

Beyond the Spoken Words: The Roles of Body Postures in Supporting Reading Aloud Activities

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Abstract. This paper explains the importance of reading posture / body posture during parent-children read aloud sessions and how they support intimacy as well as maximize the process of knowledge construction during their reading sessions. 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 words and the body postures of a mother and her 8-year-old son's interaction in 10 read aloud sessions. We found that in addition to using words that were comforting, the mother also used affectionate body contacts, and various reading postures that help the child engaged with the book during the reading sessions. In the light of these findings, we suggest that parents try varying their reading posture/body posture and familiarize affectionate body contact to enhance their reading together session.

Keywords: *Spoken Words, Body Postures, Reading*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, reading and literacy have become an important issue ever since the country joined The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that initiated Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000. PISA assesses school age children's ability to use their reading, mathematics, and science skills to overcome daily life challenges. In the past PISA reports, Indonesia has been placed at the near bottom of the list of participating countries [1]. In responding to the result of assessment, the ministry of education developed a movement called National Literacy Movement that includes 'Gerakan Literasi Sekolah' (GLS, school-based literacy movement), "Gerakan Literasi Masyarakat" (GLM, Community-based Literacy Movement) and "Gerakan Literasi Keluarga" (GLK, Family-based literacy movement) in 2016 with the hope of nurturing Indonesians' reading interest [2]. Besides the government, large groups of communities, particularly reading communities, are helping to raise this issue by popularizing reading activities such as read aloud. One of the popular read aloud communities, with more than 5000 followers on Instagram is Read Aloud *Yuk* community. This community promotes read aloud as well as home literacy practices through online seminar and online challenge on their Instagram platform.

Studies found that reading aloud is an important factor in children's social and cognitive development and intelligence [3]. Despite various body movement and body posture being displayed in reading activity, people continuously associate

reading only as a pure mental act and dismiss the fact that the body also play a crucial role in it. For a long time, scholars have defined reading as a conscious act that emphasize on recognizing emotion or spirituality and deriving meaning [4]. Reading, however, is beyond that definition. It is not only a mental act, but reading is also a physical activity [4]. The body, therefore, doing its job to support our reading activities: namely, eye scanning the text in order to comprehend it, hands gripping the book to feel the texture of the paper and body posture adjusting to the space where reading activity is being occupied. Furthermore, there are several studies that examine the connection between body move and cognitive process [5-8].

Recent study on the roles of body postures in improving reading aloud practice at home found that children often mimic their care-giver movement as the read aloud activity inhabit [9] which scholar claims as an indication of child's participation as well as comprehension [8]. Other study on the reading that adapt embodied cognition theory stated that sensorimotor should be involved in individual's linguistic comprehension [5]. As the research about reading as bodily act and non-verbal communication being presented, we believe that the practice of home literacy and read aloud activities, involving family members could model how body postures, body movement and everything that require motoric system would support reading activity [10].

As part of an ethnographic study of Indonesian home literacy practices, we examined the reading activity of a non-English speaking family where the mother, Amara, an English teacher and her 8 years-

old son, Jun (all names are pseudonyms) agreed to participate in the study. While observing the semantic aspect of Amara and Jun reading aloud activity, I (the first author) found an interesting habit related to bodily activities that Amara and Jun frequently performed during the reading aloud session. In this article, we report on types body postures that Amara and Jun performed while they were reading books together.

When we were on the site with the participants and learned about their book-mediated interactions, we started to wonder on the roles of the body postures of Amara and Jun as they were reading together and how those gestures reflect and affect Jun's engagement and comprehension.

2. READ ALOUD: BODILY ACTIVITY

Family and home are children's first learning environment, thus make parents acquired the role as the children's first teachers. There are five areas of development that parents can help to nurture, namely, physical, social and emotional, learning approach, intelligence and communication and language [11]. Accordingly, we believe that all of those can be accomplished through reading. Over the last few decades read aloud has gained more public attention due to massive promotion, notably at homes where parents view it as a foundation to develop children's literacy [12]. Research on children and home literacy implied that parent attitude towards book, for instance their reading habit, and the availability of reading material are affecting children's word-reading accuracy and fluency [13].

Children are very observant in their nature. They monitor their environment and mentally take note of it and eventually imitate it. Thus, it is only natural when they notice whether their parents are fond of reading or show positive or negative attitude toward it [14]. That is why home literacy and read aloud is influential in improving parents – children relationship as well as children's language development. Although it is regarded as constructive activity, the experience could be carried out in a comfortable manner. Read aloud activity that lack of interpersonal connection or in which children continuously being corrected over small mistakes, will lead children to view reading, particularly reading aloud, as stressful activity [14]. Therefore, the use of casual and engaging approach, such as using gesture, voice, and expression, is believed to be helpful in increasing children's understanding [12]. Talking about gesture means we also talk about

bodily activity where it also involves body movement and posture which is perceived as an embodied activity [4].

Our body, as McLaughlin stated, cannot be seen as a separated object that only bound to do physical activity, it lives and is connected with other bodies in the world through interaction and complex work to finally shape its sense-making activities [4]. Moreover, human's ability to make sense or interpret things are also the work of the body as it involved in some specific cultural formation, in connection with reading; its procedure and habits as it engages with the text can be identified as an example of the work of the body. Despite all the physical work, we cannot deny the fact that reading is also a matter of physical pleasure where it usually started in the embrace of the parents, with all the intimacy and interaction being represented. The physical contact occurred in the parents and children interaction is acknowledged to be an essential factor that create continuous habitual practice of reading [4]. The intimacy that a child experience during the reading is believed to remain in their life and they will distinguish reading as an alternative way to fulfil their desire of parental love. This kind of pleasure is manifested in the beginner reader when they express their enjoyment on touching the texture of the paper and turning it. Other research regarding reading aloud conducted by Smith [15] also mentioned about the founding of reading as an embodiment in her own reading aloud activity. Smith made the term 'the vibrant triangle' to describe the relationship built in a reading session that include adult reader, child participant and the book. [15]. It implies to the interaction accomplished in the reading process that incorporate the picture book, the adult reader, and the child. In addition, Smith stated that theory of reading as an embodied experience fits her vibrant triangle experience perfectly. She portrayed the experience of her and her daughter, Tavia, snuggled on the sofa as the example of reading as an embodied activity, she believed that Tavia's curiosity emerged because of the comfort that she experiences during their reading session. What happened to Smith and Tavia's reading aloud experience strengthen McLaughlin's statement about the unconscious occurrence of pedagogy in parents-children reading activity. They may not realize the occurrence of pedagogy since they both did the reading aloud with the purpose of seeking pleasure but in fact, they also had a fundamental physical training that helped improve their reading.

Caregiver such as parents or teachers could expose children to vocabularies, sounds and

meaning in their early literacy. Moreover, researchers are often reminded about the importance of vocabulary and phonology learning and deriving meaning by using strategies such book levelling and book selection. Little did we know, the pedagogy of posture and gesture is perhaps the first thing being taught to children and it is undoubtedly holding a crucial role in supporting reading activity. In his book McLaughlin gives example on how teacher in school ask the students to sit still in order to gain complete focus on reading [4]. Teachers may not aware that the postures they required the students to do could help the students acquiring the reading skill that they are targeting for them. The application of sitting still while reading in school is only one of many possible situations that proving the importance of reading postures. The same situation can happen anywhere because, as McLaughlin says, “wherever reading is taught, lesson about body and the book reinforced” [4]. Therefore, quoting from McLaughlin “mastering our own body is essential in order to learn the text thoroughly” [4].

3. METHOD

This study referred to McLaughlin’s theory and understanding on the Physical Practice of Reading as the main reference to observe bodily activity, particularly reading posture performed by Amara and Jun during read aloud sessions. As previously stated, this study is an ethnography study. Thus, we did field observation to collect the data. During the observations, we tried to capture the interaction in their most natural way in order to understand their perspective on the reading session [16] though one of us (the first author) was present at the setting. The nonparticipatory observation [16] was used to observe Amara and Jun’s reading aloud session, which made the author only observing and did not involve and did not try to direct Amara and Jun’s reading aloud session. I collected qualitative audio-visual and digital materials in a form of video recording to make my presence less intrusive and provide the participants of the study shares their reality directly with the author [17].

3.1. Subjects of the study

The participants of the study were Amara and Jun. Amara, 41 years old, is an English teacher in a local private school. She has an advanced English skill since she graduated from English education major. Furthermore, her several experience of visiting foreign country play a significant role on improving her English skill. She perceives English as a door that open many opportunities. Amara is a mother of two,. Her first child, Kyla is now sitting on first grade of Junior High School and stays at Islamic boarding school. Her second child, Jun, is second grade primary students who is now studying from home due to the pandemic. Despite being fluent in English, Amara communicated with her family member in Bahasa Indonesia and some Javanese. During book selection process, Amara told me that Jun was not very fond of reading. He rarely read book on his own including textbook from school. Moreover, Jun was not exposed to English language at home. He learned some English words from game instruction on his phone and YouTube video and never from book which made the reading sessions a new experience for Jun. Despite his little exposure in English, Jun understood and knew quite a lot of English vocabularies.

Initially, this study was designed for my (first author) thesis and focused on meaning-making and knowledge constructing using Mercer theory of social constructivism, but in the process, we found that Amara and Jun often displayed gesture and like to vary their posture during reading session thus, intrigued me to explore more about bodily activity in reading. The 10 books chosen for the reading session were all written in English. The 10 books consisted of 5 English story books, selected from researcher’s private collection, and 5 English digital books from literacy clouds. The reading aloud sessions were conducted for 5 consecutive weeks in 10 separate occasions. The time and the place of the reading aloud sessions were chosen by Amara, which took place in her living room and Jun’s bedroom.

3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis of this study is designed according the aim of the study and the research questions. The analysis is conducted in three steps:

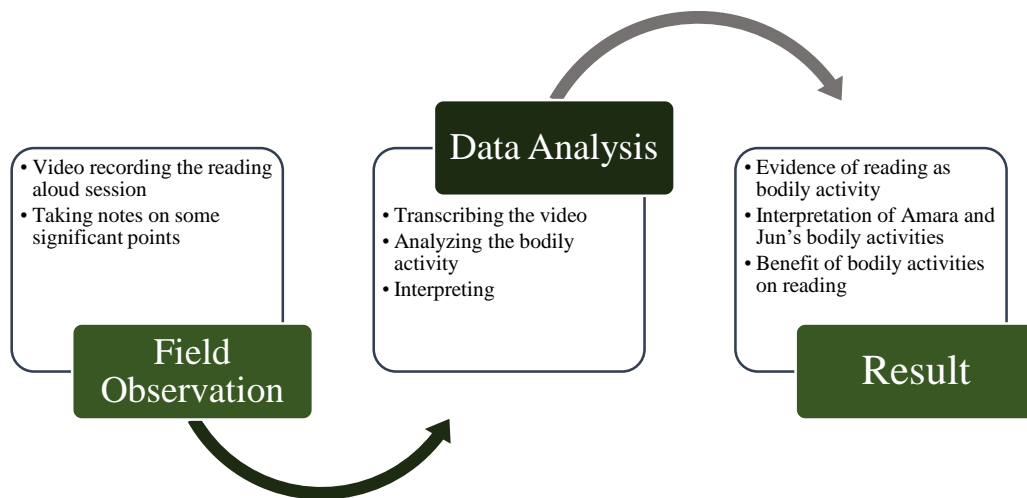


FIGURE 1. Data Analysis

- **Step 1: Transcription**
The video recordings were transcribed, to capture verbal conversations of Amara and Jun with brief comments on body language such as postures and gestures that stand out. This analysis gave a brief hint of how the Amara and Jun's body language enhances their reading aloud session.
- **Step 2: Closely observing on bodily activity**
Next, I (the first author) closely observed on Amara and Jun's bodily activities appeared in the video, and thereafter focused on the dialogues they produced based on the transcription. I also matched it with the field notes that was taken on the spot during Amara and Jun's reading aloud session. This analysis gave a deeper conception of bodily activity and focusing in three elements in the adaptation reading postures which are the grip, the structure support, and the pose as well as the material factor that influence the adaptation which refers to the object they used to read, the conditions of the reader's body, and the setting where the reading inhabit.
- **Step 3: Interpretation**
Finally, I interpreted what has emerged in the previous steps of the analysis in relation to 1) reading aloud as bodily activity, 2) the effects

of bodily activity, particularly reading posture on enhancing Amara and Jun reading aloud session, 3) the text and interaction engagement made by the bodily activity. All of the bodily activity happened in Amara and Jun's reading were interpreted with the reference of McLaughlin's book *Reading and the Body: The Physical Practice of Reading* [4].

4. RESULTS AND SUGGESTION

The bodily activity, particularly the reading posture, and its impact to Amara and Jun reading aloud session were described and commented in this section. Short transcription and pictures from the reading aloud sessions were included to support the description or interpretation of our analysis.

From 10 reading aloud sessions we found that Amara and Jun always displayed relaxing reading postures and discarded the ergonomics rationality, like sitting in proper alignment, arm crossing while reading, both hands gripped the book as the eye looking straight to the text, or what LaSalle called *reading body* [4]. There were two reading postures that Amara and Jun displayed in general, first was both sitting side by side and Jun leaning his body to Amara, and the second was Jun sitting on Amara's lap leaning back while Amara supported his body weight.



FIGURE 1. Amara and Jun reading printed book side by side.

From figure 1, noticed that Jun left hand grasped the side of the book, his thumb touched the front paper and the rest of his fingers gripped the back of the book to enhance the visibility and prevent the book from falling. His right hand laid free (invisible here) near Amara's body. His body bent, leaning all his weight to Amara as he focused on the text. In Amara's case, she leaned back to the wall supporting her own weight as well as Jun's. Her arm lingered on Jun's back, her left-hand lingered on Jun's wrist as her fingertips slightly touched the front paper of the book. On the other side, her right-hand actively pointing each word she read to direct Jun's gaze on the book as well as emphasizing the word-form and the sound. On some occasion she pointed on the text to emphasize some interesting or important objects like new characters, colour of the objects and things. On the recording we could hear Amara, in figure 1, telling Jun about some adjective words of the object:

Excerpt 1

(The actual conversation spoken in Bahasa Indonesia. The excerpt presented is the translated version of the actual conversation)

Amara: (asking about the meaning) what is long? (point the object and make a circular move around it) long pencil, (point to others object) this one is short pencil.

Jun: (looking to where Amara's finger silently) -long horse (mimicking Amara on saying the word long) what is horse, *Bun?*

Amara: where?

Jun: ah later (smiling playfully)

After the session done, Jun asked Amara about the long horse which was a word that he ever saw in his game.

In that sequence we could see that Jun talking about his prior knowledge about something that had the long word in it. Amara gestures of pointing and



FIGURE 2. Jun reading digital book on Amara's lap.

circling the object helped Jun shift his gaze from the word to the object that Amara pointed out. Moreover, it seemed to help Jun recall his prior knowledge about the word and raise his curiosity. Similar thing happened on other sequences when Amara pointed each character and introduced them to Jun. Besides focusing on each character and repeating what Amara said, Jun also asked several questions regarding the colour and things he saw in the text. The little questions he asked implying his engagement to the book and his gaze and mimicry signalling participation and comprehension [8].

On figure 2, we could see Jun reading while sitting on Amara's lap, he leaned back and let Amara support his body weight. His hand gripped the tablet tightly, adjusting the position for him to see the text clearly. He rested some parts of the tablet on his legs, therefore aiding the visibility and stillness. Jun's body integration to his surrounding that supported him to read, as McLaughlin stated, considered common in reader to help them read for a long time [4]. And the pose he displayed with all his body, including his grips and his body structure, was actually his way to gain cognitive attention since the key to effective pose is the continuity of physical stillness that needed by the eyes [4]. On the other hand, we could see Amara displayed a reading posture that fully supported Jun's body structure. She was sitting cross-legged and giving Jun's enough space to sit between her legs by opening it a bit wider. This pose was made to prevent her to bear more weight from Jun's lower body and to make Jun sat comfortably. Her upper body displayed a straight pose, pillow put on her back thus made her convenient, though she needed to bear her son's body weight. Her arms laid free on both sides, sometimes her left hand (invisible in figure) caressed Jun's thigh as she read him story. Primarily, we could see how Amara and Jun possessing three elements of reading posture (the grip, the support

structure, and the pose) to carry out the demand of reading.

In addition to reading posture that has been explained in the previous paragraph, Amara and Jun reading aloud session also displayed some posture adaptation to their reading material. On his book, McLaughlin specifically mentioned six materials factor that affect the reading process which are the size and the weight of the book, physical strength, available light, visual acuity, and furniture [4]. The reading pose of Jun in figure 2 is a perfect example of body adaptation to the material factor. The size of the tablet was not very big thus Jun held the tablet by himself. If he let Amara held the tablet, it would add the distance of his gaze and the screen consequently the text would become vague in his eyes. His legs, making triangular shape, also part of the adaptation. His body dictated him to adjust his pose in order to bear the weight of the book, or in this case the tablet. Similar occurrences happened to Amara. Closely

looking at her pose in figure 1, we could see that she leaned her body to Jun's side. Aside from adding more intimacy to their reading aloud session, her pose could be interpreted as her attempt to get a better visibility of the text since the book size was quite big and the some of the words were placed in the edge of the paper. The pose of her legs also took part to aid the text visibility. Since she wore skirt the gap between her thigh will be covered by the cloth as a result the book did not fall when she pointed the object to direct Jun's attention.

There was an occurrence that really captured my attention and proved how Amara and Jun are undoubtedly an adaptive reader. The pose in the figure 3 showed an intense near-sightedness. This happened because the size of the book was only as big as adult's palm, yet the content needed further cognitive attention since the book was a combination of story book and activity book in which the child needed to count, found object and drew.



FIGURE 3. Amara and Jun displaying an intense near-sightedness



FIGURE 4. Jun interacting with Amara, discussing about the book.

The pose in figure 3 suggests a steady, observant, cognitive attention, and an intense engagement to the text. Both of them were gripping the book tightly trying to solve the questions that presented in the book. The conversation that occurred in the figure 3 was Amara and Jun finding and counting the oddity shown in the book:

Excerpt 2

(The actual conversation spoken in Bahasa Indonesia. The excerpt presented is the translated version of the actual conversation)

Amara and Jun: (counting and pointing the odd objects together) one, two, three, four, five, six, seven (pause), eight

Jun: there are no more

Amara: (pointing the object) this one Jun, why it can be up here? (counting) Nine... (implying to some

object that Jun considered odd) and then, this one is actually not odd, Jun. we can paint it like this.

Jun: (giggling) ohh? (pause, thinking) right (agreeing to Amara's opinion)

Here we could see Amara and Jun's engagement both to the book and their interaction. They bonded together, trying to find the oddity. Both Amara and Jun thoroughly focused on identifying the object. From the conversation we could see Jun trying to use his reasoning ability before agreeing to Amara's opinion which suggested his engagement and comprehension of the text.

Lastly, in the figure 4 we could see Jun whispering things to Amara, there he was trying to tell Amara his personal story that related to the book:

Excerpt 3

(The actual conversation spoken in Bahasa Indonesia. The excerpt presented is the translated version of the actual conversation)

Jun: (whispering) there are *bethik* fish in the river

Amara: (listening carefully) where?

Jun: in that river that- (thinking)

Amara: which river?

Jun: um, it is not a river, a watercourse

Amara: (implying on watercourse near their house)

ohh there are *begog* fish that watercourse

Jun: (correcting Amara) *bethik* fish

Amara: ohh right *bethik* fish. That fish can walk even if there is no water and with what the fish walk again?

Jun: with the fin

Amara: right

The book that Amara read was talking about fish called *pepuyu* or known as *ikan bethik* (*bethik* fish) in Indonesian and in this sequence, Jun was trying to connect his prior knowledge to the story. Jun displayed a close body movement in which he chose to whisper instead of talking casually about that information. Amara, in response to Jun movement, was tilting her head to help herself listen to what Jun wanted to say as well as closing the distance to help Jun whisper more comfortably. This bodily activity did not only show an emotional connection between Amara and Jun but also knowledge acquirement and text engagement.

Therefore, as the embodiment in reading presented in the result, we strongly suggest caregiver, specifically parents, to try varying their reading posture and adding intimacy, such as caressing their child, involving them in reading activity and leaning closer to them when they talk to build an affectionate relationship, not only between the parents and children but also between the children and the book. Furthermore, we suggest parent to be less worry about the non-ergonomic reading posture since the most important thing to gain cognitive attention is to manage the text visibility, as long as the book is steady and reader can remain still for a long time, the posture may vary widely [4].

5. CONCLUSION

The study views reading as mental as well as bodily activities, which included reading posture, gesture and body movement. Thus, the interaction between Amara and Jun in their reading aloud were taken into account. Notions that have been unravelled in the analysis is the influence of bodily activity in reading

to engage child in the text and the interaction during reading aloud. By analysing video recording with several viewpoints, the study exemplifies the bodily activity that promotes intimacy as well as pedagogy during reading aloud session such as tight hand gripping, focused-eye, affectionate touch, and effective directing gesture. This implies engagement to the text and interaction as well as enhancement in reading is situated.

This study urges that reading activity is not only a matter of mental act, but it also involves physical act, and both work together to make the reading or any experience involving cognitive process possible. Each part of our body possesses a significant role that improve our cognitive ability. Furthermore, the body needs practice to attain the cognitive ability and it will be beneficial if the practice is introduced from early age for instance by applying home literacy and reading aloud. It is reasonable that every family may adapt different way on carry out their reading aloud session. Nevertheless, the outcome that has been described in the article can be added into parent's consideration to enhance their home literacy and reading aloud activities.

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