A Review of the Influence of 'Interactive Read Aloud' on Standard one Pupils' Vocabulary Growth and Critical Thinking in Public Primary Schools in Tanzania

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Abstract: *Early childhood is a critical stage for language and cognitive development, with vocabulary growth and critical thinking being key components for long-term academic success. This study examined the influence of interactive read-aloud on vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking among Standard One pupils in Tanzania. By incorporating teacher-pupil dialogue during reading sessions, interactive read-aloud provide opportunities for pupils to engage with new vocabulary in meaningful contexts and develop higher-order thinking skills. Employing a qualitative approach, this study analyzed data collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and secondary educational sources. Findings reveal that pupils who regularly participated in interactive read-aloud demonstrated notable improvements in vocabulary usage and critical thinking abilities. The results suggest that, when strategically implemented, interactive read-aloud enhances pupils' cognitive and linguistic capacities. The study highlights the need for improved access to high-quality reading materials and teacher training to maximize the benefits of this instructional approach. Recommendations include professional development for teachers and investment in diverse literary resources.*

Keywords: Interactive read-aloud, Vocabulary growth, Critical thinking, Early childhood education, Primary schools.

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1. Introduction

Early childhood is universally recognized as a pivotal stage for language acquisition and cognitive development, which serves as the bedrock for future educational success. The foundational years of education are crucial for setting the trajectory of a child's literacy and intellectual abilities. In this context, the development of vocabulary and critical thinking skills is particularly significant, as these elements play a vital role in enabling children to understand and engage with increasingly complex concepts as they progress through their education (Biemiller, 2020). Vocabulary growth provides the linguistic tools necessary for effective communication and comprehension, while critical thinking fosters the ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information critically.

Interactive read-aloud has emerged as an effective pedagogical strategy designed to enhance these foundational skills. This approach involves a dynamic interaction between the teacher and pupils during reading sessions, where the teacher actively engages the students by asking questions, prompting predictions, and facilitating discussions about the text. Unlike traditional read-aloud

that focus solely on reading the text aloud, interactive read-aloud incorporate meaningful dialogue that helps children make connections between the new vocabulary and their existing knowledge base (Mahenge, 2018). This method not only introduces new words in context but also encourages deeper comprehension through active engagement and discourse.

According to Ngowi, (2021), the use of 'interactive read-aloud' has been associated with significant improvements in vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking skills among young learners. Creating opportunities for students to encounter and use new words in various contexts can enable teachers to better retention and application of their vocabulary. Moreover, the questioning techniques and discussions that characterize interactive read-aloud promote critical thinking by encouraging pupils to reflect on the text, analyze characters, and make inferences. This approach supports the development of higher-order cognitive skills essential for academic success.

This study investigated among other things, how interactive read-aloud influence vocabulary growth and critical thinking in standard one pupils, focusing on early language development in a Tanzanian context. By examining the experiences of pupils and teachers, this research would provide insight into how these practices can be effectively utilized in classrooms to promote holistic cognitive development.

1.1 Problem of the statement

Despite extensive research highlighting the importance of vocabulary development and critical thinking in early childhood education (Biemiller, 2020; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2017), many primary schools in Tanzania face significant challenges in implementing effective strategies to nurture these skills (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2020). While interactive read-aloud have been shown to promote both vocabulary growth and critical thinking (Zimmerman, 2018; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2020), their widespread adoption is hindered by limited access to high-quality reading materials (Swanson et al., 2019), insufficient teacher training (Collins, 2019), and a lack of awareness of best practices for fostering engagement during reading sessions (Kaefer & Niehaus, 2019). Consequently, many Standard One pupils in Tanzania are not reaching their full potential in terms of vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking, both of which are essential for academic success (Lipman, 2020; Fisher, 2018).

This study addresses the challenge of inadequate instructional strategies to enhance these skills, with a particular focus on interactive read-aloud. While the advantages of this method are well-documented (Beck et al., 2017), there remains a gap in understanding how best to implement it in resource-limited environments like Tanzanian primary schools. Therefore, this study investigates the role of interactive read-aloud in developing vocabulary and critical thinking among Standard One pupils, utilizing qualitative research methods and secondary data analysis. It also identifies key challenges and offers practical recommendations to improve teacher training and access to quality reading materials, with the goal of enhancing learning outcomes for young learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Growth in Early Childhood

Vocabulary growth during early childhood is a cornerstone of literacy development and academic success. The early years of a child's education are marked by rapid cognitive and linguistic expansion, and vocabulary development is central to this process. According to Biemiller (2020), children who possess a broad vocabulary are better prepared to comprehend complex texts and engage in critical thinking as they progress through school. The ability to decode and understand new vocabulary enables students to access a wider range of content, which, in turn, enhances their reading comprehension and overall academic performance. Furthermore, vocabulary acquisition in early childhood is not only essential for reading success, it also plays a critical role in communication skills, enabling children to articulate their thoughts and ideas more effectively.

Interactive read-aloud have emerged as a potent strategy for facilitating vocabulary development. Unlike traditional reading, where children passively listen, interactive read-aloud involves an active dialogue between the teacher and pupils, creating opportunities for deeper engagement with the text. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2017) emphasize the importance of exposure to "tier two" words that are not commonly used in everyday speech but are frequently encountered in written text. These words are vital for language growth because they provide the tools for children to express more complex ideas. Through interactive read-aloud, pupils are exposed to these vocabulary-rich texts, and teachers play a crucial role in explaining the meanings of unfamiliar words and providing context. This active engagement helps children assimilate new vocabulary more effectively, as they are not just hearing words but are also encouraged to use them in meaningful ways during discussions.

2.2 Critical Thinking Development

Critical thinking is the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. This is an essential cognitive skill that can be cultivated even in early childhood (Lipman, 2020). Fisher (2018) argued that young children are capable of higher-order thinking when guided appropriately through questioning, reasoning, and problem-solving activities. Interactive read-aloud encourages critical thinking by inviting children to make predictions, analyze characters' motives, and infer meanings from stories.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports the development of critical thinking through social interaction, emphasizing the role of more "knowledgeable others" in scaffolding children's cognitive growth (p. 86). During interactive read-aloud, teachers serve as these knowledgeable others, prompting pupils to articulate their thoughts, make inferences, and engage in problem-solving tasks. This form of guided learning is particularly effective for young learners, who may initially struggle with abstract thinking but can be progressively challenged through strategic questioning. By creating a dialogue around the text, teachers help students internalize cognitive strategies transferable to other learning contexts. As a result, pupils become active participants in their learning process, developing critical thinking skills that will serve them throughout their education.

Furthermore, critical thinking development is closely intertwined with language acquisition, as a rich vocabulary provides the necessary tools for expressing complex thoughts and ideas. Beck et al. (2017) highlighted those children exposed to a wide range of vocabulary through interactive read-aloud are better able to engage in higher-order thinking processes. In practice, teachers can ask pupils to use newly learned words to explain characters' motivations, predict story outcomes, or evaluate moral dilemmas presented in the text. This strengthens pupils' understanding of the vocabulary and enhances their ability to analyze and critique the narrative, thereby deepening their critical thinking abilities. Through repeated exposure to this form of structured thinking, Standard One pupils gradually build the confidence and skills necessary to approach learning with a critical lens.

2.3 The Role of Interactive Read-Aloud in Vocabulary Development

Interactive read-aloud have emerged as a pivotal educational strategy in fostering early literacy, particularly in the realms of vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking. The essence of interactive read-aloud lies in the active engagement between the teacher and pupils during reading sessions. Unlike traditional reading where the teacher reads aloud passively, interactive read-aloud involves dynamic dialogues, where teachers ask questions, prompt predictions, and encourage pupils to discuss and reflect on the text. This interactive process provides students with rich, contextualized exposure to new vocabulary, which is crucial for deeper learning and retention. Research highlights that such engagement significantly enhances vocabulary growth, as students encounter new words within meaningful contexts, rather than in isolation (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2017).

Furthermore, interactive read-aloud serves as a powerful tool for developing critical thinking skills. By integrating questions that prompt analysis, evaluation, and inference, teachers can guide pupils to think beyond the literal meaning of the text. This method aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Through discussions and reflective questions, pupils are encouraged to analyze characters' motivations, predict outcomes, and infer meanings, thereby engaging in higher-order thinking processes. This not only enhances their comprehension but also fosters critical thinking skills that are essential for academic success and lifelong learning (Lipman, 2020).

The integration of interactive read-aloud into the curriculum has shown promising results in various educational settings. Studies indicate that pupils who regularly participate in interactive read-aloud sessions demonstrate notable improvements in both vocabulary usage and critical thinking abilities (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2020). Teachers observe that pupils become more articulate in expressing their thoughts and show greater confidence in their analytical skills. This effect is attributed to the frequent and meaningful exposure to new vocabulary and the opportunity to engage in thoughtful discussions, which collectively contribute to a more profound understanding of the text and its implications.

However, to fully realize the benefits of interactive read-aloud, certain challenges need to be addressed. Access to high-quality reading materials and effective teacher training are critical components that influence the success of this instructional approach. It is essential for educators to receive professional development on best practices for conducting interactive read-aloud and for schools to invest in a diverse range of high-quality texts. By addressing these challenges, the potential of interactive read-aloud to enhance vocabulary growth and critical thinking in early learners can be maximized, thereby contributing to improved educational outcomes in primary schools (Swanson et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2018).

2.4 The Role of Teachers in Interactive Read-Aloud

The success of interactive read-aloud largely depends on the teacher's ability to facilitate meaningful dialogue and adapt questions to the developmental levels of pupils. Collins (2019) suggested that teachers who use targeted questions and prompts during reading sessions help foster both language acquisition and critical thinking skills. Teachers also play a crucial role in scaffolding learning by adjusting the complexity of their questions to challenge pupils while providing the necessary support to help them succeed.

The role of teachers in interactive read-aloud is pivotal to their effectiveness in fostering vocabulary growth and critical thinking. Teachers are not merely facilitators of the reading process but active participants in creating a dynamic learning environment. According to Collins (2019), the teacher's role involves crafting targeted questions and prompts that engage pupils and stimulate deeper comprehension. By using questions that require pupils to think critically about the text, teachers help students connect new vocabulary with their existing knowledge and experiences. This interaction not only enhances vocabulary acquisition but also encourages pupils to articulate their thoughts and make connections, fostering both linguistic and cognitive development.

Moreover, teachers are responsible for scaffolding students' learning during interactive read-aloud. Scaffolding involves adjusting the level of support provided based on the pupils' needs, which can range from clarifying vocabulary to guiding discussions on complex themes. Bruner (1986) highlighted the importance of this adaptive teaching approach, emphasizing that effective scaffolding helps pupils progressively develop their skills. Through thoughtful questioning and guided discussions, teachers can challenge pupils to think beyond the surface level of the text, thus promoting critical thinking skills. This role requires teachers to be not only knowledgeable about the content but also skilled at using pedagogical strategies that foster an interactive and engaging learning experience.

In addition, the teacher's engagement in interactive read-aloud often includes modeling thinking processes and encouraging pupils to reflect on their understanding. This reflective practice is essential for developing metacognitive skills, which are crucial for critical thinking. By demonstrating how to analyze a text and ask probing questions, teachers help pupils develop the ability to evaluate and reason through information independently. Effective teachers employ a range of strategies to maintain an interactive atmosphere, such as using think-aloud, encouraging peer discussions, and providing feedback on pupils' responses. These practices contribute to a richer learning experience and enhance the overall impact of interactive read-aloud on vocabulary and critical thinking (Bruner, 1986).

Overall, the teacher's role in interactive read-aloud extends beyond merely reading aloud; it involves creating an engaging and supportive environment that fosters vocabulary development and critical thinking. Through strategic questioning, scaffolding, and modeling, teachers play a crucial role in maximizing the benefits of this instructional approach and ensuring that pupils gain both linguistic and cognitive skills.

2.5 Enhancing Critical Thinking through Interactive Read-Aloud

Beyond vocabulary development, interactive read-aloud have been identified as effective in nurturing critical thinking skills in young learners. Critical thinking, as defined by Lipman (2019), involves reasoning, problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and synthesize information. In the context of early literacy, interactive read-aloud encourage pupils to think critically about the text, fostering skills such as inference, prediction, and evaluation.

Several researchers have explored the role of read-aloud in promoting higher-order thinking skills. A study by Santoro, Chard, Howard, and Baker (2020) highlighted that when teachers use specific questioning techniques during read-aloud sessions such as asking pupils to make predictions, draw conclusions, or infer the motivations of characters, pupils develop better analytical skills. The dialogic nature of interactive read-aloud ensures that pupils are not passive recipients of information but active participants in constructing meaning from the text. Furthermore, Kaefer and Niehaus (2019) suggested that interactive read-aloud provide opportunities for scaffolding critical thinking by progressively challenging students to engage with more complex texts. As pupils participate in discussions that require reasoning and problem-solving, they begin to internalize the strategies used by teachers to approach and analyze the text.

2.6 The Connection between Vocabulary Growth and Critical Thinking

Vocabulary development and critical thinking are closely intertwined. A rich vocabulary enables pupils to express their thoughts more precisely, articulate their reasoning,

and engage in more sophisticated dialogue. According to Biemiller (2020), vocabulary knowledge is a significant predictor of reading comprehension and critical thinking ability. When children understand a wider range of words, they can better grasp complex concepts, which in turn enhances their ability to think critically about what they are reading.

In addition, the connection between vocabulary growth and critical thinking is grounded in the idea that a richer vocabulary enhances cognitive abilities, allowing individuals to better process, analyze, and articulate complex concepts. When students expand their vocabulary, they are exposed to more precise and nuanced language, which enables them to engage in higher-order thinking processes, such as reasoning, problem-solving, and evaluating information. Vocabulary serves as a foundational tool for critical thinking, as individuals with a more extensive lexicon can recognize subtle differences in meaning, make connections between ideas, and better comprehend abstract concepts. Research has shown that vocabulary development is closely linked to improved cognitive functions, including verbal reasoning and comprehension, which are essential for critical thinking (Tabaeian et al., 2021).

Moreover, vocabulary growth fosters metacognitive awareness, encouraging learners to reflect on their thought processes and evaluate their understanding. As students acquire new words, they develop the ability to engage in critical discussions, question assumptions, and apply logic to diverse scenarios. Interactive learning environments, such as read-aloud sessions or discussions that encourage the use of new vocabulary, have been found to promote critical thinking by requiring students to analyze texts and articulate their thoughts effectively. For instance, research by Peng et al. (2020) indicates that students who engage in vocabulary rich activities demonstrate enhanced analytical skills and are better equipped to construct arguments and justify their opinions. Therefore, vocabulary growth not only improves communication but also nurtures the cognitive skills necessary for critical thinking.

Interactive read-aloud serve as a bridge between vocabulary growth and critical thinking by providing a shared reading experience where language and reasoning skills are developed simultaneously. Through strategic questioning and discussion, teachers guide pupils in using new vocabulary to articulate their thoughts and engage in higher-level cognitive processes.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the role of interactive read-aloud in enhancing vocabulary growth and critical thinking among Standard One pupils in Tanzania. The methodology primarily focused on the collection and analysis of secondary data, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the research topic.

3.1 Secondary Data Sources

The study utilized secondary data sources to gather existing information on student engagement and learning outcomes in government primary schools. Various documents, including journals, articles, conference presentations, and books, were systematically reviewed to identify relevant research on the influence of interactive read-aloud on vocabulary acquisition and the development of critical thinking skills in early learners. The identification process involved keyword searches in educational databases and libraries, focusing on literature that specifically addressed teaching strategies and their impact on literacy development. This approach ensured that the study was grounded in established research findings, providing a solid foundation for the investigation.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data collection primarily involved a thorough review of secondary sources. This process included identifying and selecting relevant literature that explored interactive read-aloud and their effectiveness in promoting vocabulary growth and critical thinking among early learners. The review covered a wide range of studies, particularly those that offered insights into best practices and challenges associated with implementing interactive read-aloud in different educational contexts. Additionally, data was collected not only from the literature and related materials but also from interview

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the reviewed literature were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This method allowed for the interpretation of findings from various studies, leading to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking development among Standard One pupils. The analysis aimed to synthesize insights gained from different sources, highlighting common themes and discrepancies in the literature to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject matter.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a significant positive influence of interactive read-aloud on vocabulary growth among Standard One pupils in public primary schools

within the Tanzanian context. Pupils who were regularly engaged in interactive reading sessions showed notable improvements in their ability to comprehend and use new vocabulary in various contexts. *For instance, one participant indicated that*

> *...pupils were able to use new words in sentences after engaging in read-aloud sessions, such as saying, 'The rabbit was very curious about the strange noise,' demonstrating their understanding of the word 'curious' in context.* [HT3; SchC: 24/06/2024]

This suggests that exposure to vocabulary within the rich, meaningful context of stories enhances pupils' retention and practical application of new words. The findings align with the work of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013), who also emphasize the value of interactive read-aloud in vocabulary development. Their research demonstrates that children exposed to new words in context-rich environments, such as story reading, are better able to grasp, retain, and use those words in daily communication. In particular, they argue that interactive discussions surrounding vocabulary during read-aloud sessions further enhance pupils' depth of word knowledge, mirroring the significant improvements in vocabulary comprehension observed in the Tanzanian context of this study.

Teachers reported that pupils grasped complex words more easily when these terms were introduced through interactive reading. For example,

> *"Teachers observed that when words were introduced during story time, students could easily recall and apply these words later in their own conversations, such as using 'adventure' and 'explore' when discussing their weekend plans."* (ACT1; SchA: 18/06/2024).

Such observations illustrate how interactive read-aloud not only fosters vocabulary acquisition but also encourage pupils to use new vocabulary in everyday communication. The findings align with the work of Beck and McKeown (2019), who argue that interactive read-aloud plays a critical role in vocabulary development. According to their research, when children are introduced to new words in meaningful contexts, such as during storytelling, they are more likely to remember and use those words in everyday conversations. This method of instruction encourages deeper cognitive engagement, which facilitates not only vocabulary acquisition but also the application of new words in real-life situations.

Moreover, the study found that critical thinking skills among pupils improved substantially through the use of interactive read-aloud. Teachers employed a range of questioning techniques during the sessions, such as asking pupils to predict outcomes, infer meanings, or analyze character motivations. For instance, one teacher noted,

> *"I often ask my students what they think will happen next in the story. This prompts them to think ahead and reason based on the context we've read so far.*" (T2; SCHB: 21/06/2024).

These activities encouraged pupils to engage in reflective thinking, moving beyond rote memorization to deeper cognitive processing. The findings align with the work of Fisher (2018), who emphasized that interactive read-aloud foster critical thinking by prompting students to engage with texts at a deeper cognitive level. Fisher observed that asking students to predict, infer, or analyze during read-aloud sessions enhances their ability to think critically and reflectively.

The frequent participation in dialogue-based activities helped pupils develop analytical skills, as they were required to explain their thoughts, justify their answers, and explore alternative viewpoints. One participant shared,

> *"During discussions, my pupils surprise me with their interpretations. They ask questions like, 'Why do you think the character did that?' This shows they are thinking critically about what they read."* (ACT2; Sch2: 19/06/2024).

This engagement with the text fostered an early foundation for critical thinking. The findings align with the work of Lipman, (2020) who emphasized that dialogue-based activities, particularly in reading discussions, significantly contribute to the development of pupils' analytical and critical thinking skills. Fisher argues that by engaging students in conversations that require them to explain their reasoning, justify their answers, and consider alternative perspectives, they build deeper cognitive abilities.

The role of the teacher was found to be crucial in facilitating these cognitive and linguistic gains. Teachers who actively incorporated strategic questions, guided discussions, and scaffolded learning opportunities created a more conducive environment for vocabulary growth and critical thinking development. As one teacher reflected,

> *"When I guide my students to explore the meanings of words or the implications of events in the story, they develop a deeper understanding of the material."* (HT1; Sch1: 13/06/2024).

The findings concur with the work of Fisher, (2018), who emphasize that teacher facilitation through questioning, discussion, and scaffolding is essential for cognitive and linguistic development in young learners. Their research highlights that when teachers strategically engage students in exploring word meanings and analyzing text events, it fosters a deeper comprehension and enhances critical thinking.

However, the study also highlighted several challenges in implementing interactive read-aloud effectively. Limited access to diverse and age-appropriate reading materials was a recurring issue, with teachers often relying on a small

selection of texts that may not provide sufficient exposure to a wide range of vocabulary. One teacher lamented,

> *"We don't have enough books that interest my pupils. I often have to repeat the same stories, which limits their exposure to new vocabulary."* (HT2; Sch2: 21/06/2024).

Additionally, many teachers lacked specialized training in interactive read-aloud strategies, which hampered their ability to fully exploit the benefits of this instructional approach. The findings concur with the work of Ngowi, (2021) who emphasize that limited access to diverse and age-appropriate texts can hinder vocabulary growth and critical thinking development in young learners. In their research on read-aloud practices, Ngowi, (2021) found that when teachers are constrained by a narrow selection of reading materials, students' exposure to rich, varied vocabulary is significantly reduced.

The findings suggest that addressing these gaps through investment in literary resources and professional development for teachers could further optimize the impact of interactive read-aloud on both vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study emphasizes the significant benefits of interactive read-aloud in enhancing vocabulary development and critical thinking among Standard One pupils. Engaging pupils in dialogue during reading sessions facilitates meaningful interactions with new vocabulary and fosters higher-order cognitive skills. The findings suggest that pupils who regularly participate in interactive read-aloud make meaningful progress in both vocabulary comprehension and application, as well as in reflective and analytical thinking. These results highlight interactive read-aloud as an effective tool for promoting linguistic and cognitive growth, essential for academic achievement and lifelong learning.

However, several challenges need to be addressed to maximize the impact of interactive read-aloud. Limited access to a wide range of high-quality reading materials restricts pupils' vocabulary exposure, and the lack of specialized training for teachers hampers the full potential of this approach. For the benefits of interactive read-aloud to be fully realized, it is crucial for educational stakeholders to enhance the availability of diverse texts and support teacher development in interactive read-aloud techniques.

5.2 Recommendations

Several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of interactive read-aloud in promoting vocabulary growth and critical thinking among Standard One pupils.

1. Policymakers and educational authorities should invest in a diverse selection of age-appropriate, culturally relevant texts to enrich pupils' vocabulary and stimulate curiosity.

2. The government and teacher training institutions need to introduce targeted training in interactive read-aloud methods, including workshops on questioning techniques and discussion facilitation, to equip teachers for impactful reading sessions.

3. Schools should form partnerships with publishers and organizations to acquire diverse reading materials affordably or through donations, ensuring a steady supply of quality resources in classrooms.

4. Curriculum developers must implement a system to monitor interactive read-aloud practices and provide ongoing feedback, helping teachers refine their techniques and stay updated on effective approaches.

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