

Reading Aloud to Increase Parental Engagement in Children Literacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The parental engagement of the 1st graders of SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal in their children's early literacy phase is still not maximal. Reading has not become an important part of learning activities at home. Therefore, efforts must be made to encourage parents to pay more attention to children's reading interest by being directly involved in children's reading activities. The reading aloud activity aims to arouse parental awareness and provide skills for parents of the 1st graders of SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal to be able to accompany their children in reading books at home as an effort to develop reading interest from an early age. Materials and demonstration of reading aloud were delivered via podcast and broadcast on Youtube due to social restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, parents practiced reading aloud to their children at home. This activity was recorded and the video was sent to the service team for feedback and evaluation. Through this activity, parents could spend their time to assist their children in learning, especially reading. Children learned with enthusiasm and had a pleasant book reading experience. In addition, students' interest in reading will grow because they get a pleasant impression from reading aloud with their parents at home.

Keywords; Reading aloud, parental engagement, reading habit

1. Introduction

Since 2016, the Ministry of Education and Culture has intensified the National Literacy Movement (*Gerakan Literasi Nasional/GLN*) to foster a culture of literacy in the education ecosystem starting from families, schools and communities in the context of lifelong learning to improve quality (Atmazaki dkk, 2017). This program was strengthened by the inauguration of the National Movement for Parents Reading Books (*Gerakan Nasional Orang Tua Membacakan Buku/Gernas Buku*) on May 5, 2018 which aims to (1) familiarize parents with reading books with their children, (2) strengthen the socio-emotional relationship between children and parents, and (3) fostering children's interest in reading from an early age. This effort

was made because of the alarming facts that based on the results of the 2015 BPS survey as many as 91.47% of school-age children in Indonesia prefer to watch television and only 13.11% like to read. In the *Gernas Baku* program, parents, school members and the community are expected to involve in the children's literacy process, especially at pre-school age (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). Thus, the foundation of literacy will be built firmly and children will be ready to enter the primary school level.

Based on Regulation of Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 17 Year 2017, the age limit requirement for the 1st graders of elementary school is 6-7 years. At this age, children are expected to have school readiness in terms of various aspects including language skills and literacy (Britto, 2016). Seefeldt & Wasik (2008: 353-355) added that the basic ability that children must have to enter elementary school is reading. This is in line with Gove and Cvelich's (2011) opinion that reading is the foundation of classroom learning activities.

In the academic year of 2020-2021, SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal accepted 112 students and were divided into 4 (four) parallel classes (Class 1 A-D). Of those 112 students, many have already been able to read but some of them have not. Those who are still struggling in reading will be given an additional reading lesson. However, the aim is to enable the students to read so that they can attend lessons in school where grade 1 materials require students to comprehend reading texts. This activity is not intended to develop students' reading interest. Thus, even though children can read, it does not guarantee that they will become fond of reading.

In the normal learning condition (offline class), students can use the school library facilities to read books other than textbooks. Students can also borrow books from the library and read in reading corners or spaces provided by the school. This is a school effort made to support students' reading interest. However, in an online learning situation, this certainly cannot be done because student learning activities are entirely carried out at home.

From the above elaboration, the school needs to make other efforts so that it can continue to foster a generation of readers who are raised from an early age.

Therefore, it is necessary to apply an appropriate and effective learning strategy of reading for children aged 6-7 years (1st graders of elementary school) that parents and their children can do at home, for example reading aloud. In Brazil, an innovative program focused on promoting reading aloud by parents to children lasting for 9 months resulted in greater benefits for parent-child interaction and children's language and cognitive development than the one provided by childcare education (Weisleder dkk, 2018). In the same breath, Ahmad et al. (2020) said that the role of parents in encouraging their children's reading habit is very important and becomes more decisive in enhancing and maintaining reading habit. It is confirmed by Inten (2017) that parents are the first and foremost to instill various things that affect the child's personality in the future.

In this 21st century, students' literacy skills are closely related to the demands of reading skills which lead to the ability to understand information analytically, critically and reflectively (Sari, 2018). For the 1st graders, the textbook materials require students to be able to comprehend the texts and lead to higher order thinking skills (HOTS), not for those who are still on the phase of spelling and reading practice. As mentioned by Gove et al. (2011: 96), the children's development in reading and writing for 1st graders of elementary school is at the early phase where the instructions become more formal. At this age, children usually begin reading simple stories and develop reading strategies such as predicting and comprehending reading texts. Consequently, parents have to prepare their children early before entering elementary school to be able to read.

In normal school learning conditions, the 1st graders of SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal who have not gained reading fluency will be given an extra lesson by the class teacher. However, in the Covid-19 pandemic situation, teachers can only provide additional reading assignments and then students must study at home with parental guidance. And parents who do not have the time or ability to teach their children will delegate the task to someone else, such as a tutor. It is not a mistake, but in this activity parents are not directly involved in the students' learning process.

On the other hand, when learning at home, 24 hours of children's activities are the parents' responsibility, including in terms of education. The school "only" acts as a partner providing curriculum and learning contents. In these conditions,

the teacher is in a difficult position to reach students directly. School lessons are delivered online via Youtube in less than 15 minutes or even only in the form of assignments in student books or worksheets. There is no emotional connection that feels like face-to-face learning in class. If this large amount of time is not spent properly by parents, school lessons will only become a burden for students because the focus of learning is only completing subject assignments. This burden can potentially make children lazy to read and ultimately reading interest is difficult to grow.

During the online learning process, communication between teachers and students' parents is carried out through the Whatsapp. Whatsapp is used to send lesson materials every Monday to Saturday. Student assignments are also collected via Whatsapp by taking photos of the worksheets or sending videos. By reading the instructions from the teacher, parents will guide their children at home to study. In addition, Whatsapp is also used to convey other school information. Another media used is the school website to work on student evaluation questions on weekends. Evaluation is used to measure students' knowledge in understanding the subject matter. There are times when the learning process is carried out through the Zoom application so that the teacher can have virtual face-to-face with students, and students can also greet their classmates. In addition, Facebook and radio channels are also used to deliver live broadcasts discussing school lessons.

Therefore, it can be seen that the children's learning resources are teachers through social media, Internet applications, school textbooks, and student worksheets. Books outside of school subject matter are not directly discussed in the communication between teachers and parents. In other words, student activities aimed at developing reading interest have not been paid a special attention. As Owusu-Acheaw dan Larson (2014) are concerned that if children miss the opportunity to connect with books in the early stages of their lives, they will find it difficult to acquire a good reading habit in the future.

Based on the situation analysis and partner's problems described above, the focus of the problem can be seen from two points of view: (1) literacy activities at school cannot be carried out so that literacy activities need to be done at home by involving parents, especially for the 1st graders of elementary school; (2) student

learning activities at home rely a lot on the materials from schools that use online modes aimed to complete school assignments not to develop students' reading interest. Thus, there is an urgency of applying an appropriate learning strategy so that students will love reading activities through parental engagement.

2. Method

To solve the partner's problems, our community service team conducted a training to read aloud with the parents of grade 1A-D students at SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal as the subjects. With this training, the school is trying to encourage parents to play an active role in children's literacy activities at home because during this pandemic the role of teachers is limited to delivering subject matter online and conducting evaluations for school assignments given to the students.

For home activity, parents directly practiced reading books to their children. Parents could read aloud interactively making it fun for children. Fajriyah (2018) mentioned that the efforts that can be made to develop early literacy in children are creating a literacy environment and reading stories. The reading stories activity is suitable for low graders because their characteristics are concrete operational, love stories, and think narratively (Pratiwi, 2017).

Bano et al. (2018) in their research suggested that parents should play an active role in developing reading attitude by providing reading materials and creating a reading-friendly environment at home. Thus, it will create interesting experiences for children to associate with book reading. Students will think of book reading as a necessity not a burden. So, it is expected that children's reading interest will develop. Bano et al. also added that if parents focus on improving children's reading skills at an early age, they will better develop reading activity as a routine.

The reading aloud training was carried out with the following procedure:

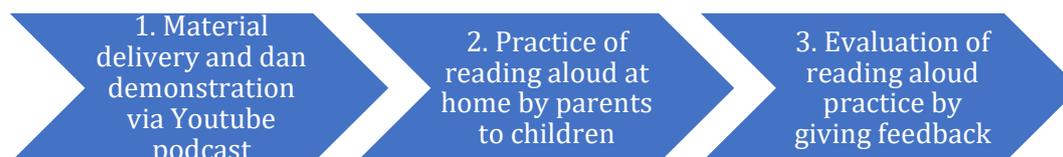


Figure 1. Procedure of reading aloud training

3. Results and Discussion

In the first stage of the reading aloud training, the community service team delivered materials on a Youtube podcast in less than 40 minutes which can be accessed via the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X22eq2CFxpE. The materials are as follows:

1. Definition of read aloud

Setiawan (2017) said that reading aloud is the activity of reading books aloud, which is a simple activity but has great benefits. Parents only need to take books/ reading materials and read them aloud to children. If done regularly, Setiawan convinced that children will be willing to read, be able to read and become fond of reading.

In other words, reading aloud is not just reading with a loud voice. When a book is read loudly, there is also an attempt to bring the texts in the book to life, there are letter symbols that are strung together in words which are then pronounced with the right intonation according to the context. For example, when reading about the story of Prophet Sulayman and the ants, read it with an upward intonation in the following sentence "Hey ants ... come back to your nest, we are passing this way!" By doing this, children are brought into situations where they can feel involved in the text and engage reading. As a result, reading aloud will be effective (Acosta-Tello, 2019).

2. Purposes of reading aloud

The purpose of reading books to children is to develop reading habit and develop a character of fond of reading in children from an early age. Wandasari (2017) defines this character as the habit of taking time to read various readings that benefit the reader. So, the main purpose of reading aloud is to provide a pleasant experience for children in interacting with books. Gambrell in Layne (2015) mentioned that reading aloud for students can make them love languages and books. The focus is not to make children be able to read as early as possible but to make them love reading. A child who can read early but has never been read to may not be interested in reading. Children can get bored easily when given reading material or refuse to read at all if they are not asked. Meanwhile, children who are accustomed to being read to will try to

understand the book contents and enjoy them more when they are reading a book independently.

In addition, reading aloud also aims to expose children to academic vocabulary they will encounter in school textbooks and also motivate students to enjoy the reading process more. This can be achieved if the child is effectively read to for at least 20 minutes every day (Johnston, 2015).

3. Advantages of reading to children at home (Trelease, 2013)

- a. Creating a pleasant experience between parent and child: they share the enjoyment of reading a book, the stories in the book can slowly be parsed as they wish, and the pictures can be observed closely by children without fear of disappearing quickly like on television.
- b. Stories in books can be narrated in language appropriate to the child's age and attention span. Parents know this better.
- c. Dialogue can be done interactively.
- d. Children are exposed to rich, structured, and attractive.
- e. Children know standard/written language so this will help their writing skills.
- f. Children get to know vocabulary in context and how to write it down so that it is easier to learn to spell. At the same time, they also recognize the word symbols and their sounds.
- g. Reading books can also extend a child's attention span so children can learn to focus more.

4. Children's responses when being read to

Children's responses when being read to can vary depending on their age or how often children are read to. Even so, parents are advised to keep reading the book at least 1 book or for about 10-20 minutes a day. The forms of children responses by (*Reading Milestones: 0-24 Months*, 2019) are for example:

- a. A 4-month-old baby will look calm or give a little smile or just be quiet, but he is actually listening.
- b. A 5-to-6-month-old baby will be more interested in biting the book.

- c. An 8-month old baby prefers to turn book pages even though they have not finished reading them.
- d. A one-year-old child will move a lot but can imitate sounds or movements with short concentration (3 minutes).

Carroll (2013) added that young children's experiences with story books are more valuable when adults involve them in the story. Children are asked to respond, while adults provide them with relevant information. Children's questions and comments on stories are an important component of interactive procedures.

5. Contents of children books

Karima and Kurniawati (2020) mentioned that when parents read books to children, it is better to pay attention to the type of book as well as the parental engagement in the interaction while the book is being read.

Books that can be read to children from an early age to the first year of elementary school should consider the following:

- a. Books must be in physical form, not digital or audio books, because the goal is to build interactions between children and books, not merely to understand the contents.
- b. For babies and toddlers, provide a book with a narrative that has a good rhythm and rhyme with bright colors and things that are easily recognizable. Children of 2 - 2.5 years can begin to understand the plot of the story.
- c. At the age of 2.5 years, parents can read stories containing moral values, self-help, spiritual, stories of the prophet and their fellows.

In addition to delivering the materials, our team also demonstrated the activity of reading aloud as an example for parents to be able to practice the same activity at home. This podcast was welcomed by SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal and the parents of the 1st graders. Parents gave positive responses; that is after watching the podcast, parents clicked *like* on Youtube and filled out the Google Form for viewers.

In the second stage, parents practiced reading aloud to their children. This activity was recorded in a form of video and uploaded to Youtube. Then the video

link was shared to WhatsApp group of each class and our community service team to get feedbacks. There were 43 responses from participants from all 1st grades totaling 112 students.

In the third stage, our team gave feedbacks in the form of comments and positive input on book reading that parents have done to their children at home. Their understanding of the importance of reading books to children and how to practice it can be seen from the videos sent to the class WhatsApp groups. Both children and parents also seem enthusiastic in reading activities.

4. Conclusion

This activity of reading aloud by parents to the 1st graders of SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal gave great benefits for schools, parents and the 1st graders. In the current pandemic condition, schools can continue the literacy program even though students are not present at school. Parents can read books to their children so that parents are engaged in the children's literacy process. In the process of developing reading interest, children have a pleasant experience because their parents can directly assist them.

Parental engagement in the process of developing children's reading interest is a good start to maintain the sustainability of school literacy programs. After carrying out the activity of reading aloud by parents to children, the next literacy activities that can be done are to create a book reading community for students at SD Ihsaniyah Gajahmada Tegal or to review simple children's story books. It still requires the parental engagement, so that together with school children's literacy activities can continue both at home and at school, in normal and pandemic conditions.

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