

Improving rural junior high school students' reading comprehension through the think-aloud strategy

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Abstract: Reading comprehension remains one of the most persistent obstacles for Indonesian junior high school students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), commonly rooted in limited vocabulary, weak inferential ability, and passive reading habits. This study examined whether the Think-Aloud strategy could improve the reading comprehension and learning activity of eighth-grade students at a rural public junior high school in Riau, Indonesia. A classroom action research design following the Kemmis and McTaggart model was implemented in two cycles, each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection, and involved 31 students. Data were collected through reading comprehension tests (pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II), classroom observation, field notes, and documentation, and were analyzed descriptively on the basis of the minimum mastery criterion (MMC = 75). The class mean rose from 62.26 in the pre-cycle to 71.45 in Cycle I and 77.58 in Cycle II, while the proportion of students reaching the MMC increased from 32.26% to 48.39% and then to 87.10%, exceeding the 75% classical mastery criterion. Students' learning activity also improved on all four observed indicators. The Think-Aloud strategy therefore improved students' reading comprehension and is recommended for teaching narrative-text reading in junior high schools.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, rural school, think-aloud strategy

Abstrak: Kemampuan membaca pemahaman (*reading comprehension*) masih menjadi salah satu kesulitan utama siswa SMP dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing, yang bersumber dari keterbatasan kosakata, lemahnya kemampuan inferensi, dan kebiasaan membaca yang pasif. Penelitian ini bertujuan meningkatkan reading comprehension dan aktivitas belajar siswa kelas VIII di sebuah SMP negeri di wilayah pedesaan Riau, Indonesia, melalui strategi Think-Aloud. Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) model Kemmis dan McTaggart dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus yang masing-masing meliputi tahap perencanaan, tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi, dengan melibatkan 31 siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes membaca pada tahap pra siklus, siklus I, dan siklus II, observasi, catatan lapangan, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara deskriptif berdasarkan Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal (KKM = 75). Nilai rata-rata kelas meningkat dari 62,26 pada pra siklus menjadi 71,45 pada siklus I dan 77,58 pada siklus II, sedangkan persentase siswa yang mencapai KKM meningkat dari 32,26% menjadi 48,39% dan kemudian 87,10%, melampaui kriteria ketuntasan klasikal 75%. Aktivitas belajar siswa juga meningkat pada keempat indikator yang diamati. Dengan demikian, strategi Think-Aloud dapat meningkatkan reading comprehension siswa dan direkomendasikan untuk pembelajaran membaca teks naratif di SMP.

Kata kunci: Pemahaman membaca, sekolah pedesaan, think-aloud strategy

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INTRODUCTION

English is one of the essential things in education, communication, technology and global cooperation. One of the four essential skills in English that is considered as the basis of developing vocabulary, content area knowledge and academic literacy is reading (Astuti et al., 2025; Wahyudin et al., 2026; Wahyuni et al., 2026). However, reading comprehension

still becomes one of the big problems for English as Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially at Junior high school level in Indonesia (Yetti, 2025; Yusuf et al., 2018). Limited exposure to authentic texts, restricted vocabulary, and largely mechanical, decoding-oriented instruction leave many students unable to move beyond literal, word-by-word processing toward the inferential and evaluative comprehension that secondary-level texts demand. At school, this difficulty is compounded by the way reading is usually taught. Reading lessons tend to concentrate on translating the text and checking answers to comprehension questions, so the thinking that a skilled reader goes through (predicting, noticing a confusing word or sentence, and rereading to repair it) is rarely shown to students (McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). Students are thus left to read passively and seldom learn how to monitor and repair their own understanding (Zhussupova & Kazbekova, 2016).

A large amount of research shows that low reading comprehension among students is linked to students' knowledge and use of reading strategies, especially the metacognitive strategies that readers use to plan check and evaluate readers understanding of a text. Al-Mekhlafi (2018) found that many EFL students have a moderate level of knowledge about strategies that help students check and fix students own comprehension, while Bagci (2019) demonstrated a significant relationship between metacognitive awareness of reading showed a connection between students' metacognitive knowledge of reading strategies and students' confidence in students own reading ability. This indicates that knowing reading strategies and students belief, in students abilities to read are closely connected. The same pattern is documented in Indonesia, where less proficient tertiary readers have been shown to draw on a narrower and less flexible repertoire of monitoring strategies than their more proficient peers (Pammu et al., 2014), and where students' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies varies systematically with proficiency and reading medium (Rianto, 2021).

Other evidence pointing in the same direction comes from younger learners: Zhang et al. (2008) found that students of primay school age learning to read in English already differ measurably in their strategic control of the text, and meta-analytic work confirms that monitoring strategies in particular travel with comprehension across first- and second-language settings (Sun et al., 2021). In this respect, Zhussupova and Kazbekova (2016) highlighted the significance of embedding explicit metacognitive strategy instruction into reading pedagogy, as it allows students to actively plan, monitor and evaluate their comprehension, instead of passively engaging with texts. In line with this perspective, the present study focuses on reading comprehension as the primary outcome, while metacognitive strategy instruction is employed as an instructional approach to enhance students' understanding of written texts.

Think-Aloud is one of the metacognitive strategies recommended for teaching reading comprehension, alongside approaches such as Reciprocal Teaching and PQRSST. It belongs to this group because the same metacognitive operations described above are verbalised by the reader while reading: planning (previewing the title and predicting what the text will be about), monitoring (noticing an unknown word or a sentence that does not make sense), and evaluating and repairing (rereading, using context clues, or summarising to check understanding). In the classroom the teacher models these processes by verbalising his or her own thinking when reading a material. The students then practise

verbalising their thoughts in pairs. The monitoring that a skilled reader usually does silently becomes evident and may be reproduced. Think-Aloud is described by McKeown & Gentilucci (2007) as an interactive teaching technique where the teachers and students collaboratively construct meaning through continuous exchanges of predictions, questions, and interpretations, rather than treating it as a technique that teachers merely transfer to students. The term should nevertheless be distinguished from its use as a research method for eliciting verbal reports of cognitive processing (Cohen & Wang, 2024; Hu & Gao, 2017). In the present study, Think-Aloud is used in its pedagogical sense: as an instructional routine through which students' metacognitive monitoring is trained so that their reading comprehension improves. Because this monitoring has to become habitual, the benefits of the strategy are expected to depend on repeated practice rather than on a single demonstration.

Empirical evidence for the effectiveness of Think-Aloud at the junior high school level, the context of the present study, is encouraging. Yusuf et al. (2018), working with eighth-grade students in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, reported measurable gains in students' ability to identify main ideas, locate supporting details, and draw inferences after Think-Aloud instruction. McKeown and Gentilucci (2007) examined Think-Aloud as a means of developing metacognition and comprehension monitoring in a middle school second-language classroom, and Bagci (2019) showed that eighth-grade students' awareness of reading strategies is closely related to their self-efficacy in reading comprehension, which suggests that a strategy that makes this awareness explicit should benefit students of this age. Studies that use think-aloud diagnostically point to the same mechanism: EFL readers deploy identifiable, teachable monitoring and repair moves when they read in a foreign language ((Alfarwan, 2021; Ghavamnia et al., 2013). Positive outcomes have also been reported at other levels, with primary school students (Chin & Ghani, 2021) and university students (Al-Ahdal & Alolaywi, 2022; Zayed, 2021), and a systematic review of 40 studies concluded that Think-Aloud consistently benefits EFL/ESL students' reading comprehension, metacognitive awareness, fluency, retention, and motivation (Tang et al., 2025). The same review, however, explicitly called for more classroom-embedded, context-specific studies, and studies at the junior high school level remain few compared with those at the primary and university levels.

Notwithstanding this accumulating evidence, a closer reading of the literature reveals an important gap. Most previous Think-Aloud research has been performed as quasi-experimental or correlational studies in urban, university or primary school contexts. Classroom-embedded, teacher-researcher collaborative interventions in rural junior high school EFL classrooms, where resource constraints, low baseline literacy, and limited access to English outside the classroom are common, remain comparatively underexplored. This matters for three reasons that the wider comprehension literature makes explicit: effect sizes obtained under whole-class conditions are typically far smaller than those obtained in researcher-led tutoring (Okkinga et al., 2018); the magnitude of reported gains depends heavily on whether outcomes are measured with standardized or researcher-developed instruments (Filderman et al., 2022; Silverman et al., 2020); and the teacher's own preparation is itself a moderator of student comprehension outcomes (M. Rice et al., 2024). In Indonesia, most previous studies and classroom action research on Think-Aloud (Ariadi, 2023; Rahayu, 2022; Rukmana et al., 2025) have reported overall score improvement in

senior high school or primary school settings and few have described how the strategy was refined from one cycle to the next in a rural junior high school classroom.

The present research site likewise shows this disparity. A preliminary survey of 31 students of Class VIII A at SMPN 5 Kabun, a public junior high school in Rokan Hulu Regency, Riau, indicates that 21 students (67.74%) scored below the school's minimum mastery criterion (MMC = 75) on a baseline reading comprehension test, with most scores hovering between 50 and 65. An interview with the class's English teacher corroborated this pattern, attributing students' low reading achievement to limited vocabulary mastery, difficulty processing sentence- and text-level meaning, and low motivation to read English texts both inside and outside the classroom. The narrow clustering of the scores is itself diagnostic: it points to a shared instructional deficit rather than to scattered individual difficulty, and therefore to a problem that a whole-class strategy intervention is well placed to address.

To address these problems, this study offers the Think-Aloud strategy as the solution. The strategy was chosen because it responds directly to the three causes identified at the research site: the teacher's modelling shows students how a skilled reader deals with unknown words and confusing sentences, which addresses their limited vocabulary; verbalizing predictions, questions, and inferences while reading trains the sentence- and text-level processing that students found difficult; and the paired problem-solver and listener roles turn reading from a passive into an active activity, which is expected to raise students' motivation to read. Accordingly, the present study implements the Think-Aloud strategy in a two-cycle classroom action research design within the regular English classroom of Class VIII A at SMPN 5 Kabun, with the aim of improving students' narrative-text reading comprehension and their learning activity. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What was the level of students' reading comprehension before the implementation of the Think-Aloud strategy? (2) How did students' reading comprehension and mastery of the MMC change after the Think-Aloud strategy was implemented in Cycle I and Cycle II? (3) How did students' learning activity change during the implementation of the Think-Aloud strategy? The action hypothesis of this study is that the implementation of the Think-Aloud strategy will improve students' narrative-text reading comprehension so that at least 75% of the students reach the MMC, and will increase their learning activity in the classroom.

METHOD

Research design

This study employed a classroom action research (CAR) design, selected because it enables teachers and researchers to systematically test and refine an instructional intervention within the authentic conditions of their own classroom while iteratively improving practice on the basis of evidence gathered in situ (Kemmis et al., 2014). The design is also well established as a vehicle for teacher professional development in Indonesian EFL settings, where sustained teacher-academic collaboration has been shown to reshape teachers' pedagogical reasoning and not only their classroom techniques (Puspitasari et al., 2021; Wulyani et al., 2021), and where CAR-based instruction has been argued to constitute a sustainable model of professional learning rather than a one-off training event (Meesuk et al., 2020). The design followed the Kemmis and McTaggart model,

comprising two cycles, each consisting of four interrelated phases: planning, action, observation, and reflection, as illustrated in Figure 1.

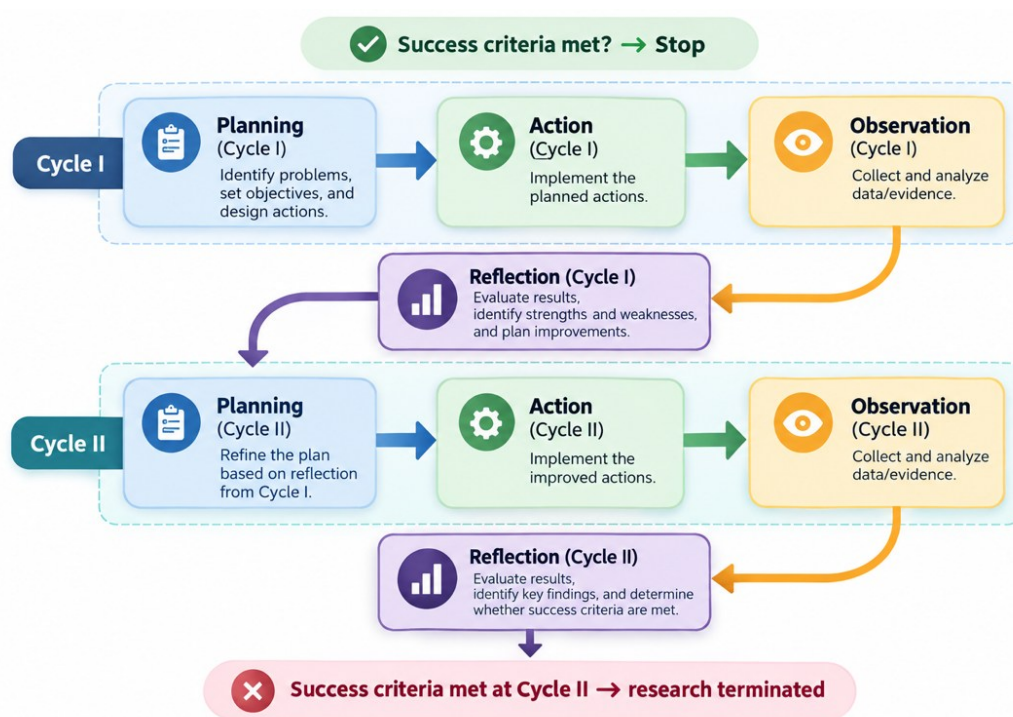


Fig. 1. Classroom action research design (Kemmis et al., 2014)

Research setting and participants

The research was conducted at SMPN 5 Kabun Class VIII A, which is a public junior high school located at Batu Langkah Besar, Kabun District, Rokan Hulu Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia. The school was created in 2009 and has been accredited with “B” by the National Accreditation Board. Most students come from nearby villages, where English is rarely used outside the classroom. This setting differs from the urban schools and higher education institutions where most previous Think-Aloud studies have been conducted. The participants were all 31 students in Class VIII A during the odd semester of the 2026/2027 academic year. They were included as one intact class, without a separate control group, in accordance with the classroom action research approach. The study was conducted collaboratively by the researcher and the class’s English teacher from July to August 2026. Throughout the intervention, the teacher continued to lead the lessons, allowing Think-Aloud to be implemented within the students’ regular classroom activities rather than in a researcher-controlled setting.

Procedures

In the planning phase in Cycle I, the lesson plan (RPP) was prepared that integrated the Think-Aloud approach in narrative-text reading activities. The researcher also created a classroom observation sheet and a reading comprehension test to measure students’ understanding. In the action stage, students were in couples and played two roles taking turns. One student took on the role of the “problem solver” and spoke his thinking as he

answered questions concerning the narrative text; the other was the “listener,” who watched the reasoning unfold without offering corrections or interruptions. After the task was done, the students switched places so each student had the opportunity to practise expressing their ideas and interpreting the material. The teacher explicitly modelled the Think-Aloud process before transferring responsibility to the student pairs so that students had an observable template of monitoring conduct to emulate rather than being forced to verbalise an unfamiliar procedure unsupported. During the observation phase, the collaborating teacher recorded the students’ engagement using a structured observation checklist. During the reflection phase, the results of the pre-cycle and Cycle I tests and the observation data were reviewed jointly to determine specific weaknesses, such as the lack of student enthusiasm and willingness to ask or answer questions, which were then used to improve the intervention for Cycle II.

Cycle II followed the same fundamental method as Cycle I but included various changes based on the outcomes of the prior cycle. First, the teacher gave extra support and inspiration prior and during the Think Aloud activities in an effort to make the kids feel more confident and actively participate. Second, the teacher modelled the method in more detail and offered more guiding questions to sustain students’ attention and support their comprehension of the text. Third, student pairs were reshuffled based on their Cycle I test results to have a more balanced interaction and peer learning. The modifications were made to solve the problems found in Cycle I, although the Think Aloud style was maintained as the core instructional strategy. The four stages of classroom action research (planning, action, observation, and reflection) were repeated again. Then, the Cycle II reading comprehension test was administered to assess students’ improvement.

Instruments

Four instruments were used to collect data: (1) a reading comprehension test on narrative texts, administered in the pre-cycle stage before the action and at the end of Cycle I and Cycle II, constructed by the researcher and reviewed for content validity by the collaborating English teacher; (2) a structured classroom observation checklist covering four indicators of student learning activity (attention to the teacher’s explanation, asking and answering questions, active participation in class, and successful task completion), completed by the collaborating teacher during the action phase of each cycle; (3) field notes documenting classroom events, student responses, and contextual conditions not captured by the observation checklist; and (4) documentation, including student attendance and performance records and photographic evidence of classroom activities. The validity of the reading comprehension test was established as follows.

The validity of the test was established as content validity in two steps. First, the items were developed from a test blueprint based on the basic competences and indicators for narrative texts in the eighth-grade English syllabus, so that every item measured an aspect of narrative-text reading comprehension taught in class, namely identifying the main idea, finding specific information, determining word meaning, identifying reference, and making inferences. Second, the blueprint and the items were reviewed by the collaborating English teacher as an expert judge, who examined the match between each item and its indicator, the clarity of the instructions and wording, and the level of difficulty for the class before the tests were administered. The expert judgement was recorded on a validation sheet that

rated each item on these three aspects, and the test obtained a validation score of 216 out of a maximum of 240 (90%), which falls into the very valid category. The test was therefore judged valid and appropriate for measuring the narrative-text reading comprehension of the class.

Data analysis technique

Data were analyzed descriptively, with the focus on students' mastery of the minimum mastery criterion set by the school (MMC= 75). For each test (pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II), the class mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores were calculated, and each student was categorized as having achieved mastery (score ≥ 75) or not. The percentage of students achieving mastery (classical mastery) was calculated using the formula $P = (F/N) \times 100\%$, where F is the number of students scoring at or above the MMC and N is the total number of students. The observation data were analyzed in the same way, as the percentage of students showing each of the four learning-activity indicators in each cycle, while the field notes and documentation were used to interpret the test and observation results and to plan the refinements for the next cycle.

The action research was considered successful when at least 75% of students achieved scores at or above the minimum mastery criterion (MMC = 75) and at least 70% of students demonstrated active engagement on each of the four observed learning-activity indicators. Both thresholds were fixed before data collection began, so that the decision to terminate or continue the cycles could not be made post hoc. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained through permission from the school principal, and informed consent was obtained from the collaborating teacher; student data were anonymized using two- to three-letter codes throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior to the intervention, a pre-cycle test was administered to establish students' baseline narrative-text reading comprehension. As shown in Table 1, the class obtained a mean score of 62.26 (SD = 10.79), with scores ranging from 50 to 80. Only 10 students (32.26%) reached the minimum mastery criterion (MMC ≥ 75), while the remaining 21 students (67.74%) scored below it. About two-thirds of the class were in the tight 50–60 band, indicating that the difficulty was widespread in the group and not isolated to a struggling minority. This baseline result supports the teacher's report of a widespread challenge with vocabulary and text-level comprehension and served as the empirical foundation for the implementation of the Think-Aloud intervention. This poor baseline is consistent with previous observations that reading comprehension is a persistent issue for Indonesian junior high school students (Yusuf et al., 2018) and coupled with the conclusion that a large number of EFL students have a reasonable awareness of the ways to monitor their own understanding (Al-Mekhlafi, 2018).

After the adoption of Think-Aloud in Cycle I, the class mean increased to 71.45 (SD = 8.68), which is an increase of 9.19 points from the pre-cycle. The number of pupils who mastered the material increased to 15 students (48.39%) whereas 16 students (51.61%) remained below MMC. While there was an improvement, the success criterion of 75% mastery was still not attained and the observation data recorded alongside the test suggested participation was still uneven across the class. The refinements indicated in the

Method section were consequently carried through to Cycle II of the action study. The limited outcome obtained in Cycle I can be explained by the nature of the technique. It is cognitively and linguistically challenging to verbalise one's thinking in a foreign language and the Cycle I reflection indicated that many students were still reluctant to verbalise their thoughts and to ask or answer questions. This is consistent with the finding of Tang et al. (2025) that the effectiveness of Think-Aloud is contingent on sufficient scaffolding and the length of implementation.

After the refinements were implemented in Cycle II, the class mean rose further to 77.58 (SD = 6.44), representing a gain of 6.13 points over Cycle I and 15.32 points over the pre-cycle. Critically, the number of students achieving mastery increased to 27 (87.10%), exceeding the pre-established success criterion of 75%. The standard deviation decreased monotonically across the successive administrations (10.79 → 8.68 → 6.44), indicating that the intervention not only raised the class average but also compressed the distribution; the class minimum rose from 50 to 60 over the same period. Taken together, these two patterns are consistent with lower-performing students having benefited disproportionately from the strategy. On this basis, the action research was terminated at the end of Cycle II. Table 1 summarizes the results of the three tests. These results are consistent with earlier Think-Aloud research at the junior high school level, in particular Yusuf et al.'s (2018) finding that eighth-grade Indonesian students improved in identifying main ideas and drawing inferences after Think-Aloud instruction, and with Tang et al. (2025) review, which concluded that Think-Aloud reliably benefits EFL reading comprehension. That a comparable improvement occurred in a rural junior high school with limited resources and a low baseline suggests that the strategy can also work in this kind of setting. The larger gain in mastery in Cycle II than in Cycle I further indicates that the benefit of Think-Aloud builds up with repeated practice. As McKeown and Gentilucci (2007) describe, meaning is constructed gradually through repeated teacher-student and peer dialogue, and strategy knowledge turns into better comprehension only when the strategy is practised systematically over time (Ghavamnia, 2019; Ghavamnia et al., 2013; Juhkam et al., 2023). The refinements made in Cycle II (more encouragement, more detailed modelling with guiding questions, and the re-grouping of pairs) gave students precisely this additional guided practice.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' reading comprehension scores

Test	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mastery (≥75)
Pre-cycle	31	62.26	10.79	50	80	32.26%
Cycle I	31	71.45	8.68	55	90	48.39%
Cycle II	31	77.58	6.44	60	95	87.10%

Classroom observation data (Table 2) showed parallel improvement in students' learning activity across all four indicators from Cycle I to Cycle II: attention to the teacher's explanation rose from 39% to 74% of students (+35 percentage points), question-asking and -answering rose from 45% to 65% (+20 points), active class participation rose from 29% to 65% (+36 points), and successful task completion rose from 29% to 71% (+42 points). Two indicators, attention (74%) and task completion (71%), met the pre-established 70% engagement criterion in Cycle II, while question-asking and active

participation approached but did not reach it (both 65%). The direction of change was nonetheless consistent across all four indicators, and the two largest shifts occurred in the behaviours most directly targeted by the strategy: active participation and task completion, each of which more than doubled. Read alongside the test results, the observation data indicate that the intervention improved not only measurable comprehension outcomes but also observable classroom engagement, albeit unevenly across indicators. The increase in participation supports Bagci's (2019) view that students' strategy awareness and their confidence in reading reinforce each other: as students became more successful in verbalizing and monitoring their comprehension, they became more willing to engage with the reading task. This is also consistent with evidence that students with stronger reading self-efficacy show greater reading engagement (Yang et al., 2024). The uneven pattern across indicators is informative as well. Asking and answering questions and taking part before the whole class, which require public verbal risk-taking, lagged behind the activities that could be carried out within the pair, suggesting that the paired structure first reduced students' hesitation to verbalize, with whole-class participation following more slowly.

Table 2. Percentage of students' learning activity in cycle I and cycle II

Activity Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II	Change
Attention to teacher's explanation	12 (39%)	23 (74%)	+35%
Asking / answering questions	14 (45%)	20 (65%)	+20%
Active participation in class	9 (29%)	20 (65%)	+36%
Task completion	9 (29%)	22 (71%)	+42%

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that Think-Aloud can be productively adopted by EFL teachers in similarly resource-constrained junior high school settings, provided that (a) the strategy is implemented across multiple cycles rather than a single lesson, allowing the cumulative benefit documented here to materialize; (b) teachers invest deliberate effort in modelling the verbalization process explicitly before releasing responsibility to student pairs, consistent with the transactional, co-constructive nature of the strategy; and (c) lower-performing students are given particular attention, given the disproportionate reduction in score dispersion observed in this study. A fourth condition is inferred from the literature more broadly than these data: teacher preparation is itself a moderator of student comprehension outcomes (Rice et al., 2024; Rice, Hejmadi et al., 2024), so school-level adoption of Think-Aloud is likely to depend less on the specification of the strategy than on whether teachers are truly supported in learning how to model it well.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, the study involved only one class of 31 students, with no comparison group. It may be concluded that students' reading comprehension improved from pre-cycle to Cycle II, however this improvement can be caused by students' familiarity with the test format rather than only the Think-Aloud approach. Second, the intervention consisted of only two short cycles; although the class met the 75% mastery criterion, four students still scored below the MMC in the Cycle II test, and two of the four activity indicators (asking and answering questions, and active participation) reached only 65%, below the 70% criterion. Third, the reading tests were developed by the researcher and reviewed by the collaborating teacher, so the scores describe progress within this class rather than reading

ability measured by a standardized test. Fourth, the observation data were recorded by the collaborating teacher, who knew the aims of the study, so the activity ratings may have been influenced by the teacher's expectations. Further cycles or studies should therefore involve more meetings, give additional attention to the students who have not yet reached the MMC, and use an independent observer.

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research concludes that the Think-Aloud strategy improved the narrative-text reading comprehension of the eighth-grade students of SMPN 5 Kabun. Before the intervention, students' reading comprehension was low, with a mean score of 62.26 and only 32.26% of the students reaching the MMC. After the strategy was implemented, the mean score increased to 71.45 with 48.39% mastery in Cycle I and to 77.58 with 87.10% mastery in Cycle II, so the success criterion of 75% classical mastery was achieved. Students' learning activity also increased on all four observed indicators, with attention and task completion reaching the 70% criterion. English teachers are therefore encouraged to apply Think-Aloud over several meetings, with explicit modelling and particular attention to lower-performing students, when teaching reading in junior high school.

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