

SCAFFOLDING STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION WITH THINK-ALOUD STRATEGY

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Abstract

Think aloud strategy or the “sharing the reading secrets” is an important instructional scaffold for teaching higher level cognitive strategies. Think aloud can be used for clarifying difficult statements or concepts; for summarizing important information; and for thinking ahead. In TEFL context, think aloud can be used as an effective strategy for scaffolding reading comprehension. However, different from the case in English as first language, in TEFL context, the effectiveness of think aloud in scaffolding reading comprehension is still sparsely addressed. The present study tries to investigate the effectiveness of using think-aloud instructional scaffolding in teaching reading to the first year students of a Senior High School in Indonesia. The study employs quantitative method, with quasi experimental design called non-equivalent control group. The data are obtained from pretest, posttest and questionnaire, and are were analyzed using t-test, *eta squared*, and ANOVA. In addition, qualitative interview is used to triangulate the data and elaborate the results. The findings reveal that despite some limitations, the teaching program is successful. Started from the similar level in pretest ($t = 0.107$, $df 60$, $p = 0.01$), the experimental group perform better on reading comprehension than the control group ($t = 4.38$, $df 60$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that think-aloud improves students' reading comprehension better than the standard teaching strategy. The strength of association (η^2) is 0.242 which means that 24% of the variability in this sample could be accounted for by the choice of think-aloud teaching strategy. The improvement of experimental group's reading

comprehension is on both literal and inferential question types ($t= 0.692, df 30, p = 0.01$). It is also found that there is no significant difference on students' reading comprehension in narrative, descriptive, and news item ($F= 0.710, df 2/80, p = 0.01$) showing that think-aloud can be appropriately applied in those three text types. The questionnaire addressed to the experimental group also shows that the respondents use reading strategies better after the implementation of think-aloud ($t = 21.068, df 30, p= 0.01$). The *eta squared* is 0.93, revealing that 93% of the variability in this sample could be accounted for by the choice of think-aloud strategy.

Key words: *literal and inferential question, narrative, descriptive, and news item, reading comprehension, reading strategy, scaffolding, think-aloud,*

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1. Introduction

Reading is worth-noted for English learners. Harmer (2007: 99) states that it is fruitful not only for careers, study, and pleasure, but also for language acquisition. He further states that reading provides good model for English writing, provides opportunities to study vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation, and demonstrates the way to construct sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts. Nagy, Herman and Anderson (in Grabe and Stoller, 2002) describe its worth in language acquisition in details. If fifth-grade students read about a million words in the course of a year (30 minutes per day, @ 100 wpm), they are likely to encounter about 21,000 unknown words or approximately two percent of total words read. In relation to the comprehension, Grabe and Stoller (2002) state that academic success depends on the students' ability in comprehending the language in the texts.

In fact, a research on reading skill in Indonesia has revealed that the students' skills particularly in reading comprehension are still far from satisfactory. Sixty nine percent (69%) of 15-year-old Indonesian students have internationally worst reading performance (*Media Indonesia*, 2003). Referring to the similar discussion, it is reported in *Kompas*, a daily newspaper, (2003) that around 37.6% of 15-year-old students are merely able to read the texts without understanding the meaning carried by the text. Only 24.8% out of them are able to correlate the texts with their prior knowledge. It means that many students still have insufficient ability to comprehend the texts.

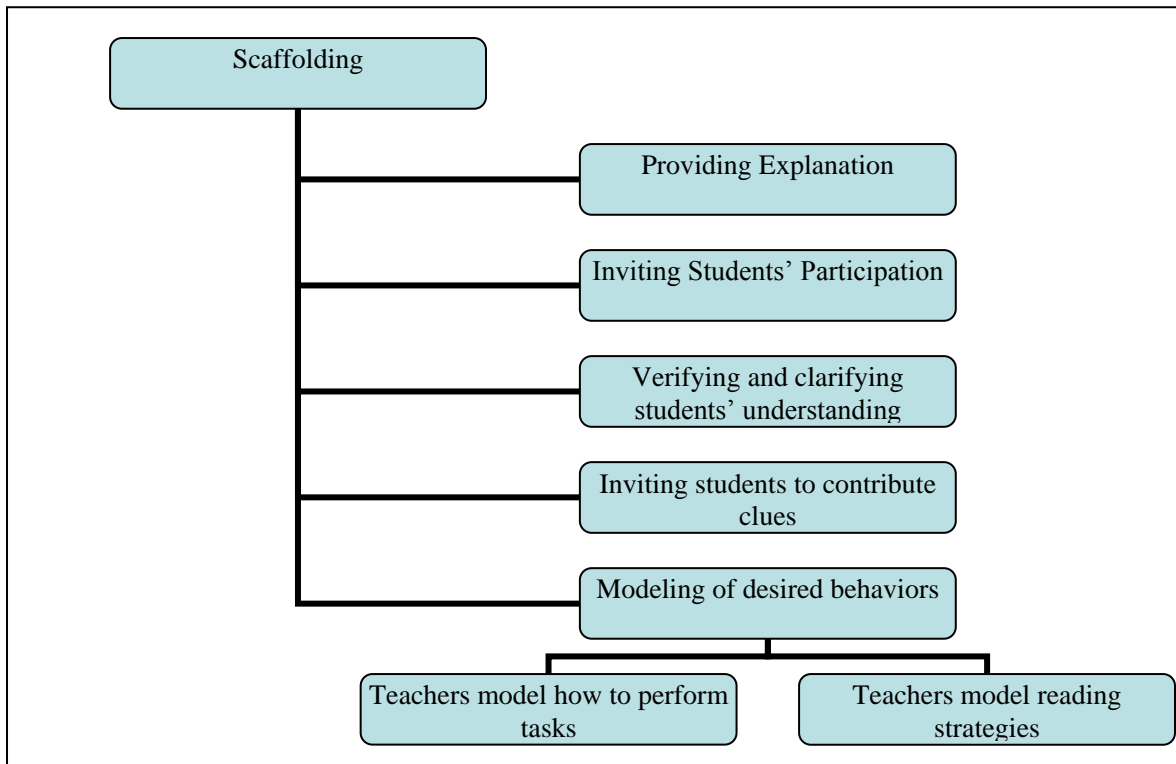
Students' inability to comprehend texts is also seen in some Senior High School students in Indonesia, where most first year students still encounter difficulty in dealing with reading English texts. They, therefore, need appropriate instruction from the teachers. In this case, teachers should play a role as an additional power to gear students' ability in improving their reading ability. They should assist the students from the very beginning level. They should help students to move toward a new skills, concept, or level of understanding by considering their current ability. They are responsible to initiate each new step of learning, building on what students currently able to do alone. It is a *scaffolding*.

Scaffolding is perceived as the strategy used by the teachers to facilitate learners' transition from assisted to independent performance (Cooper, 2000:33-34; Gibbons, 2002). The philosophy underpinning this approach is substantially explained in the writing of Brunner built from the works of Piaget and Vygotsky (Pinter, 2006: 12). Scaffolding is used to bridge between students' independent and supported operating levels. In order to help learners to understand the text and to focus on meaning, teachers, according to Tierney & Readence (2000 quoted by Dunston & Headley in Guzzeti, 2002:655), can scaffold learners to read by using think-aloud. It is basically applied in two ways: as an informal assessment of students' reading strategies or comprehension and as a teaching strategy aimed at assisting readers of all ages in developing the essential comprehension self-monitoring skills necessary for effective learning.

Scaffolding is recommended to be done in five ways: offering explanations, inviting students' participation, verifying and clarifying students' understanding, inviting students to contribute clues and modeling of desired behaviors suggested by Roehler and Cantlon in Hogan and Pressley (1997: 17-30). The latest, modeling, can be done, for example, when the teachers model the students how to do tasks or when the teachers model how to use certain strategies. Think-aloud is a strategy in which teachers formerly make their thinking explicit by verbalizing their thoughts while reading orally to model the process of comprehension (Harris

& Hodges in Block & Israel, 2004; Vacca & Vacca, 1999: 53) and model their own reading strategies to their students (Wilhelm, 1990).

Thus, it is one of the strategies to scaffold students' reading comprehension. There are some reasons why think-aloud strategy is good for scaffolding students' reading comprehension. First, the students can learn to control or monitor their own comprehension. Tankersley (2003: 90), about this, says that one of the factors affecting readers' comprehension is their ability to exercise metacognitive control over the content being read or in other words, their ability to monitor and reflect on his or her own level of understanding while reading. Second, the students can learn reading strategies. Knowledge of strategies is important to enhance students' ability to select thinking processes to overcome comprehension difficulties while they read (Block & Isreal, 2004; Block, 2004 in Block & Israel, 2004; Oster, 2001). Third, it increases the level of students' interest and participation (Oster, 2001). Forth, it can be used as a valuable tool to assess students' comprehension in the classroom (Block & Israel, 2004; Block, 2004 in Block & Israel, 2004; Oster, 2001). It is seen that think-aloud is not only good for teaching but at the same time, can be used as a tool to assess students' comprehension. When the students are out of comment or give wrong comment for the story, we may suggest that they do not comprehend the text. When it happens, teachers can remodel them to show how to solve similar problems. The fifth, think-aloud implements the basic principles of scaffolding. Students are the active learners (Piaget's theory of constructivism), and therefore, their zone of proximal development should be maximized through the help of their peers and teacher (Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism) in an integrated activity which is in line with the concept of Gradual Release of Responsibility or GRR (Pearson and Gallagher in Ellery, 2005:18). Scaffolding is temporarily provided and it is gradually removed bit by bit as the learners become more competent independently (Collins in Yu, 2004; Cameron, 2001:8).



There are several practical guides to follow for the implementation of think-aloud. Following Davey, teachers can at first focus on some strategies such as developing hypothesis by making predictions, visualizing by creating images from the information being read, linking information in the text with prior knowledge by sharing analogies, monitoring comprehension by verbalizing a confusing point, and overcoming problems with word recognition or comprehension (Davey in Eanes, 1997:86; Gunning, 1996 in Rothschild, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 1999).

1. Develop hypotheses by making predictions

Teachers might model how to develop hypotheses by making predictions from the title of a chapter or from subheadings within the chapter. For example, suppose we are teaching narrative we can say *“from the title ‘Snow White,’ I predict that this text will tell about a Snow White. But, what is snow white, I think that it is a name of person.”*

The text continues:

Once upon a time there lived a little girl named Snow White. She lived with her Aunt and Uncle because her parents were dead. One day she heard her Uncle and Aunt talking about leaving Snow White in the castle because they both wanted to go to America and they didn't have enough money to take Snow White. Snow White did not want her Uncle and Aunt to do this so she decided it

would be best if she ran away. The next morning she ran away from home when her Aunt and Uncle were having breakfast. She ran away into the woods.

2. Develop images

To model how to develop imaging, at this point teachers might stop and say *“I have a picture in my head that Snow White must be sad. She cried because she did not want to be alone.”*

The text continues:

She *was* very tired and hungry. Then she *saw* this little cottage. She *knocked* but no one *answered* so she *went inside* and *fell asleep*.

3. Share analogies

To model how to link new information with prior knowledge, teacher might share the following analogies. *“This is just like the time when I was tired and hungry at home but I couldn’t find anything to eat. Then, I choose to sleep.”*

The text continues:

Meanwhile, the seven dwarfs *were coming* home from work.

4. Monitor comprehension

To model how to monitor comprehension, teachers can verbalize a confusing point: *“It tells that there are seven dwarfs coming home. But, I don’t know what dwarfs are.”*

The text continues:

They went inside. There they found Snow White sleeping. Then Snow White woke up. She saw the dwarfs. The dwarfs said, ‘What is your name?’ Snow White said, ‘My name is Snow White.’ Doc said, ‘if you wish, you may live here with us’. Snow White said, ‘Oh, could I? Thank you.’ Then Snow White told the dwarfs the whole story and Snow White and the seven dwarfs lived happily ever after.

5. Regulate comprehension

To model how to correct previous problem, teachers can demonstrate:

“I don’t know what dwarfs are. But in the next sentences, I could find that they came in, found snow white sleeping, asked Snow White’s name. So, I think that they are seven people. People who finally became Snow White’s friends.”

2. The Study

This is an experimental study which is aimed to get empirical evidence if think-aloud teaching strategy is effective to scaffold first year Senior High School students in their reading comprehension and strategy use. The main objective of this study is to find out whether think-aloud is effective to scaffold students' reading comprehension, to find out types of reading questions which can be improved with think-aloud, and types of texts in which think aloud can be applied appropriately.

This study employs quantitative method. Quasi experimental design with non-equivalent control group has been chosen due to subject randomization impossibility. One class is the experimental group and another is the control group. The population of the study was the first year or X Grade of senior high school students at a Senior High School in Pandeglang Regency, Banten Province, Indonesia, consisting of four classes. The reason to include them is for the sake of homogeneity. By cluster random sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993:84), two classes were taken as samples: X3 and X4. There were 31 students in each class. Another random sampling, by flipping a coin, was used to enroll those classes into experimental and control classes. The result showed that X3 was the experimental class while X4 was the control class. In conducting this research, some instruments were used to collect the data. Pretest and posttest were used to investigate students' reading comprehension. Through a pilot study, they have been empirically tested to be valid ($r = 0,95$ for pretest, $r = 0.90$ for posttest) and reliable ($r = 0.72$ for pretest, $r = 0.80$ for posttest). The treatment for both control and experimental group can be described as follows.

Control Class Treatment

By examining the lesson plan made by the teacher and how the lesson was carried out in the classroom, the strategy used by the teacher teaching control class was categorized as a three-phase technique of teaching in which the teacher believe that the process of teaching

reading could be carried out in three stages: pre-reading, whilst-reading, and post-reading activities. However, the teacher did not follow the three-phase strategies (*see*: Klingner, Vaughn and Boardman, 2007). They say that in the *pre-reading stage*, teachers can spend a few minutes to build students' background knowledge, make connections between old and new knowledge, introduce new vocabulary, preview or examine the material in detail, make predictions and help readers set a focus for reading; *during-reading*, the teacher can enhance students' comprehension by assisting them in monitoring their understanding; *after reading*, teachers can ask students to take benefit from summarizing the key ideas they've read and responding to the reading in various ways, including writing, drawing, and discussing. Based on the preliminary study, it is found that the English teacher taught the students to read text simply by asking the students to discuss the topic of the text before reading; reading it aloud and translating during reading; discussing and answer its related questions after reading.

Experimental Treatment (Think-aloud Strategy)

The present study applies ten steps to scaffold students' reading comprehension with think-aloud strategy as outlined by Anderson (1999: 77), which can be divided into four main steps. The first step is modeling the strategy in which the teacher models and talks about the strategy through the use of think-aloud and students observe them. The teacher stresses what, why, and when the strategy is used. The second step is the apprenticeship of use in which the teacher uses the strategy and students talk about it and seek for helps when needed. The third step is scaffolding strategy use in which students use and talk about the strategy with the help of scaffolding technique like think-aloud, usually in small groups. The teacher observes, provides feedback, and helps as needed. The fourth step is independent use in which students independently use strategy demonstrating competence through techniques like think-aloud. Teacher observes and assesses; plans future instruction. The description of how the strategy of 'think aloud' protocol was actually used can be seen on page 6-7 above.

			STUDENTS DO/TEACHER WATCHES
		STUDENTS DO / TEACHER HELPS	4
	TEACHER DOES / STUDENTS HELP	3	
TEACHER DOES / STUDENTS WATCH	2		
1			

Modeling

Guided Practice

Pair-Practice

Independent

The process of GRR in Scaffolding Reading Comprehension with Think-aloud Instructional Strategy

After the treatment was carried out, a standardized questionnaire of metacognitive awareness of reading strategy inventory adopted from Mokhtari and Reichard (in Klingner, Vaughn, Boardman, 2007:29-30) was distributed before and after treatment to the experimental class. The internal reliability of the instrument ranged from 0.86 to 0.93. It consists of 30 items in Likert scale and was used to investigate the students' use of global reading strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support reading strategies. In addition, a qualitative interview was employed to triangulate and elaborate the results as suggested by Creswell (1994:185).

3. Findings and Discussion

Experimental and control groups are the same in their initial level of reading comprehension as indicated by the reading pretest given prior to the treatment. The mean of experiment group pretest score is 4.20, while the mean of control group is 4.18. Statistical analysis has revealed that there is no significant difference in their pretest scores of reading comprehension ($t=0.107$, df 60, $p=0.01$). In other words, the treatments using think-aloud strategy are started from similar level of reading comprehension.

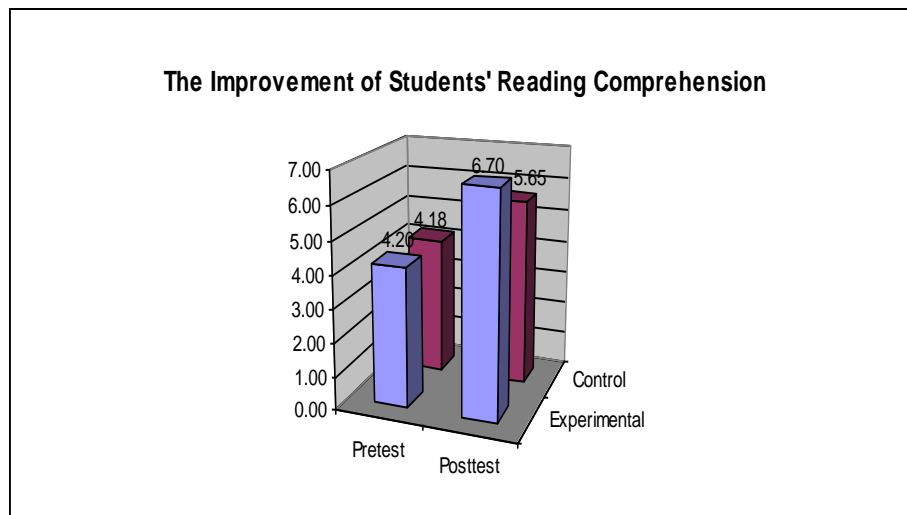
Compared to their initial level as indicated in pretests, both experimental and control groups score better in their posttest. Experimental group average score has increased from 4.20 in pretest to 6.70 in posttest. Control group average score has increased from 4.18 in pretest to 5.65 in posttest. In other words, the experimental group has gained 2.50 point (from 4.20 in the pretest into 6.70 in the posttest) while the control group has gained 1.47 (from 4.18 in the pretest to 5.65 in the posttest). Regarding the effectiveness of think-aloud strategy to scaffold students' reading comprehension, posttest scores have revealed that the reading comprehension of the students learning under think-aloud strategy and those learning under standard method of teaching differs significantly ($t= 4.38$, $df 60$ and $p= 0.01$). It can be concluded that think-aloud strategy improves students' reading comprehension better. The strength of association (η^2) is 0.242, indicating that 24% of the variability in this sample could be accounted for by the choice of teaching strategy (in this case: think-aloud strategy).

It confirms earlier studies that think-aloud strategy specifically improves students' reading comprehension (Baumann, Jones, and Kessel, 1992: 1; Lavadenz, 2003: 1). It is due to the two facts that the students' use of reading strategies has increased and they have responded well to think-aloud strategy. The result of questionnaire assessing experimental group use of reading strategies will be specifically elaborated later.

If think-aloud strategy is compared with the three-phase technique implemented to control class, it is clearly seen that they are different in term of the reading teaching principles for poor readers. Firstly, the three-phase technique provides less scaffolding for learners. To the poor readers, teacher should scaffold his students but then he removed it gradually after the students have been able to complete tasks alone. Secondly, no reading strategies taught to the students so that the students are not then becoming effective readers. Thirdly, it failed to improve students' motivation because they felt frustrated as they translate the texts. Students, therefore, are not interested in joining reading class. In term of its effectiveness, research on

read-aloud, one of *during-reading* activities applied to control class, shows that teachers are more likely to have low-achieving readers read aloud than high-achieving readers (Allington, 1980, 1983; Chinn, Waggoner, Anderson, Schommer, & Wilkinson, 1993; Collins, 1986; Hoffman et al., 1984 cited by Tankersley, 2003: 100), and that, it tends to ignore high-achieving readers.

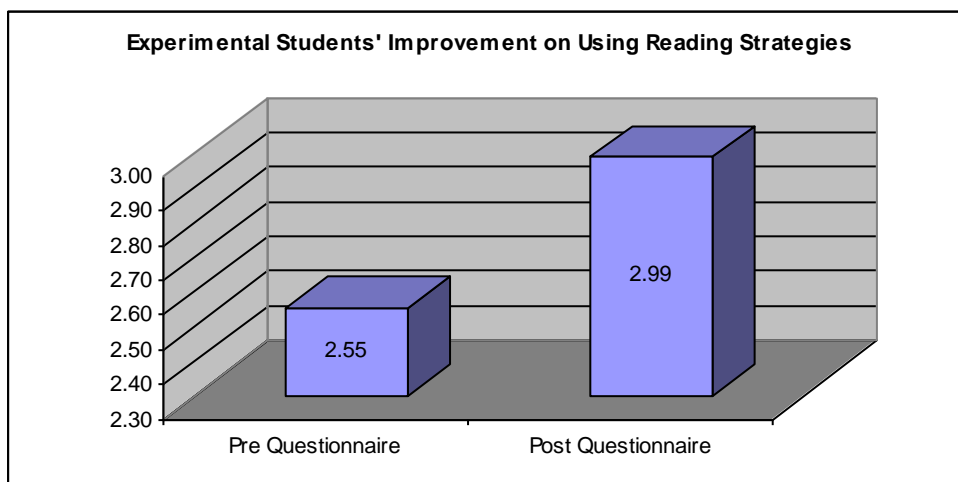
In relation with reading comprehension level, think-aloud strategy does improve experimental group's literal and interpretive levels. From all correct answers, 43% is for literal questions and 57% is for interpretive questions. Statistical analysis has informed that there is no significant difference between their scores in literal and interpretive questions ($t= 0.692$, df 30, $p=0.01$). After the implementation of think-aloud strategy, students of experimental group got better scores on their literal level as well as on their interpretive level.



In relation with three text types taught (narrative, news item and descriptive texts), an analysis of ANOVA shows that there is no significant difference among students' scores of experimental group in narrative, news item, and descriptive texts. It is empirically tested that think-aloud is good for those three text types ($F=0.710$, df 2/80, $p=0.05$). Although it is found by Berkowitz (1992) & Taylor and Chou-Hare and Smith (1982) in Caldwell and Leslie (2003: 2) that narrative text is generally more easily thought aloud than expository text, it is then

empirically tested in this study that think-aloud is good for all those three text types. However, the students feel more comfortable when doing think-aloud in narrative text since they are more interested in the stories inside than those in expository text. It is elaborated during the interview that most students have commented that think-aloud in narrative text is more interesting.

Concerning the question whether think-aloud strategy improves the experimental students' use of reading strategies, the data from questionnaire indicate that the average score for pre-questionnaire is 2.55 and it has increased into 2.99. The statistical analysis shows that there is a difference between experimental students' use of reading strategies before and after the implementation of think-aloud strategy ($t=21.068$, $df 30$, $p=0.01$). The *eta squared* was 0.93, telling us that 93% of the variability in this sample can be accounted for by the choice of teaching strategy (in this case: think-aloud strategy).



In details, the mean for problem solving strategies has increased from 2.74 before treatment to 3.06 after treatment. Although those mean scores, according to Mokhtari and Reichard in Klingner, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007:30), are still categorized as medium users, the difference has been significant ($t=9.49$, $df 30$, $p = 0.05$), indicating that there is a significant difference in students' use of problem solving reading strategies before and after treatment. For global reading strategies, the pre-questionnaire mean is 2.49, which has increased to 2.94, from

low level into medium level (Mokhtari and Reichard in Klingner, Vaughn, and Boardman, 2007: 30). The two means differ significantly ($t= 15.35$, $df\ 30$, $p= 0.05$), indicating that there is a significant difference in students' use of global reading strategies before and after treatment. In addition, concerning the reading strategies, the pre questionnaire mean is 2.48 and it has increased to 2.99, from low to medium level. The two means also differ significantly ($t= 13.29$, $df\ 30$, $p=0.05$), indicating that there is a significant difference in students' use of support reading strategies before and after treatment.

4. Conclusion

It is empirically tested that scaffolding students' reading comprehension with think-aloud strategy has improved students reading comprehension by improving their reading strategies in general. It is in line with the goal of think-aloud of training reading strategies in order to build students' comprehension. It also confirms earlier studies that it improves students' use of reading strategies. Good reading strategies then help students to comprehend the text more quickly and effectively.

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Appendix 1:

Learning activities for control group

Phase	Focus	Teacher's Activities	Students' Activities	Time Allocation
Pre-Activities	Introducing learning objectives and activating students' background knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introducing learning objectives 2. Activating students' background knowledge by asking questions related to narrative text e.g do you like story, etc 3. Introducing the topic 4. Asking questions related to the topic 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Paying attention to the teacher's explanation 2. Responding to the teacher's questions. 	15 min
<i>Text "Snow White"</i>				
Whilst-Activities	Assigning students to read aloud and answer the questions based on the text.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading the text aloud and asking student to listen and locate the difficult words as the teacher reads the text. 2. Designating some students to read the text. 3. Clarifying the meaning of difficult words. 4. Assigning students to answer the questions 5. Check the students' answer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Paying attention to the text being read and locate the difficult words. 2. Some students read and the others read silently as their peers read the text. 3. Writing down the meaning of difficult words. 4. Answering the questions based on the text. 5. Review their answer 	30 min
<i>Text "Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves"</i>				
	Assigning students to sit in a group to read the second text and answer questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introducing the second text 2. Asking questions related to the topic 3. Assigning students to read and answer the questions in second text in group 4. Check the students' answer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work in group to read and answer the questions for the second text 2. Review their answer 	30 min
Post-Activities	Checking students' answer.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closing the meeting 		15 min

Appendix 1:

Learning Activities for Experimental Group

Phase	Teacher's Activities	Students' Activities	Time Allocation
Introduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher explains the idea of think-aloud strategy 2. Teacher explains why this strategy is important 3. Teacher explains when to use the strategy in actual reading 4. Teacher gives the prompts to help students doing think-aloud 5. Teacher introduces the text by first asking questions related to the narrative text e.g "do you like story?" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Students pay attention to the teacher's explanation 4. Students answer questions related to the narrative text 	15 min
Modeling think aloud strategy to comprehend the text (Teacher does, Students watch)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher verbalizes her prediction when reading the title of the text 2. Teacher verbalizes her thought when visualizing the text 3. Teacher model how to connect the text with prior knowledge by verbalizing her comparison 4. Teacher verbalizes the confusing point 5. Teacher models how to correct previous problem 6. Teacher gives opportunity for the students to ask questions related to what have done by teacher 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students read the passage silently and see how teacher verbalizes her thoughts when predicting, visualizing, connecting her prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension and regulating comprehension 2. Students ask questions related to think aloud strategy 	20 min
Guided-Practice (Teacher does, students help)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher continues reading the text. She stops in some lines and asks students what they think 2. Teacher writes students' comment on the board 3. Teacher reviews every strategy used together with the students 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students pay attention to the passage read by the teacher 2. Students tell what they think during teacher's reading 3. Students review every strategy used together with the teacher 	15 min
Pair-Practice (Students do, teacher helps)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. With different text, teacher asks students to practice in pair and record their think-aloud. 2. Teacher helps students if necessary 3. Teacher reviews the text and asks what they are thinking during their read 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students take turns thinking aloud as they read a passage. While the first student is thinking aloud, the other listens and records (Handout 1) 2. Students can ask teacher's help if necessary 3. Students tell the teacher what they are thinking during their reading 	15 min
Independent Practice (Students do, teacher watches)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher asks students to do think-aloud independently and check their use of reading strategies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students practice think-aloud independently and check their use of reading strategies (Handout 2: Checklist form) 	15 min
Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher asks literal and inferential questions related to the text 1, 2 and 3 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students answer teacher's questions related to the text 1, 2, and 3 	10 min

