting, the third researcher taught the class by following these steps of Think Aloud Method (http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/think_alouds):

- She began by reading a text and along the way; she clarified and explained new vocabulary and unfamiliar sentence construction to the students.
- Then, after reading the text, she established some questions to encourage thinking aloud, by asking questions for the students to answer by themselves: What do I know about this topic? What will I learn about this topic? Do I understand what I just read? Do I have a clear picture in my head about this information? What more can I do to understand this? What were the most important points in this reading? What new information did I learn? How does it fit in with what I already know?
- She gave the students some time to answer them, and gave feedback to students who needed assistance.
- After that, she re-read some selected passages aloud while the students read the same text silently. At certain points, she stopped and asked the students to think aloud of the answers to some of her questions.
- During the teaching and learning process, she showed how good readers monitor their understanding by re-reading a sentence, reading ahead to clarify, and looking for context clues.
- Students then learn to provide answers verbally to the questions as the teacher directs the think-aloud.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

A pre-test was given to the students at the start of the first meeting before the Think Aloud method was implemented. Figure 1 shows the scores from the pre-test.

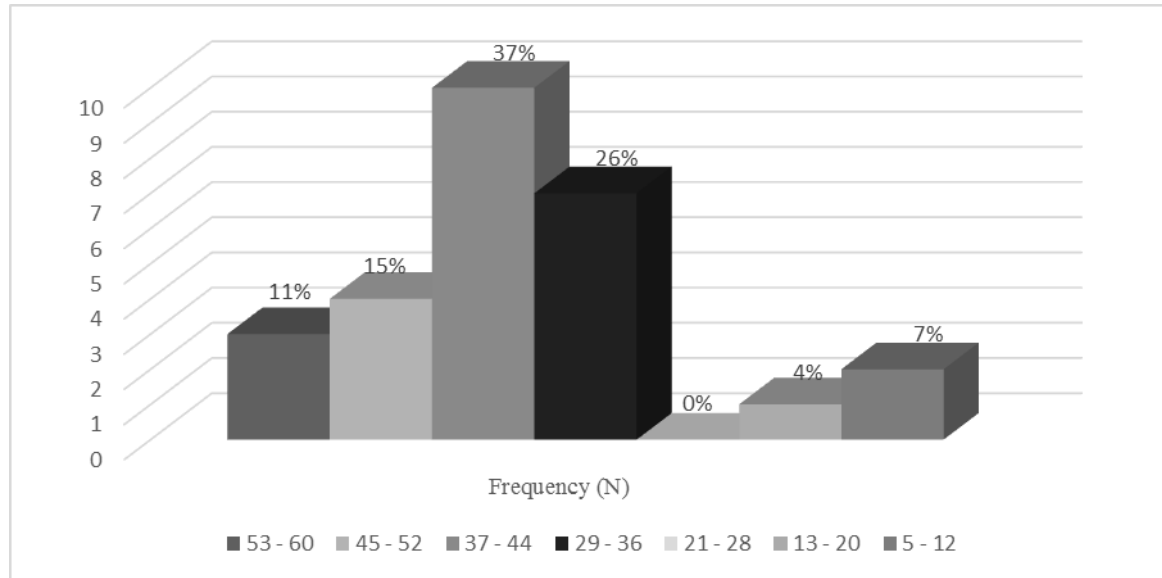


Figure 1. The students' pre-test scores.

Figure 1 shows that the students had low scores in reading comprehension. From Figure 1, two students got 10 (the lowest score), one student got 20, seven students got 30, ten students got 40, four students got 50 and three students got 60 (the highest score). Meanwhile, the minimum criteria score (or KKM) for EFL reading comprehension at SMPN 17 Banda Aceh was 80; so not one student achieved passing grade, i.e. the students' reading comprehension was low at the start. Next, the Think Aloud method was applied for the next three meetings, then the post-test was given to the students to re-measure their ability and to find out what improvement they had made by comparing the results of the post-test with those from the pre-test. Figure 2, which follow, shows the post-test scores.

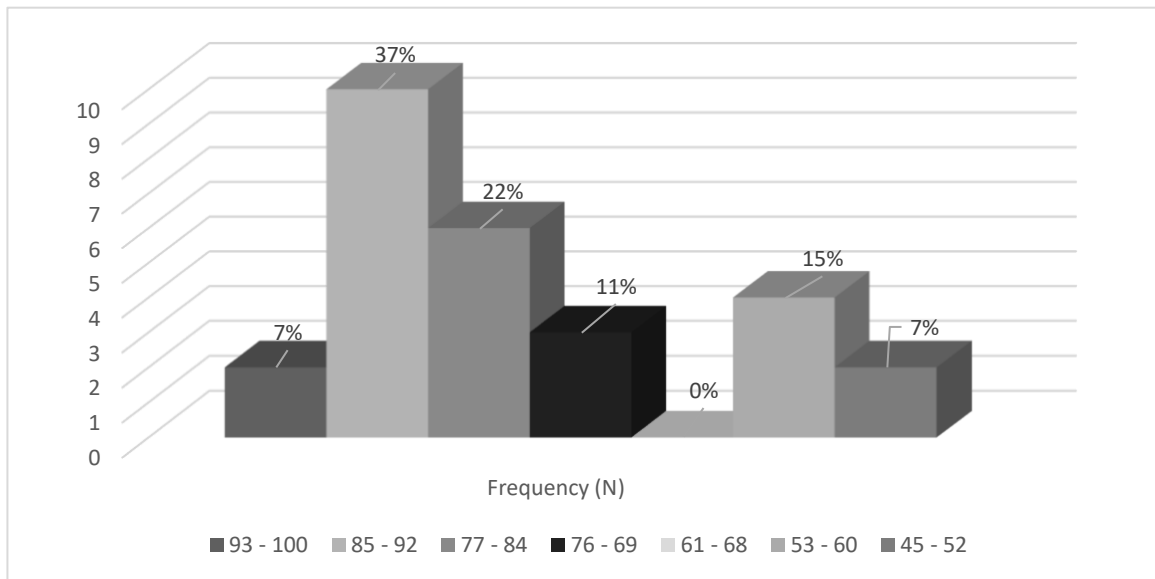


Figure 2. The students' post-test scores.

Figure 3 below presents the results for each skill from the students' pre-tests and post-tests.

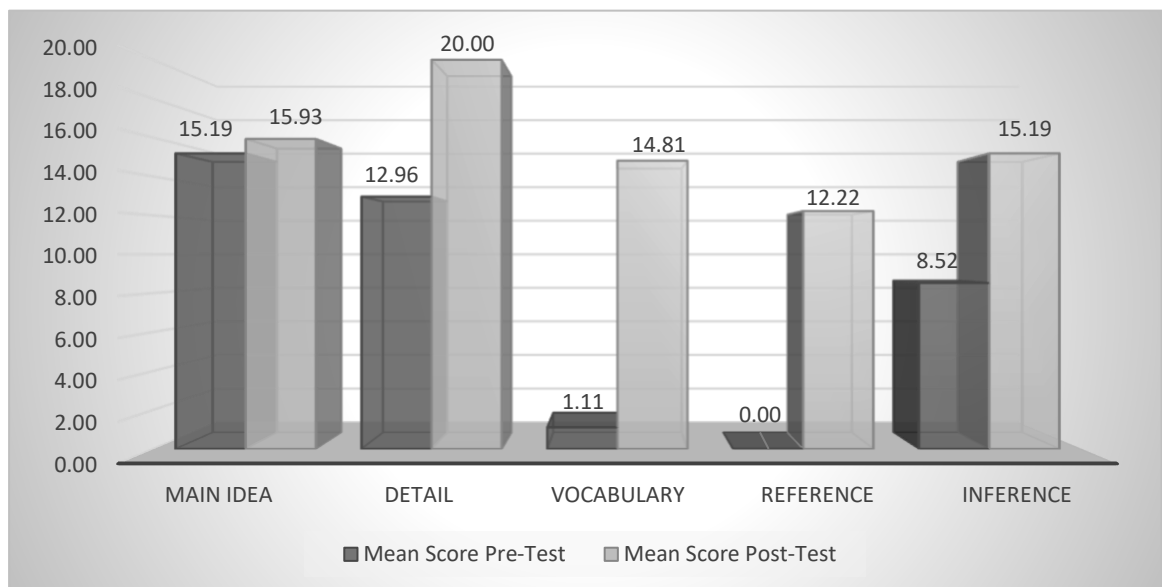


Figure 3. The mean scores for each aspect of reading comprehension.

The post-test results were much better than those from the pre-test. About 18 students reached the KMM showing that the treatment improved their reading comprehension. The mean score of the pre-test was 38 and the mean score of the post-test was 79; while the median score in the pre-test was 40 and the median in the post-test was 80.

There were upward movements in the mean score for each aspect of reading comprehension. While the average score for the main idea increased only slightly from 15 to 16, for detailed information, the average score increased from 13 to 20 in the post-test. For inferences, the average score increased from a low of nine in the pre-test to 15

in the post-test. While the average score for references increased from zero in the pre-test to 12 in the post-test: And the biggest increase in scores was in vocabulary with only one in the pre-test increasing to 15 in the post-test. Thus there was improvement in the performance in all aspects of the EFL reading comprehension by the students using the Think Aloud method.

In proving the hypothesis, first, the mean score of the pre-test and post-test were calculated, after that the mean score was substituted into the t-test formula where it was found that the t-score was 4.754. The t-score was higher than the t-table ($t_s > t_t$), ($t_s = 4.754 > t_t = 2.056$). Hence the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted and the null hypothesis (H_o) was rejected. This indicated that the Think Aloud method significantly improved the students' reading comprehension. In conclusion, there was an improvement in the student's EFL reading comprehension after teaching-learning to use the Think Aloud Method.

4.2 Discussion

From the five aspects of reading comprehension, vocabulary had the highest increase, while the lowest increase was in the main idea. The purpose of the Think Aloud Method is to make students comprehend the texts better, finding the main idea, the detailed information, the inferences, the references and understanding the vocabulary, all increased. According to [Huang \(2010, p. 149\)](#), the Think Aloud method helps improve five functions in learning EFL, via: (1) practicing pronunciation, (2) improving oral language, (3) getting deeper understanding, (4) strengthening knowledge of EFL, and (5) improving the classroom atmosphere. Principally, by applying this technique, students were taught to listen to the English text as much as possible so they became more familiar and were able to read the English texts with correct pronunciation as demonstrated by their teacher. Then, the students were asked to comprehend the text deeper; to find the main idea as the main point of the text to catch the information. They also learnt to note the detailed information in the text, plus learning how to find the references, how to make inferences and how to guess the meaning of new vocabulary. From this study, the Think Aloud Method had a positive effect for the students in improving their reading comprehension, they were able to combine their experiences during their lessons, so it motivated the students who enjoyed the learning process more and this improved their comprehension of the texts. In addition, the results from this research are reinforced by the previous results from [Charters \(2003\)](#), [Jahandar et al. \(2012\)](#), [McKeown and Gentilucci \(2007\)](#), and [Oster \(2001\)](#) who also found that this method had a positive effect to improve the reading comprehension of students.

Previous studies have focused on observation of the teachers' approach when teaching reading comprehension plus the instructional techniques and the students' responses; but in this study, the focus was to examine the five aspects of reading comprehension, namely the main idea, detailed information, references, inferences and the meaning of vocabulary. So, the researchers were able to determine what aspects greatly improved when the Think Aloud method was used in the learning processes. As we know, students with different interests in learning can improve their understanding in reading by using a proper method and improving motivation. In short, the Think Aloud Method not only makes learning reading more interesting, but it also improves the students' ability to comprehend the text. Some strengths of applying this method

were that the students enjoyed the teaching-learning processes more so that conditions in the class became more alive and active. This method is interesting and easy to be applied in the teaching-learning processes.

5. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to find out whether the Think Aloud Method could improve the reading comprehension abilities of Grade VIII students at SMPN 17 in Banda Aceh. The results showed that the use of this method could significantly improve the students' achievements in the five aspects of EFL reading comprehension namely: identifying (i) the main idea, (ii) the supporting details, (iii) identifying references, (iv) making inferences, and (v) interpreting vocabulary. After the students learnt how to use this method, their results in the post-test were significantly higher than in the pre-test especially in all five aspects of the reading comprehension aspects that most students at junior high schools face much difficulty with. Additionally, the median post-test score of 80 was equal to the KKM and was much higher than the pre-test median score of 40, which meant that the students' reading comprehension had markedly increased. In addition, at-test showed that the difference in the scores between the pre-test and the post-test was significant. Therefore, it is concluded that there was a significant improvement in the students' EFL reading comprehension when they learnt how to use the Think Aloud Method.

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