Applying a Book Read Aloud and Leveraging It with Storyline Online: A Case Study of Indonesian Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

This study departed from an understanding that one aspect in literacy teacher preparation is to make explicit personal beliefs of preservice teachers in receiving knowledge and instruction in the program. Enrolling in an introductory course of children's literature, a group of Indonesian preservice teacher participated in a read aloud project where they applied knowledge related to reading aloud to students. As the project evolved, the Preservice teachers attempted to use the Storyline Online digital literacy resource in addition to book read alouds. This qualitative study reported Indonesian preservice teachers' reflections after implementing the two activities. The findings indicated that they gravitated toward having a physical book read aloud for a range of reasons, revealing a positive attitude toward book read alouds. What is more, Storyline Online was considered a useful digital literacy resource to complement the activity of book read alouds and a tool to improve English.

Keywords: Read Alouds, Preservice Teachers, Digital Literacy Resources, Storyline Online, Indonesia

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Introduction

Interests in literacy education that promote book engagement are currently on the rise in Indonesian public education, especially after the introduction of a literacy initiative called Gerakan Literasi Sekolah (or GLS literacy initiative). One main reason to implement the GLS literacy initiative was an effort to address the issue of Indonesian students' low literacy levels and poor reading habits (Indonesian Ministry of Education, 2016). Efforts to improve Indonesian students' literacy and reading habits focus on engaging students with books promoted through literacy activities such as read alouds, guided reading, and shared reading. Indonesian teachers' role is to facilitate these literacy activities as well as a role model who serves as a living embodiment of how books are enjoyed and that reading is an activity to be cherished (Indonesian Ministry of Education, 2016). Indonesian teachers typically learn to conduct literacy activities specified in the GLS literacy initiative through professional development programs. For example, Indonesian teachers learn steps to conduct a book read aloud through workshops and seminars. Unfortunately, efforts that specifically prepare Indonesian preservice teachers to learn about literacy instruction that facilitate book engagement are not yet an integral part of Indonesian teacher education curriculum. This persists despite a strong body of research available that urges the importance of preparing quality literacy teachers within the confines of a sustainable teacher education curriculum (Risko, et al, 2008; see Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals—International Literacy Association, 2018). With this absence, it is no coincidence that there is a dearth of study in a context of teacher education that investigates how future Indonesian teachers are prepared to gain the knowledge and skills in a response to GLS literacy initiative. (My research on preparing Indonesian preservice teachers with knowledge about children's literature offers some insights about the attention to the reader aspect of a literacy teacher, a literacy teacher who is also a reader (Durriyah, 2019). The present study aims to contribute to the research gap.

Other concerns relate to the inadequacy of book access. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Education Office of Research, there is strong evidence suggesting a lack of book access has exacerbated poor reading habit in Indonesia (Indonesian Ministry of Education, 2019). The poor condition of public and school libraries is to blame. The office insisted that interest to read among students in Indonesia is high, yet the book access is minimal. One suggestion that the report brought forward is to accelerate access to digital literacy resources. These were some of the contexts regarding Indonesia's literacy education that motivated this study. This research framework borrowed one of main foci in teacher preparation that emphasizes highlighting the perceptions of literacy preservice teachers in receiving knowledge and instructions in teacher preparation program (Scott et al. 2018).

Preservice Teachers' Read Aloud Project

The read aloud project was part of an introductory course for children's literature, a required course for undergraduate English teaching students. An initial focus of the course was to introduce a basic understanding about literature and children's books. I designed the course that included activities demonstrating classroom literacy instruction. I focused on introducing read alouds—partly because a read aloud was one of literacy instruction being highlighted in GLS literacy initiative. Second, a book read aloud activity would require only one book for a whole group, which offers advantages over other literacy instruction that requires teachers to provide copies of books to students (e.g., shared reading). This consideration is important in context where, to my observation, public access to quality English books is low—this

situation echoing earlier official reports about poor access to books in most Indonesian schools (Indonesian Ministry of Education, 2019). The urgent issue was to promote literacy amid book access scarcity. This understanding was then being reflected in how the read aloud project with preservice teachers evolved over the semester. Initially, the course focused on having the Preservice teachers practice conducting a book read aloud to students. As the field experience progressed, these future EFL teachers saw the need for an additional support tool to help them conduct English book read alouds with expressive reading. This was relevant considering as future EFL teachers they felt it was important to be resourceful teachers. In class I showed them a YouTube video of Barack Obama delivering an expressive read aloud of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which impressed them. This led me to search for literacy studies concerned with expressive reading during read alouds. Especially useful in my search was a teaching tip published by *The Reading Teacher*, a leading literacy practitioner journal, which promoted digital text resources for fostering reading fluency (Thoermer & Williams, 2012), particularly a recommendation about Storyline Online.

Storyline Online (https://www.storylineonline.net/) is a digital platform literacy resource that provides read aloud videos delivered by professional actors whom one may argue have the capability to deliver an expressive and accurate read aloud performance. It is somewhat an upgraded version of the digital book read aloud program because it offers more than simply a voice over book talk like many digital storybook programs (see, for example, Ciampa, 2012). Storyline Online is touted as one excellent free online resource to help preservice teachers improve expressive reading skills (Kerry-Moran, 2016; Thoermer & Williams, 2012). Such a video format of professional actor read alouds is helpful because it enables students to hear a professional actor's reading expression—aiding students' story comprehension. After receiving some demonstrations for using Storyline Online, the Preservice teachers returned to the field and this time used Storyline Online in place of a book read aloud. The Preservice teachers reflected on the two experiences in writing following a set of guided prompts. In the teacher preparation program, a guided process of student teachers' learning reflection is arguably critical in shaping future teaching practices (Foong, Nor, & Nolan, 2018). The written reflections serve as data source for this research.

My goal with this research was to identify some of the Preservice teachers' perceptions about the book read aloud and Storyline Online activities after having conducted both with students. Perceptions here are defined as "personal beliefs" with regard to literacy instruction (Scott et al., 2018, p. 6), which in this case are the Preservice teachers' beliefs on read alouds. I wanted to know how Indonesian preservice teachers, who for the majority just learned about reading aloud as part of literacy teaching, would reflect on their experiences in conducting a read aloud activity with young readers. I was interested in knowing, from the perspective of promoting literacy through reading aloud, what they perceived about the activities of book read alouds and Storyline Online in terms of distinctive characteristics and possibly similarities. In addition, I was especially interested in gleaning from the data the opportunities for utilizing digital literacy resources into literacy instruction. This was partly motivated by research recommendations by the Indonesian Ministry of Education (2019) cited earlier that encouraged the use of digital resources to promote literacy culture, especially amid the poor conditions of public and school library collections. So, I was interested in learning to what extent this effort of digital resource utilization in literacy instruction would be relevant in the context of Indonesia. The point is to support the idea that literacy teachers must consider this digital technology trend and so must experience a teacher preparation program curriculum that considers digital literacy resources. Following this introduction, I will review the literature relevant to the topics under the discussion. A

methods section will describe the research approach, context, and data collection. The research findings will be presented and discussed next, followed by the conclusion section.

Literature Review

International Literacy Association (ILA) released a literacy leadership brief emphasizing the power of read alouds to foster a lifelong reader: "Reading aloud is undoubtedly one of the most important instructional activities to help children develop the fundamental skills and knowledge needed to become readers" (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 2). The ILA highlighted what literacy research has documented about read alouds, including the frequency of read alouds in daily literacy activities and the use of different genres (beyond narrative texts) and subject areas (math included). One related issue discussed in the brief is concerned with read aloud preparations because "what matters more than merely reading aloud is the quality of the teacher– student book interaction" (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 4). Those highlights from the ILA literacy brief emphasized teachers' knowledge and skills in performing read alouds with students.

Fisher and colleagues (2004) summarize the benefits for students of a read aloud, noting that "read alouds are an effective way to introduce students to the joy of reading and the art of listening while developing their vocabularies, experiential backgrounds, and concepts of print and story" (pp. 8-9). They add that "through a read aloud, teachers can model reading strategies and demonstrate the ways in which the language of the book is different from spoken language. Children's understanding of the patterns and structures of written language can be developed through read alouds" (p. 9). Fisher et al. also found that read alouds provide an opportunity for teachers to model oral reading fluency ("The teacher read the book flawlessly. Her prosody engaged the students and they were captured as she presented the chunks of text") (p. 12). Teachers were also animated and effectively used expression to engage the students who "laughed at jokes in the books as she read them, clearly following along with the text" (p. 12).

These effective read aloud characteristics are important to highlight because reading expression is a critical component to building reading comprehension. Unfortunately, research suggests that many preservice teachers "have developed habits of reading aloud without infusing meaning into the way words are spoken" and therefore need help "developing expressive reading skills" (Kerry-Moran, 2016, p. 661). Digital technology development offers an expanded avenue for literacy growth specifically for building reading comprehension (Lacina & Matthews, 2012). Literacy researchers and practitioners have suggested several reading comprehension areas that digital texts could potentially help to develop with readers including vocabulary enrichment (Lacina & Matthews, 2012), reading fluency, and reading motivation—i.e., widening students' opportunities to read (Thoermer & Williams, 2012).

From research on literacy teacher preparation, Scott et al.'s (2018) research review gave us three major conceptional categories in the field: perceptions, resistance, and experience. The category of perceptions involves preservice teachers' beliefs towards literacy curriculum within the program. The resistance category describes preservice teachers' tendency to favor or avoid certain literacy approaches rather than exercising all that are offered by the program. The category of experience describes preservice teachers' prolonged direct experiences of exercising multiple approaches of literacy pedagogies. These three conceptual categories are useful to understand some of the identifiable phases that typically occur during a student

teacher's program. I argue that the purpose and scope of the current study fit into the category of perceptions as the goal is to uncover Preservice teachers' beliefs about read aloud and Storyline Online instructional activities.

Method

This report followed a qualitative research paradigm situated in a teacher education program in a public university in Indonesia. The participants were 87 preservice teachers (of female predominated) who enrolled in an introductory course of children's literature that the author taught. Data was gathered from written reflections reporting a practical assignment of tutoring children. In the assignment, all the Preservice teachers were required to conduct read alouds with K-12 students in an afterschool program. Initially, the read aloud activity focused solely on reading aloud from a book that the Preservice teachers borrowed from a library or bought from a bookstore. As the read aloud assignment progressed, the Preservice teachers utilized read aloud content from Storyline Online with students. They reflected on the experiences though written response to a set question prompts: *What do you think about a book read aloud? What do you think about Storyline Online? What are the similarities and differences between a book read aloud and Storyline Online? When is the best time (recommended time) to do a read aloud?* And *When is the best time (recommended time) to do Storyline Online?* I submit that these questions would enable the study to elicit explicit information about the Preservice teachers' personal beliefs after having learned and applied read aloud literacy instruction. Answers to these questions were grouped according to the similarities of answers to each category. The original words of the Preservice teachers are italicized and narrated. For instance, in a question about a book read aloud (a category), elements that the Preservice teachers noted related to literacy development were 'intimacy' or 'bonding' during a read aloud. So, any similar data from the Preservice teachers' written reports were grouped into this categorical theme of intimacy of a book read aloud. These reflection questions guided the report as presented in the findings below.

Findings

In presenting the findings, I will group them according to the topics culled from the Preservice teachers' answers to the guided questions. The findings presentation begins with the students' perceptions about a book read aloud activity—having had experienced it with students. Next is a presentation of their perceptions about Storyline Online—also having had the experience with students. The focus is to highlight what was considered distinctive about the activities in terms of fostering literacy culture. Following that presentation is a description of some of characteristics that according to the Preservice teachers were similar between a book read aloud and Storyline Online. The findings presentation will be concluded with the Preservice teachers' suggestions about the recommended time to conduct the two activities.

Book Read Alouds

Indonesian preservice teachers noticed that a book read aloud activity builds *intimacy* as there is an extended moment of having a direct interaction and physical closeness between the reader and audience, and this may create a *bonding* between reader (teacher/ older siblings) with children. The interactive nature of read alouds *is naturally able to interrupt for clarifications and questions*, among others. In read alouds, students are able *to touch and flip back and forth book pages*. On some occasions, teachers may *allow students to take turn in reading aloud a book*. One prominent feature that sets read alouds apart from other literacy

instruction is *pointing*. Having experienced a read aloud activity, preservice teachers found that *pointing in read aloud matters*. As simple as it sounds, they noticed that *pointing makes reading aloud easier to manage, just pointing*.

Literacy development is noticeably facilitated in reading aloud. For one, a book read aloud *ignites reading habit*. Students' *literacy* is fostered as a result of teachers being *more creative with activity*. Teachers may *begin with read aloud that builds critical thinking, in hopes that it sets the class for the rest of the day*. The appearance of a physical book is almost a necessity in a read aloud. The Preservice teachers argued that having a *physical book in reading aloud is superior*. It matters because it invites *student's direct responses*. They may *ask about vocabularies*. Having a physical book would allow students to *read to themselves* (read independently) after a read aloud. One example of the benefit of having a physical book and a teacher who reads aloud is that teachers would *point out to images/pictures in order to help students'* making sense of a storybook. What is more, there a sense of teachers having control over the pace of a read aloud. Read alouds seem to be more manageable. Teachers *can control reading pace*. Some even argued that in terms of *equipment*, read alouds require *less stuff* where they only need a book for read aloud. Perhaps the Preservice teachers compared that experience with Storyline Online which requires technology to view (e.g., computers or smartphones) and an internet connection.

When Is the Best Time to Do a Book Read Aloud?

Most preservice teachers felt a read aloud was a suitable *everyday* activity, which means to *do daily read aloud* or *read aloud daily*. Some specified their daily read aloud routine. For example, preservice teachers would *begin class with read aloud as an opportunity to explore genres*. They also felt a read aloud could be conducted regularly in *English subject class*. Some reasoned that to have a *read aloud in the beginning of class is for the purpose of building teacher-student chemistry*. On the opposite end of this, some felt a read aloud at the conclusion of the class would relax the students: *Read aloud at the end of class to relax students*. A read aloud is a relaxing activity that they considered also *before bedtime*. Other than that (and other than having read alouds as an integral part of daily classroom activity), many preservice teachers considered read alouds appropriate for an *outdoor* activity such as during a *picnic*.

A Book Read Aloud Challenges

In terms of challenges with book read alouds, some argued that *read aloud is difficult* to conduct. Students referenced the preparation. A book read aloud demands teachers prepare. For example, they have to *practice with a right expression and English intonation*. Another challenge dealt with an issue about *scarcity of good printed English book*. This is true in regard to a good storybook in English because many of those English storybooks are printed overseas which results in a high price in Indonesia.

Storyline Online

The quest to find out the Indonesian students' perceptions about their experiences with using Storyline Online with students was, among others, to understand what makes this activity different from that of a book read aloud. Speaking of Storyline Online, the Preservice teachers highlighted that *Storyline has many advantages*. One is concerned with English language learning. Storyline Online is superior for *listening and intonation* and perhaps

animation. Read by popular figures in Hollywood whose English is mostly their first language, the program is an excellent source for *learning English*. They imagined, for instance, using *Storyline before teaching grammar*.

This fact about reading delivered in English also affects the audience. In terms of an audience, *Storyline is for older students*—this is in a context of an Indonesian school where English is considered foreign language. Besides English, older students will benefit from Storyline Online. Their *critical thinking* will be facilitated from viewing the video; plus, *the activities* are deemed suitable for *older students* in Indonesia. One thing for sure is that in the scarcity of good and accessible English books, *Storyline offers many excellent English book collection*. Formatted in video, Storyline makes it *possible to repeat*; therefore, it is *efficient*, they said. Another aspect that they found superior from Storyline Online is that the video comes with many *activities related to the story*. They insist that *with storyline, to make children love reading is easier with social media*. Included in their favorable views about Storyline Online is their claim that *Storyline demands less preparation on the teacher part*. Storyline Online may serve as a time filler in class, especially because it requires less preparation by the teacher. Indeed, it perhaps requires less work by teachers, but they also insisted that *teacher need to understand the story in case student want to repeat the video and ask explanation*. In other words, teachers need to at least do some preparations prior to Storyline Online.

When Is the Best Time to Do Storyline Online?

As far as Storyline Online is concerned, the Preservice teachers imagined using it *once in a while, storyline occasionally*. Because Storyline Online contains several activities, they thought it would work to *occasionally do storyline along with the activities provided*. Another idea is to pair Storyline Online with a read aloud; that is, *start the class with read aloud* and *end it with storyline*. Another consideration within a school environment is to have *Storyline in English extracurricular activity*. In a context outside of the school environment, they thought about using *Storyline any free time, especially as* it can be used with a smartphone as some of the Preserviceteachers did. Storyline is considered a suitable activity *when one gets stuck in the traffic*. All in all, they said, *Storyline is a good option when there's no book, for example on a trip, and we forget to bring books*.

What Are the Similarities Between a Book Read Aloud and Storyline Online?

In terms of the similarities between read alouds and Storyline Online, the Preservice teachers insisted that they both have *the same goal and procedure*. A book read aloud and Storyline Online are about getting students to focus (*both help students pay attention and be focus*) and to have fun (*both facilitate student to focus, joy, and responses*). In both activities, students' literacy development is fostered.

Specifically, they insisted that a book read aloud and Storyline Online are helpful in *developing student language and nurture imagination*. For example, both activities invite students to imagine and talk about a story (*both enables student to imagine the story and to respond*). The Preservice teachers argued that the invitation to talk provides the opportunity for students to be able *telling anything in their mind about a story*, and in that sense it *allows to improve students' response to story*. Read aloud and Storyline Online *enhance students' vocabularies*. From a teacher perspective, *both activities make a teacher to be active*. They both *require interaction with students*, and both activities *help teacher to introduce to new*

stories. In using read alouds and Storyline Online, teachers learn to *select books according to age and interests*.

Storyline Online Challenges

When it comes to Storyline Online, the Preservice teachers were mostly concerned with technical matters. Unlike in a book read aloud, *in Storyline it is not practical to rewind the video/locate words that students find difficult to grasp*. Specifically, viewing someone reading a book in a video makes pointing to specific text, words, or images more difficult. *Storyline is hard to point*, they said. In term of delivering, *Storyline is hard to manage student to shift focus between video viewing and teacher interaction*. Finally, regarding technology and internet access, they said *storyline requires internet data and laptop* or smartphones which some of them viewed as a burden.

Discussion

This research was framed with an understanding that in literacy teacher preparation it was critical to investigate preservice teachers' "emotional predispositions toward literacy" (Scott et al. 2018, p. 6)—in this context their predispositions towards read aloud instruction. The quest of the research was to know about the personal beliefs (perceptions) of Indonesian preservice teachers after having conducted two literacy activities with students; one was a book read aloud and the other one was *Storyline Online*. The findings show what the Preservice teachers perceived about the two experiences. In general, the Preservice teachers held a positive perception about a book read aloud especially in terms of offering a direct interactive experience between an older reader and a child audience. There is an intimacy of human physical interaction and the direct ability to interact with books (i.e., touch, point, etc.) within the context of daily literacy learning sessions. This confirmed our current understanding that the superiority of a book read aloud rests in interaction between teachers and young readers that is the crucial moment of "teacher-students book interaction" (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 4).

The findings also show that the Preservice teachers noticed the benefits of a book read aloud and could envision its strategic role for activities inside a classroom (from literacy teaching e.g., genre exploration, to class time management, e.g., opening and ending a class with a book read aloud). This finding echoed earlier research on the many ways teachers could utilize book read alouds (Fisher et al., 2004) such as for the purposes of demonstrating reading fluency, facilitating access to texts, to managing the classroom (Albright & Ariail). The findings suggesting read alouds' strategic role in classroom literacy instruction affirm a long praxis of read alouds in teacher education (see Moore, 2018; Mitchell, Homza, & Ngo, 2012).

Finally, another interesting finding about a book read aloud is that the Preservice teachers found it to be beneficial for activities outside classroom (e.g., an activity of book read aloud during picnic). However, it is relevant to bring up Fisher et al. (2004) who reminded teacher education programs to avoid giving the impression that a book read aloud is simply a filler activity, "an optional activity or a break from the routine of the classroom." They cautioned that it is pertinent to remind preservice teachers that "one of the purposes of reading or being read to is enjoyment" (p. 15)

In terms of the challenges, the Preservice teachers noticed two issues regarding a read aloud activity using book written in English. First, quality English books for a read aloud are not easily accessible due to high cost or a lack of availability in libraries and bookstores in Indonesia. Second, as they are presently being prepared to become teachers of EFL, the Preservice teachers in this study were aware of challenges for non-native speakers to produce correct English sounds (Wen Chien, 2014) and meaningful gestures. In the case of a book read aloud, the Preservice teachers felt it was challenging to read out loud an English storybook using appropriate expressions and accurate English intonation. Yet, to some extent, this challenge of delivering an expressive read aloud is not exclusive for non-native English speakers. In fact, as other research also noted, it is a challenge that is faced by many whose English is the first language (Kerry-Moran, 2016).

In Storyline Online, the Preservice teachers saw a potential for English teaching, one that in a book read aloud they noticed was least facilitated. Benefits of Storyline Online focused mostly on its potential support for literacy development in English (EFL) class. For example, Storyline Online contains videos of book read alouds from good quality English books that are not accessible for many Indonesian students. Storyline Online is also one kind of digital text considered to be helpful in supporting students' English intonation and listening skills in general. This potential of digital texts for improving students' English sound accuracy is like a finding in another study. Nayak and Sylva (2013) found that for English learners, the benefit of digital text programs is recognized mostly in gaining accuracy of English words. In their words, "opportunities to hear a text read out loud…as part of an e-book, seem to enhance accurate reading aloud skills" (p.97).

Another English learning benefit in viewing Storyline Online was to serve an excellent activity in an English grammar class or any extracurricular activities (afterschool programs) that focused on English. As a digital literacy resource, Storyline Online contains moving animations which the Preservice teachers argued also help to facilitate the story comprehension. The efficiency of Storyline Online is noticeable especially in terms of its ability to play repeatedly and its usefulness to deliver educational activity outside of a classroom when there is no book around such as an outing or when stuck in street traffic (like in Jakarta where this research was conducted). In short, using Storyline Online would make it possible to expand children's love of reading.

Finally, the Preservice teachers' direct observations indicated that students of higher grades (secondary level students) learned English from viewing Storyline Online videos; however, it indicated less for lower grade students (elementary level). One explanation perhaps is the fact that in Indonesian curriculum, English subject (EFL) was not officially offered until after an elementary level so the content had little educational relevance nor immediate need for this group. What's more, the most noticeable interruptions that the Preservice teachers experienced when viewing Storyline Online with students were to manage the students' focus and to prompt students occasionally to pay attention to the instructions from the Preservice teachers. They also noted that Storyline Online made it impractical to locate interesting words or words considered difficult to grasp. Another downside of the utilization of digital literacy resources like Storyline Online is concerned with the cost of internet access when the Preservice teachers were providing instruction outside of university or school contexts where most access to an open internet connection is usually available.

Conclusion

Indonesian preservice teachers noted similarities between book read aloud and Storyline Online activities ranging from comparable goals and procedure and aspects of literacy development (getting focused, nurturing imagination, enabling active response, and enhancing vocabularies) to the required teachers' abilities in doing the two activities (encouraging active interactions, picking books relevant to student's age and interests, and having an ability to expose students with stories). A book read aloud is especially favored by Preservice teachers for it facilitates access to student-teacher book interaction.

The Preservice teachers considered that Storyline Online's role could be to complement a book read aloud's literacy instructional activity. They recommended starting a class with a book read aloud and ending class with Storyline Online. This way Storyline Online will perhaps give leverage the benefits of book read alouds. They suggested digital text literacy resources such as Storyline Online are not replacements for teachers reading aloud interactively to students. Instead, Storyline Online can complement an existing practice of book read alouds by its incorporation into literacy routines (Thoermer & Williams, 2012; Kerry-Moran, 2016).

The focus of making visible Indonesian preservice teachers' personal beliefs about read alouds revealed mostly positive attitudes toward a book read aloud. They noticed some benefits and showed motivation to conduct them. The same goes with Storyline Online where, in addition to complementing a book read aloud activity, they noted some potential benefits to utilizing that digital literacy resource for learning English, despite the internet access downside.

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