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Story-Based Tasks through Reading Aloud to Support Young Learners' Speaking and Critical Thinking

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 23, March 2024 Revised: 12 July 2026 Accepted: 28 July 2026 Keywords: story-based tasks; reading aloud; young learners; speaking performance; critical thinking; EFL	This study investigated the use of story-based tasks through reading aloud to enhance elementary school students' speaking and critical thinking skills. The study employed a one-group pretest-posttest design involving 26 elementary school students at a private primary school in Yogyakarta. Students' speaking performance was assessed in terms of pronunciation, fluency, and intonation, while critical thinking was assessed through understanding, reasoning, and connecting. Quantitative data were obtained from speaking and critical thinking assessments administered before and after the intervention, while students' responses, worksheets, and classroom observations provided supporting qualitative data. The findings indicated substantial improvement in students' reading-aloud performance, with the mean score increasing from 4.6 in the pre-test to 9.4 in the post-test on a 12-point scale. Students' critical thinking scores also increased from 4.6 to 6.8. Qualitative evidence further indicated that students became more willing to participate, demonstrated better comprehension of story content, expressed simple opinions, and reused story dialogues creatively in new contexts. These findings suggest that story-based tasks integrated with reading aloud can support the development of young learners' oral English proficiency and provide meaningful opportunities for emerging critical thinking. <i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license</i>



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1. Introduction

English learning for young learners should provide opportunities for children to use language meaningfully rather than focus predominantly on memorizing vocabulary and completing written exercises. At the elementary school level, stories can provide an accessible context in which children encounter language through meaningful characters, events, actions, and problems. Story-based learning can therefore create opportunities for learners to develop language skills while simultaneously engaging with meaning and context.

Story-based tasks combine the advantages of storytelling with task-based language teaching by requiring learners to use language to accomplish meaningful activities related to a story. In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, task-based activities can provide opportunities for learners to interact, negotiate meaning, and produce language for communicative purposes (Inawati et al., 2022; Soongpankhao & Yuxin, 2025). For young learners, the use of stories may be particularly appropriate because stories provide contextualized language input and can make learning experiences more engaging and memorable.

One activity that can be integrated into story-based learning is reading aloud. Reading aloud provides young

learners with opportunities to practice pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and intonation while interacting with meaningful texts. Previous studies have indicated that shared and dialogic reading can support language development, particularly vocabulary and comprehension (Arnold et al., 1994; Dowdall et al., 2020; Ramsey et al., 2021). Reading aloud may also support oral production because learners are required to pronounce words, attend to sentence rhythm, and use appropriate intonation when interpreting characters and events in a story (Lustenberger, 2024; Arguello San Martin et al., 2020).

The potential of story-based activities extends beyond linguistic development. Stories can provide contexts in which learners interpret events, identify characters' intentions, explain reasons, and relate story events to their own experiences. Such activities may provide initial opportunities for young learners to develop critical thinking. Rather than treating critical thinking as an abstract cognitive skill, teachers can introduce age-appropriate thinking activities through questions and tasks that require learners to understand information, provide reasons, and establish connections between texts and personal experiences. The integration of language learning and values through stories has also received attention in previous research. Story-based materials can

provide opportunities for learners to encounter moral and social values in meaningful contexts (Sulistiyo et al., 2020; Thambusamy & Elier, 2013; Widodo, 2018). However, the effectiveness of such activities depends on how learners are encouraged to interact with and respond to the story rather than simply listen to or reproduce it. Activities involving questioning, discussion, explanation, and personal responses can transform reading from a predominantly receptive activity into a more interactive learning experience.

Despite the potential of story-based and reading-aloud activities, English instruction for young learners may still provide limited opportunities for oral communication. Classroom activities that emphasize textbooks and written exercises may restrict students' opportunities to speak English in meaningful situations. Consequently, learners may have limited confidence in producing English orally and may have difficulty expressing simple ideas about texts. The present study therefore investigates the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud in an elementary EFL classroom. The study focuses on two outcomes: students' speaking performance and critical thinking. Speaking performance is operationalized through pronunciation, fluency, and intonation, while critical thinking is examined through understanding, reasoning, and connecting. In addition to quantitative changes in students' scores, the study also explores students' classroom responses and engagement during and after the story-based activities. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud enhance elementary school students' speaking performance?
2. To what extent does the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud support the development of elementary school students' critical thinking?
3. How do students respond to story-based tasks through reading aloud as an English learning activity?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative-dominant mixed-method approach using a one-group pretest-posttest design. The quantitative component was used to examine changes in students' speaking and critical thinking scores before and after the instructional intervention. Qualitative data from classroom observations, students' worksheets, reflections, and informal responses were used to provide additional insight into students' learning experiences.

The design can be represented as:

$$O_1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow O_2$$

where O_1 represents the pre-test, X represents the story-based tasks through reading aloud intervention, and O_2 represents the post-test. Because the study did not employ a control group, the findings are interpreted as changes observed following the intervention rather than definitive evidence of a causal effect.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The participants were 26 elementary school students at a private primary school in Yogyakarta. The students participated in English learning activities based on stories and reading aloud. During the instructional sessions, the students were divided into three smaller groups to facilitate interaction, reading practice, discussion, and teacher-student feedback. The study was conducted in an

authentic elementary school English-learning context. The students' identities were protected by using pseudonyms when individual student data were presented.

2.3 Instructional Procedure

The intervention integrated story-based tasks with reading aloud/dialogic reading (Inawati et al., 2022). The instructional sequence consisted of several interconnected activities. First, students were introduced to the vocabulary and general context of the selected story. The teacher/researcher activated students' prior knowledge and introduced important words and expressions appearing in the story. Second, students participated in reading-aloud activities. Students listened to and followed the story before taking turns reading selected parts of the text. Attention was given to pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. Rather than requiring students simply to read the text, the activity included questions and interactions related to the characters, events, and meaning of the story. Third, students completed story-based tasks that required them to demonstrate understanding, provide simple reasons for characters' actions, and connect events in the story with their own experiences. These activities were intended to provide opportunities for emerging critical thinking while maintaining an age-appropriate level of English use. Finally, students completed post-intervention assessments and reflection activities. Their responses to the stories, worksheets, and classroom interactions were also documented as supporting qualitative data.

2.4 Instruments

Two assessment instruments were employed to examine the development of students' speaking and critical thinking skills following the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud. Students' speaking performance was assessed through a reading-aloud task focusing on pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. Pronunciation referred to the students' ability to produce words clearly and intelligibly, while fluency concerned their ability to read the story continuously with minimal hesitation. Intonation referred to their ability to use appropriate variations in pitch and expression when reading the story. Each dimension was rated on a four-point scale, resulting in a maximum score of 12. The total scores were interpreted as very good (10–12), good (7–9), fair (4–6), and needs improvement (1–3).

Students' critical thinking was assessed based on their ability to understand, reason, and connect ideas presented in the stories. Understanding referred to their ability to identify and explain information from the story. Reasoning concerned their ability to provide simple reasons or explanations for characters' actions and events. Connecting referred to their ability to relate the content or messages of the story to their own experiences or everyday situations. Each dimension was also rated on a four-point scale, producing a maximum score of 12. The resulting scores were interpreted using the same four categories: very good (10–12), good (7–9), fair (4–6), and needs improvement (1–3).

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were collected through pre-test and post-test assessments. Mean scores were calculated to identify changes in students' speaking and critical thinking performance following the intervention. Qualitative data were obtained from classroom

observations, students' worksheets and reflections, and informal responses following the learning activities. These data were examined descriptively to identify patterns related to students' participation, comprehension, confidence, and use of language beyond the original story context. Because the study did not include a control group and no inferential statistical test was conducted, the term "improvement" is used rather than claiming statistically significant differences (Creswell, 2009).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Improvement in Students' Speaking Performance

The first finding concerns the improvement in students' speaking performance following the implementation of reading-aloud activities. The assessment focused on three aspects of speaking performance: pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. The results of the pre-test and post-test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Speaking Performance Before and After the Intervention

Speaking Activity	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement
Reading aloud	4.6	9.4	+4.8

As shown in Table 1, the mean speaking score increased from 4.6 in the pre-test to 9.4 in the post-test, representing an improvement of 4.8 points on a 12-point scale. Based on the assessment criteria used in this study, the students' performance improved from the fair category to the very good category. This result indicates a substantial improvement in students' oral performance after participating in the reading-aloud activities. The improvement may be attributed to the repeated opportunities provided for students to encounter and produce English through story-based activities. Reading aloud allowed students to practice pronunciation, fluency, and intonation in a relatively structured learning environment. In addition, the story context provided contextual support that helped students understand how particular words and expressions were used in meaningful situations. Therefore, students were not only exposed to language forms but also had opportunities to apply them through oral production.

The improvement in intonation is also noteworthy. Reading stories requires learners to pay attention to the emotions, actions, and intentions of the characters. Consequently, students were encouraged to vary their intonation according to the meaning and context of the story rather than simply reading individual sentences. The use of meaningful narrative contexts may therefore have contributed to students' ability to produce more expressive oral language. This finding is in line with previous studies indicating that storytelling and story-based activities can facilitate young learners' oral language development (Le, 2020; Arguello San Martin et al., 2020).

The quantitative findings were further supported by classroom observations conducted during the intervention. Throughout the learning activities, students gradually became more willing to read parts of the story aloud and participate in classroom interactions. Some students who initially appeared hesitant to speak showed greater willingness to participate when the language was presented within a familiar and meaningful story context. This observation suggests that reading aloud through stories may provide a supportive learning environment for young EFL learners, particularly those who have

limited opportunities to use English for oral communication.

The findings can also be viewed in relation to the principles of task-based language teaching, which emphasize the use of meaningful and contextualized language for communicative purposes. Meaningful tasks can provide learners with opportunities to use language beyond isolated grammar or vocabulary exercises (Inawati et al., 2022; Soongpankhao & Yuxin, 2025). In the present study, the story served as a meaningful context that connected pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehension, and oral production. Through reading aloud, students were therefore given opportunities to practice these aspects of language in an integrated manner.

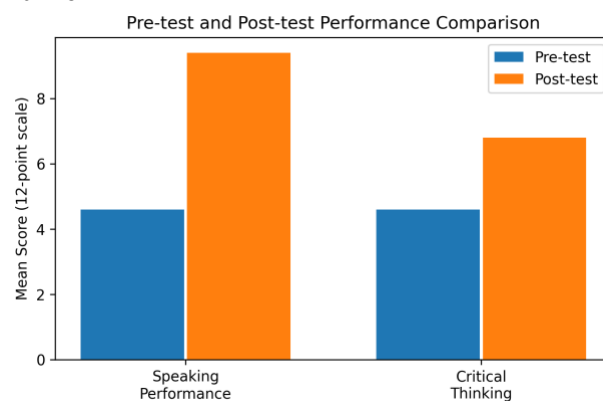


Figure 1. Comparison of students' pre-test and post-test mean scores Interpretation

The figure illustrates the substantial improvement in students' speaking performance following the story-based reading-aloud intervention. The increase from pre-test to post-test reflects the contribution of repeated oral practice, contextualized language exposure, and feedback opportunities in developing pronunciation, fluency, and intonation.

Overall, the findings indicate that reading aloud through story-based activities was associated with improved students' speaking performance. The increase in the mean score, together with the classroom observations, suggests that the activity provided students with repeated and contextualized opportunities to practice oral English. However, the improvement should be interpreted within the context of the present study and its instructional setting, rather than being generalized to all EFL learners.

3.2 Development of Students' Critical Thinking

The second finding concerns the improvement in students' critical thinking following the implementation of story-based learning activities. The assessment focused on three aspects of critical thinking: understanding, reasoning, and connecting ideas. The students' pre-test and post-test scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Critical Thinking Performance Before and After the Intervention

Assessment	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement
Critical thinking	4.6	6.8	+2.2

As presented in Table 2, the mean score increased from 4.6 in the pre-test to 6.8 in the post-test, indicating an improvement of 2.2 points on a 12-point scale. However, based on the assessment criteria, the students' performance remained within the fair category. Thus, although the results indicate positive development in critical thinking, the improvement was not sufficient to move the students into the good category. The

improvement was particularly evident in students' ability to understand story content and respond to questions concerning characters, events, and situations presented in the stories. Students also showed progress in providing simple reasons for characters' actions. In several instances, students were able to relate the messages or situations presented in the stories to experiences in their everyday lives. These responses indicate that students began to move beyond recalling information from the stories toward interpreting events and relating them to familiar situations.

The findings suggest that story-based activities can provide an accessible context for introducing critical thinking skills to young learners. Stories present concrete characters, events, problems, and consequences that can serve as starting points for discussion and reflection. Questions such as why a character behaved in a particular way, whether students agreed with a character's decision, or whether they had experienced a similar situation encouraged students to provide explanations, express opinions, and make connections. In this sense, the story served not only as a source of language input but also as a stimulus for simple reasoning and reflection.

Nevertheless, the improvement in critical thinking was more modest than the improvement observed in speaking performance. One possible explanation is the limited amount of instructional time available for students to engage in extended reasoning and reflection. The development of critical thinking generally requires repeated opportunities to interpret information, provide reasons, compare perspectives, justify opinions, and establish connections between ideas. For young EFL learners, these processes may be further complicated by their limited English proficiency, as students need to develop their ideas while simultaneously expressing them in a foreign language.

This finding indicates that the use of stories alone may not be sufficient to produce substantial improvement in students' critical thinking. The role of the teacher and the design of follow-up activities are therefore important. Story-based instruction may provide greater opportunities for cognitive engagement when teachers systematically use questions and tasks that require students to explain, justify, predict, compare, and connect ideas. Such activities can gradually move learners from simple comprehension toward more reflective and reasoned responses.

The finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the potential of stories to provide meaningful contexts for interpretation, values, and reflection (Sulistiyo et al. 2020; Widodo 2018). However, the present findings also suggest that the cognitive potential of stories needs to be deliberately activated through interactive questioning and follow-up tasks. Reading or listening to stories by itself may primarily support comprehension, whereas structured discussion and higher-order questioning can provide additional opportunities for students to engage in reasoning and reflection.

Figure 2. Magnitude of improvement across assessed outcomes.

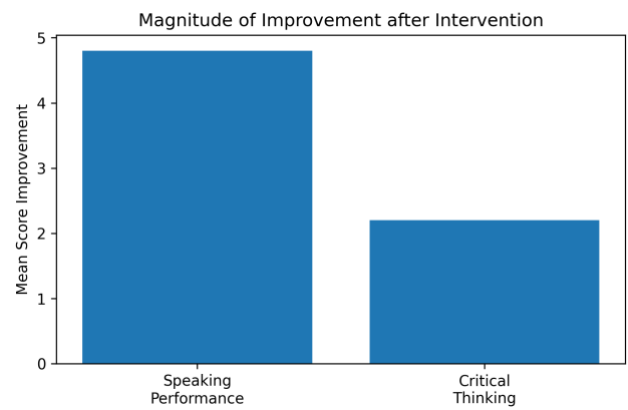


Figure 2. The comparison of gain scores shows that speaking performance experienced a larger improvement than critical thinking.

Figure 2 shows the pattern suggests that oral language development may occur more rapidly through intensive practice, whereas critical thinking requires sustained opportunities for reasoning, reflection, and connecting ideas.

Overall, the results show a positive but relatively modest improvement in students' critical thinking. The increase in the mean score suggests that story-based learning provided opportunities for students to develop basic understanding, reasoning, and connections. However, the absence of a categorical shift indicates that more sustained instructional support and cognitively engaging activities may be required to achieve stronger development in critical thinking.

3.3 Students' Responses with Stories and Language

The qualitative findings provided additional evidence concerning students' responses to the learning activities. Most students reported enjoying the stories and reading-aloud activities. Twenty-four of the 26 students expressed positive responses to the activities, particularly because they considered the stories interesting, humorous, and easy to understand. Students' worksheets and reflections also indicated that most students were able to answer comprehension questions and express simple opinions about the stories. This finding suggests that the stories provided an accessible context for students to demonstrate comprehension and personal responses.

An interesting finding emerged several days after the reading-aloud activities. The classroom teacher reported that students continued to open the storybooks and repeat dialogues from the stories. Some students even modified the names of the characters by replacing them with their classmates' names. For example, the character "Mr. Bin" was changed into "Mr. Fadil," while other dialogues were adapted using classmates' names such as "Aleya." This behavior is significant because it indicates that students were not merely reproducing the story during the lesson. They were beginning to reuse linguistic expressions from the story in new and personally meaningful contexts. Such creative modification can be interpreted as an indication of language appropriation, in which learners take expressions encountered in instructional materials and begin to manipulate them for their own communicative purposes.

The finding supports the view that contextualized stories can contribute to meaningful language learning among young learners. When language is encountered repeatedly in an engaging narrative, students may

remember and reuse expressions more naturally. The combination of reading aloud, interaction, and story-based tasks therefore appears to have created opportunities for students to engage with English beyond the immediate assessment situation.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that story-based tasks through reading aloud can support both linguistic and cognitive dimensions of young learners' English learning. The strongest improvement was observed in reading-aloud performance, while critical thinking showed a more moderate increase. This difference is understandable because the two outcomes require different forms of learning. Speaking performance through reading aloud can be practiced directly and repeatedly during a relatively short instructional period. Students can immediately receive feedback on pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. Critical thinking, in contrast, requires students to interpret information, formulate reasons, and connect ideas. These processes may require longer-term and more systematic instructional support.

The findings consequently suggest that reading aloud should not be viewed merely as a technique for improving pronunciation. When integrated with story-based questions, discussion, and reflective tasks, reading aloud can become part of a broader communicative learning sequence. The story provides language input, reading aloud provides opportunities for oral production, and story-based tasks create opportunities for comprehension, reasoning, and personal connection.

This integrated approach is particularly relevant for young EFL learners because it connects linguistic development with meaningful content. Rather than separating speaking, reading, vocabulary, and thinking activities, teachers can use stories as a common context through which these skills are developed simultaneously.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the extent to which the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud could enhance elementary school students' speaking performance, support the development of their critical thinking, and explore students' responses to story-based tasks as an English learning activity. The findings provide evidence that the use of stories through reading aloud offered meaningful opportunities for students to develop both language performance and emerging cognitive skills.

In terms of speaking performance, the implementation of story-based tasks through reading aloud resulted in a clear improvement in students' performance. The mean score increased from 4.6 in the pre-test to 9.4 in the post-test on a 12-point scale. Improvements were observed in pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. This finding suggests that reading aloud within a meaningful story context provided students with repeated opportunities to practice oral English and supported their ability to produce language more confidently and expressively.

In terms of critical thinking, the findings show that students' mean scores increased from 4.6 to 6.8. The improvement was reflected in students' ability to understand story content, provide simple reasons for characters' actions, and connect story messages with their personal experiences. However, the post-test score remained within the fair category. Thus, although story-based tasks provided opportunities for students to engage in basic reasoning and reflection, the findings indicate that more sustained and systematic practice is

needed to promote further development of critical thinking.

Regarding students' responses to story-based tasks through reading aloud, the qualitative findings indicate generally positive responses. Most students showed interest in the stories and participated actively in the reading-aloud activities. Their understanding was also demonstrated through worksheets, responses to questions, and reflection activities. Furthermore, some students continued to use and modify story dialogues after the learning activities, suggesting that the language encountered through the stories remained meaningful to them beyond the immediate classroom activity.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that story-based tasks integrated with reading aloud can be a promising approach to supporting young learners' oral English performance while also creating opportunities for the development of emerging critical-thinking skills. The findings further highlight the value of meaningful and contextualized language activities in engaging elementary school learners in English learning.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because this study employed a one-group pre-test-post-test design without a comparison group and involved a relatively small number of participants. Therefore, the observed improvements cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention. Future research should involve larger samples, comparison groups, longer intervention periods, and inferential statistical analysis to examine the effectiveness of story-based tasks more rigorously. Further studies could also investigate how different types of story-based questions and follow-up tasks contribute to specific dimensions of young learners' critical thinking development.

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