

The Significance of Book Selection: An EFL Parent's Criteria for Selecting English Story Books

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Abstract. There has been an increasing awareness on the importance of home literacy practices Indonesian societies. Reading and literacy events such as “21 Hari Seru Membaca Nyaring” was the manifestation of this increasing awareness. Despite the numerous efforts initiated by local communities to promote enthusiasm in reading and reading aloud, only a few pays attention on the significance of book selection process. Book selection is the process of selecting books to read. For young children, it is mostly done the caregivers. Book selection process involves both cognitive and sociocultural considerations that are interesting to examine. As part of a larger ethnographic study of home literacy practices, we would like to share some fragments of our data that focus on the process of book selection done by the adult participant of the study. During the process, the adult participant who happened to be an English teacher, considered content, visual features, readability, and story length for the books that they selected, in addition to the cultural considerations. Based on the analysis of the interactions, we suggest some practical implications on book selection process for home parent – children reading practices.

Keywords: Book, EFL, Parents, English Story Books

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has improved its education accessibility in recent decades [1]. The improvement is noticeably a result of the growth of income level, demographic change, and government effort to accommodate free education. This is proven by the increase of student enrolment in every education level [1]. Quoting Rosser [1], the percentage of Indonesian who enrolled to Higher Educational Institution (HEI) increase from 2 percent to 24 percent over the period of 1972 – 2015. The improvement of Indonesian's education attainment influences many aspects, one of them is the parental involvement in children. Previous research on parental involvement in children's education in Indonesia found that parent's educational attainment and parental involvement positively influence elementary school student's academic achievement [2].

Children who acquired an ideal education and actively supported by their parents since early childhood will most likely grow into a better future generation [3]. In order to support children's education, particularly in literacy, Indonesian government initiated a literacy movement known as GLN (National literacy movement). This movement designed to improve Indonesians' low attainment in literacy. The national wide movement divided into several movements called GLM (Community-based literacy movement), GLS (School-based literacy movement) and GLK (Home-based literacy movement). As the GLK habituated specific movement for parents-children reading such as

GERNAS BAKU (Parent reading to children movement) and *Pencanangan Gerakan 10 Menit Membacakan Cerita* (10 minutes read aloud to children movement) initiated. These movements aim to improve parental roles in developing children's reading interest and habituate parent – children reading home literacy practices, as well as strengthen the parent – children emotional bond [3].

In addition to the initiatives by the Indonesia government, Indonesia's reading communities also play their roles in supporting home literacy practice by generating a challenge called *21 Hari Membaca Nyaring* (21 days of reading aloud).

As reading aloud and home literacy practice habituated, the issue about book selection emerges. Book selection is identified as one of the fundamental stages that would influence the effectiveness of reading aloud [4]. Thus, selecting good quality book, such as well written book, book that has appealing plot and characters, and book that helps teacher displayed expressive and fluent reading, is considered very influential to the success of home reading activities [4]. As simple as it may seem, the process of book selection for an English learner may incorporate a more complicated phase. For instance, the book selection for English learner should consider children's age appropriateness, interest, culture, language, knowledge level and interest [5]. Thereupon, essential elements like content accessibility, language accessibility, visual accessibility and genre accessibility were proposed

as guideline for English learner book selection process [5].

As a researcher, I observed and discussed the process deeply with Amara, the adult participant of my study. I grew up in an Indonesian Muslim family that read. My mother often came home with story books that she bought and read for me every night before I went to sleep. When I read by myself, I read books that my mother picked for me. I never had the opportunity to choose my own books until I was a teenager. The process of book selection never really mattered for me until now. Looking back to the book selection process that my mother did when I was a little child, I can now relate to how important the process is for the child-reader in me. I also notice a few non cognitive aspects that mattered to Amara (that she involved) while selecting books for Jun. Some of those remind me of what my mother used to do when picking up books for me.

Therefore, I am intrigued to investigate the book selection process that occurs at Indonesian homes. We (the first and second authors) theorize that in the process, in addition to some considerations on the cognitive aspects, parents display their cultural values, belief, and knowledge of the world. We wondered how the personal factors such as belief, values, cross-cultural exposures, and knowledge of the world affect parents' book selection process? With this inquiry, we would report a case study with an Indonesian mother who happened to be an English teacher as she was selecting books for her 8-year son. This study reports the criteria that Amara used to select books that included the cognitive aspects and how the process portrays her personal belief and sociocultural views.

This study is part of an ethnography project that studies Indonesian home literacy practices. When I (first author) wrote this paper, I was in my final year and in the process of finishing my undergraduate study in Bina Nusantara University. To complete my thesis on reading aloud and knowledge construction, I asked Amara (41 years old), my relative and an English teacher, and an 8-year-old Jun (her child) to become the participants of my study. The observation was started with Amara book selection process. While I was observing the book selection closely, I started to grow interest on Amara's criteria in selecting books and the reasons behind her selection.

2. BOOK SELECTION IN EFL FAMILIES

There have been studies that highlighted the cognitive aspects to consider in book selection

process, such as vocabulary, letter knowledge, and narrative connection [6]. Other researches highlighted the levels of the book [7] and also the compatibility between the child's background and the book [5]. Several book selection methods, namely book match, five finger rule and Goldilocks rule, were found to be helpful to select high quality books for reader [8].

Along with the aforementioned studies, it is safe to say that book selection process does take part in supporting the engagement and the cognitive development of the readers. For instance, illustration in a picture book can scaffold novice reader to read by looking at the picture or simply help the vocabulary learning by repeating some certain words from the book [5]. Research on book selection in the field of early literacy suggested that caregivers explore six areas that every child could develop since birth, i.e., vocabulary, narrative connection, print motivation, print awareness, letter knowledge and phonological awareness [6], since those areas are closely related to child's cognition. Furthermore, selecting books for English learner stated need to take into account the essential elements that include content accessibility, language accessibility, visual accessibility and genre accessibility [5], as well as the cultural background and representation [9].

Studies have been done to unravel the importance of book selection and its relation to cognition and cognitive development. However, the actual process of book selection is more complex than just selecting high quality book that could enhance cognitive process. As previously stated, the selection is rather a personal experience and involves cultural background such as nationality, ethnicity, belief, cultural background and so forth. Culture or cultural background does not only influence how people view what the good and the bad but it influences the knowledge structure and cognitive process in making decision [10]. For example, the difference of Easterner and Westerner way of thinking. Easterner, usually, trying to think comprehensively and emphasizing the context. Westerner, on the other hand, is more to analytical thinking and valuing individualism.

Furthermore, when we talk about culture we mostly talk about individuals from certain country since it closely related to norm, belief and values that revolves around them [10]. In connection with the cultural discussion, Indonesians like other Asian cultures, generally value the idea of ideal extended family [11]. As a country with approximate population of 217 million, Muslim population takes

up 80 percent out of it [13]. Islamic perception and practice can be found easily in Indonesia. This explains why Islamic laws and views shaped its people's habitual practices and perspectives. Although the study being presented does not particularly explore the effects of cultural identity to book selection process, we believe that cultural background and views influence people's perception and decision-making that could be seen from the manners of the Indonesian parents in selecting the books for their children.

3. METHOD

Amara was born and raised in a rural area in East Java, Indonesia. She moved to an urban area, the place she is currently living, in 2006 to teach English in a local private school. Due to her career as English teacher, Amara had several opportunities to go overseas which made her well-exposed to foreign

cultures and ideas. Nevertheless, her belief and tradition that she acquired since early age played a significant role on her decision making. Born in a religious family, Amara has learned Islamic law and cultures deeply. Her ancestor was a famous religious leader and that eventually shaped Amara's behavior and habits on daily basis. As she grew, her belief, her cultural view and experience also her knowledge that she acquired at university influenced her ways of raising her children.

This study involved an EFL Family with Amara and Jun as participants. Amara is a mother who happened to be an English teacher at a senior high school in the town where I (the first author) and her lived. As a graduate from English education major Amara believed that children's cognitive development such as language development is an important factor to consider in the field of early childhood education.

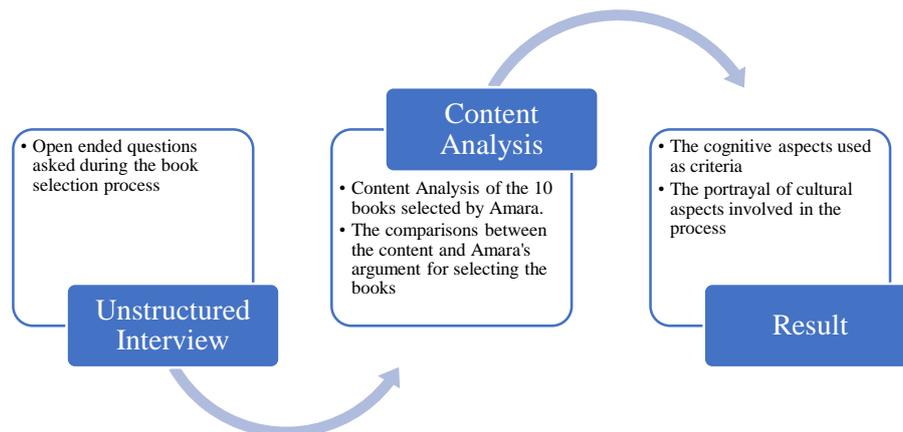


Figure 1. Data collection and data analysis process

The study closely observed home literacy practices of Amara and Jun, focusing on the book selection process. The observation mainly discussed the criteria that Amara put into consideration on selecting the book for her and Jun's reading aloud activity. The process of selection held before the home literacy started. Amara was asked to select 10 English story books consisted of 5 digital books from literacy cloud website and 5 printed books from researcher's collection. As a researcher, the data I gathered was mainly based on the interviews and the content of the books selected.

The first data set was the data gathered from the interviews. In this study the interviews were conducted twice. The first one was done right after the printed book selection and the second one was held on the fourth week after Amara and Jun finished

their eighth reading aloud session. The first interview was held to get to know Amara's initial preference in book. While the second one was being conducted to get some more explanation about the reason, she chose the book, her criteria on selecting book and her commentary about the book role in reading aloud. The type of interview being used was unstructured interview in which the question was not being prepared beforehand though certain subject of interest was embedded to direct the answer [14]. This kind of interview conducted to create a natural setting and minimize the possibility of interviewee being burdened by the question.

Next, I (the first author) observed the content of the selected book. This analysis conducted to find Amara's criteria on selecting the book and to find how the content of the selection covered Amara's

consideration regarding cognitive process and portrayed her belief and cultural influence. The content analysis which related to her consideration regarding cognitive process mostly correlated with the essential elements of English learner book selection [5] and children’s six area of development [6]. While the content analysis regarding her cultural influence was relied on what cultural researcher referred as Easterner or Asian culture and for the analysis her belief mostly being linked to Islamic law and perception.

4. RESULTS AND SUGGESTION

The criteria of Amara’s book selection, the one that she stated in the interview and the one that she implied in her action, is narrated in this section. The list of the selected book and the picture of the content are presented to support the analysis.

Amara is a mother of two. Her first child, Kyla, is a first grader in an Islamic boarding school (junior high school level). Kyla’s little brother, Jun, is currently a second-grade student in a private Islamic elementary school. Since she is a teacher, Amara paid a lot of attention of her children’s education. In the case of language and literacy, Amara exposed her first child, Kyla, with some story books, both in English and Bahasa Indonesia, and movies, which usually relate to princess and what our society viewed as a ‘girl stuff’, to enhance her language and literacy skill. Unlike Jun, Kyla is more to art and handicraft. In Jun’s case, Amara seemed to focus on sharpening his fundamental skill on reading, writing, and counting. Amara actively assisted Jun on his study, for instance, helping him narrating story for his daily logbook activity, correcting his spelling and answer for online assignment, and preparing sources for his online assignment. Jun, as Amara argued, is not very interested in reading activity. However, after doing the home literacy practices, Amara claimed that Jun’s interest in reading activity and book discussion was increasing which we assumed to be one of the results of book selection.

As previously stated, Amara’s book selection process was part of larger ethnographic study

focusing on home literacy, reading aloud activity and knowledge construction. The process started with Amara being asked to select 10 English story books for her reading aloud activity. Due to lack of printed reading sources, the researcher’s book collection being used for this activity. Before the process took place, I asked Amara about her and Jun’s book preference to narrow the book selection. On the day of the book selection process, Amara was asked to select 5 printed books from 16 books that the researcher offered. Short interview conducted to analyze Amara’s initial preference in her book selection. On the interview, Amara argued that her selection was based on Jun’s fondness. For example, animals and boyhood. Considering Jun’s little exposure in English and reading activity she also argued that her selection was focused on the story length and readability to prevent Jun from being bored or confused during the reading aloud activity.

The digital book selection was conducted without the supervision of the researcher and took place a day before the reading aloud session. Amara stated that her selection was begun with her choosing some interesting titles. She then read the books to analyze the cognitive aspects such as vocabularies, repetition, and print awareness before she placed her final selection. The second interview being conducted on the fourth week of the reading aloud session. On her book selection interview, Amara continuously emphasized on cognitive aspects that she believed were beneficial for Jun such as content (or what she called as ‘plot’), visual features, readability, and story length. She also mentioned the reason of not selecting certain books and gave commentary regarding her book selection.

From both interviews we found that her preferences intertwined with her belief, cultural influence, and herself as a person. From 10 English story book that she selected, Amara chose 7 books that portrayed animals as the characters and 3 books with human characters. From the total 3 books, only 1 book that has female character as a heroine. The books that Amara selected had less than 40 pages consisted of 1 – 5 sentences per pages.

TABLE 1. A list of book selection used in Amara and Jun reading aloud session.

| Book Title | Author | Type of Book | Year of Publication | Publisher |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|
| What’s the Time Mr. Wolf? [15] | Amanda Enright | Printed | 2015 | Igloo Books |
| Because of Piko [16] | M Fajrur Rahmat | E-book | 2018 | Puspa Swara |
| Mina Can Do it! [17] | Janina Rivera | E-book | 2020 | OMF Hiyas |

| | | | | |
|--|----------------------|---------|------|--|
| Captain Stern's Puzzle Book [18] | Andreas Röckener | Printed | 2012 | Five Mile Press Pty Limited |
| Our Small World [19] | Aik Airin | Printed | 2019 | PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama |
| Smong the Dragon [20] | Maya Lestari | E-book | 2020 | Bhuana Ilmu Populer |
| Limau Saves Energy [21] | Andy Bianchi | Printed | 2019 | Kesaint Blanc |
| Pepuyu, the Walking Fish [22] | Utari Ninghidayati | E-book | 2020 | Bhuana Ilmu Populer |
| Baby Shark – Grandma Shark's Magic Wand [23] | Pinkfong | Printed | 2019 | PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama – M&C Publishing |
| Polecat [24] | Timothy Mfana Mongwe | E-book | 2020 | Abantwana Publishing |

On the interview, Amara stated that the selected books that contained repetitive words and basic vocabularies, like number, colors, day, and time, with the hope that Jun would acquire new vocabularies by repeating the words over and over. She also acknowledged that her reason was practically a realization from what she learned in university and teaching seminars. Though her personal value and knowledge as an English teacher did play a significant role on why she selected book with a lot of repetitive words. As she stayed with Jun most of the time, she recognized Jun's knowledge level and his English language skill very well. Her decision of selecting book that promoted repetition aligned with the essential elements of English learner's book selection which is language accessibility. In connection with language accessibility, as stated in the research [5], the book should use simple and short sentences, in addition to that repetitive and predictive words also highly suggested to favor their reading activity.

The book that could be a perfect portrayal of language accessibility was *Because of Piko* [16]. The book was full of repetitive words such as Piko, village and paint. Though it also contained several challenging vocabularies for Jun for instance, unfamiliar animals (camel and elephant), unfamiliar color (magenta), and unfamiliar objects (balcony and canopy) which enhanced his vocabularies acquisition. Another book with similar aspect was

Polecat [24]. The book emphasized on name of days that being repeated along the story. The name of the days was followed by the action of the character which helped Jun acquire more verb vocabularies.

Another point that Amara put into her consideration on selecting the book was the plot or the storyline. Amara stated that storyline was a crucial aspect to the point it became the first thing she analysed before selecting the book. On her interview Amara told us that she mostly selected a book that was close to Jun's world and was rich with moral value. For example, she chose *Limau Saves Energy* [21] in figure 2 to help Jun understand that the little thing he did at home, such as turning off the lamp, unplugging the cable and turning off the television when no one is watching, does contribute on saving world's energy.

The next book that was selected on the storyline was *Pepuyu* [22], which can be seen in figure 2. The character in the book was a fish that can be found in a river or watercourse in Indonesia. Amara stated that lately Jun has been into animal, particularly guppy, thus she thought having book that has fish character will be helpful to build Jun's reading interest and curiosity. Her decision on selecting the book that shared connection with Jun supported what researcher referred as content accessibility in which the aspect favored the child reader, particularly the English learner, by choosing story with familiar topic. Additionally, the selected book also covered

the narrative connection and print awareness area. The reason that made the book selected entangled

problems such as knowledge gap and irrelevancy between the child and the book.

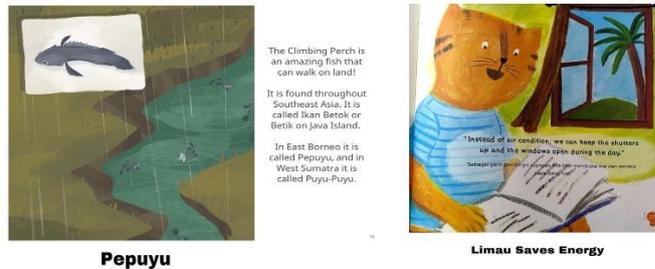


FIGURE 2. Content of Amara’s book selection

A phonological awareness realization also found in Amara’s book selection. Phonological awareness emphasizing the experience of listening and playing with various sounds [6] which were found in Baby Shark Grandma’s Magic Wand [23]. The book offered several examples of words rhyme and playful sound such as beyond and wand, small and tall, and playful magic spell (*doo doo doobracadabra* and *ziggity zig*) which made Jun really engage with the book. Research regarding phonological awareness and reading comprehension found that phonemic and syllabic skill is essential to improve text and sentence performance in reading comprehension [25] in which benefited the reader especially the English learner.

Other cognitive aspects that Amara considered important which was visual feature also reflected in Amara’s book selection. The book chosen by Amara was very colorful and well-illustrated. Amara argued that the reason behind choosing appealing and descriptive illustration was because she found it easier to explain what happened in the book by pointing on the illustration thus Jun understood the context better. The reasons were aligned with our argument on the importance of visual accessibility. The illustration, apart from the aesthetic purpose, should be able to cover the text in order to aid the English learner comprehension [5]. Additionally, the color, the shape, the theme, and the word displayed in children’s story book encouraged their foundation of visual thinking [26] which open the possibility of utilizing picture and imagery to various model of literacy learning.

Despite being considered as a medium that supported cognitive process, Amara’s criteria on her selection like visual feature and plot were also the manifestation of Amara’s belief and cultural influence. As previously stated, from 10 books being

selected there are 7 books with animals as main character, 3 books with human character which from the 3 only 1 book including female as the main character. Based on Amara statement on the second interview the decision was made because Jun preferred a book with animals or boy character since it closely related with his life. The statement supported with Jun’s action, he dismissed the book that was not involving animals or boy character when he shortly encountered the selection process.

On the selection process, I offered a story book that possessed Olaf, a character from Frozen movie, as the main character. When Jun saw the book, his initial reaction was saying that the book should be for her sister, Kyla. Amara agreed with Jun’s opinion and both referred the book as a ‘girls’ book’. This occurrence displayed how Indonesian generally correlating object with gender. This, perhaps, was a result of a life-long ideology of gender role involving masculinity and femininity before the country’s reformation [11]. Besides the portrayal of our national culture the tendency of choosing book based on gender could also be influenced by Amara’s religious principal. In Islam, the role of male and female has been depicted in Quran in such details and quoted on the authority of prophet Muhammad in the Sunni collections of Hadith [27] and since Amara is a Muslim, those religious principals may have come into her consideration. Additionally, in Muslim literature animals often became the personification for certain human traits to teach moral lesson related to human [28] in which being portrayed in Amara’s book selection.

A perfect example of the intersection between Amara’s criteria on book selection and her cultural influence, belief and personal value such as in figure 3 was found in Our Small World [19]. The book plot was focusing on the fundamental of diversity which

also became Amara’s focus. Since she had the experience of going abroad and met many people from various background, racial and nationality Amara is well-aware with the issue of diversity thus she wanted Jun to become aware of the issue and be more considerate when he encountered people who are different to him. The reason portrayed Amara’s

knowledge and personal value as human and mother. Just like other parents, Amara wanted her son to grow to be a kind human being. Aside from diversity the story was also revolved on boyhood and sports in which the setting portrayed the soccer tournament in school.

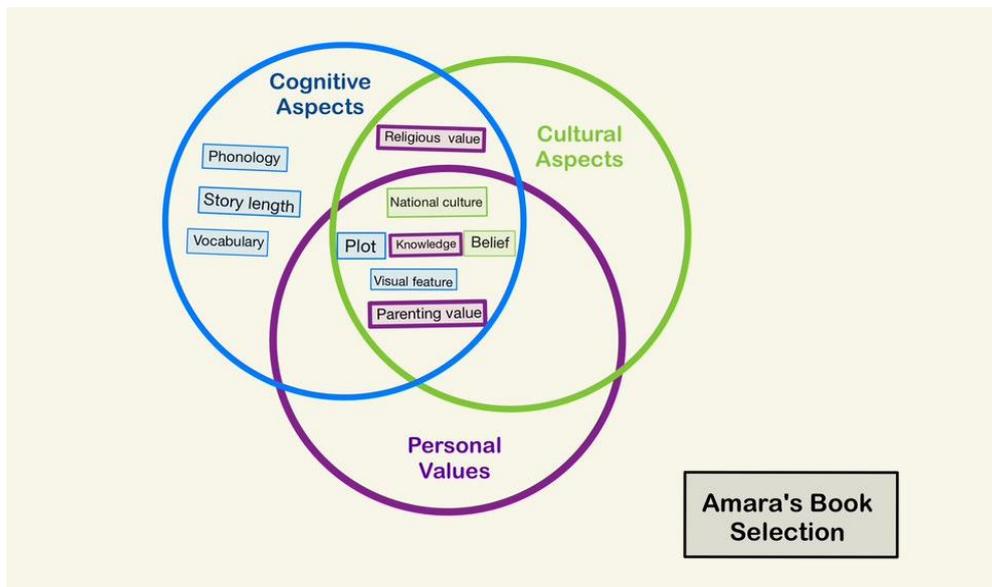


FIGURE 3. The aspects involved in Amara’s book selection

The setting, as Amara stated, was closely related to Jun’s daily lives and liking. However, the reason can also be seen as Amara’s and Jun’s reflection of national culture. Similar with the case of the general book selection Amara mostly supported Jun’s agenda of reading the book with animals and boys’ character. As explained previously, Indonesia like some other Asian countries, has a rigid gender norm and certain views about gender role has been constructed since early age. For instance, men are taught to be tough and self-reliant [29]. Additionally, the gender construction in Indonesia was mostly shaped by

Islam principal since Islam is the majority that people in Indonesia adhered [13].

Another portrayal of Amara’s cultural influence also showed on her criteria of book selection regarding visual feature. On her second interview, Amara revealed her reason for not choosing certain book. One of the unchosen books was an elephant at the beach. She mentioned that she was about to choose the book because it matched her criteria like story length, vocabularies and so forth but on the last page the book displayed an illustration that she thought was not suitable for Jun. The illustration showed two elephant’s trunks formed a heart shape, displayed on figure 4.

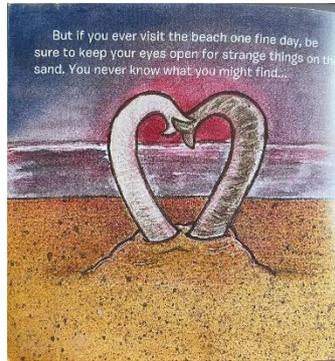


FIGURE 4. The illustration of an elephant at the beach

Amara argued that the illustration was not necessary and did not explain the text, additionally, it was not easy for Jun to comprehend that kind of illustration. This view of Amara was possibly influenced by our shared culture on perceiving and expressing love. Asian or mostly referred as Easterner way of expressing love differs from those of Westerners [30]. Study that examined expression of intimacy of American and Japanese presented that Americans (Westerners) were very expressive and perceived physical contact as form of expressing intimacy as for Japanese (Easterner) they correlated intimacy with empathy. With our understanding of her cultural background, it is understandable if Amara stated that the illustration on figure 4 was not very proper for Jun since the idea of familiarizing romantical gesture is not very common in Asian country.

5. CONCLUSION

This study observed on EFL family book selection process as the mother, Amara, proceed with the selection. The result of Amara's book selection reflected her knowledge as an English teacher as she highlighted several aspects such as vocabularies, phonology, plot, story length and visual features which were based on her considerations of her child's cognition. In addition, Amara's belief and cultural influence greatly reflected on her book selection process. Her tendency of choosing book with animals and boys' character, in some ways, related with the national culture of gender construction and stereotypes which also intertwined with Islamic principles. Additionally, the results also found that some book reflected the combination of some of the aspects. For example, her personal value as a mother, cultural influence, and belief displayed

on how she dismissed book that showed physical contact that endorsed romantical relationship.

All in all, the book selection process is rather a personal experience in which the selection may differ from family to family. Nevertheless, Amara's book selection process may still add to a better understanding of the significance of book selection process. Book selection is a fundamental process in reading activity, particularly in the home literacy practice. We found that book selection is a personal process since it involves some cognitive and cultural aspects of those who do the activity. In the context Indonesian homes, the parents who are mostly in charge of selecting the books, may want to consider certain mentioned aspects that were involved in the process.

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