

Language and literacy in the digital age.

Early language acquisition is a critical part of a child's lifelong learning journey, language acquisition is time sensitive, meaning, without a solid foundation in place in the early years it will be more difficult for a child to acquire the necessary language and communication skills needed later on in life (Department for Education, no date). In addition, Education Wales (2022) state that language is an important tool for linking a person to the world around them. Language enables a child to connect with their culture, giving them a sense of identity, while also providing an understanding of diversity, thus supporting children to embrace every person as an individual.

According to The University of Kansas (2017) early language acquisition begins as early as a few days after birth with their research showing that babies are able to distinguish between two languages as early as one month before birth. BBC Radio 4 (2015) state that through time there have been many arguments about how language is acquired, with Plato believing babies are born with knowledge and John Lock arguing that it is experience that informs development. However, in the 1960's Noam Chomsky theorised that grammar is universal, and children are born with an innate language acquisition device that allows a child's brain to organise the language they experience into pre-determined categories giving them the foundation to quickly learn to communicate following pre-determined formats (BBC Radio 4, 2015. Morin, 2020). Furthermore, Lennenberg (1969) suggested that children are born with an innate understanding of their native language's grammatical structures and how this effects language acquisition. Although Lenneberg states that where children are deprived of specific language training during the critical acquisition phase, they will often show language delays, Lenneberg states that language development is not about what a child does achieve but what they are able to achieve. However, Jerome Bruner's theory argues that although children are born with the ability to develop language, they need to learn through regular in person interactions with adults to reach their full potential. Bruner also hypothesized that children were able to grasp language through simplified uses of dialect known as child directed speech (ImamS edu, 2022). Motherese also known as parentese, is an example of child directed speech, where the mother's tone and timber of voice changes, becoming higher pitch and more musical when talking to their child (Fuller-

Wright, 2017). Fuller- Wright states that this change in tone is seen across many languages and cultures and appears to be an instinctive way of supporting language development. Furthermore, Ekhardt (2020) states studies by University of Washington show that through the more engaging higher pitch and slower tempo of motherese, a baby is more inclined to respond to communication and thus has increase language abilities later in childhood.

Eve Clarke believes that children need support from adult interactions to communicate effectively. Clarkes theory is that a child cannot use language without an understanding of what language means, and children cannot gain and understanding of language without adult interaction. One example of this is through the use of picture books, Clarke explains that when a child points at an animal in a book and a parent responds with, “ yes an Owl” and then attaches a sound to that owl, a child is then being given not only a visual marker for an owl but also a sound marker, thus developing their understanding of what the word owl means (Yeh, 2022) Examples of this are seen during the digital storytelling element of this assignment. In addition, Booktrust (2021) suggests that through primary carer supported early access to literature, a child’s attachments are strengthened, thus supporting mental health and wellbeing, and providing a strong foundation for better educational outcomes. This is reflected in National Literacy Trust (2023) research into their ‘First words together’ programme which supports caregivers to talk and read with babies and toddlers. The research found that through the programme parents gained greater confidence in communicating and reading with their preschool children, developing the child’s early communication skills, providing the child with a solid foundation for early education. Furthermore, Education Wales (2022) describe literacy as an opportunity to expand a learner’s knowledge, giving them the capability to explore the world around them from many different viewpoints, sparking imagination, providing a foundation for mental wellbeing and a lifelong thirst and love for literature. Likewise, Bruns (2011) explains that through storytelling a child can create a bridge between their imagination and lived experiences, helping them to make sense of the world around them and creating emotional links with the storybooks characters, supporting the child to identify, understand and process their own emotions. However, although Education Wales (2022) state that literature gives

children a connection to their culture and a sense of belonging within their community, research by National Literacy Trust (2022) suggests that nearly 40 percent of children struggle to find characters that represent them in story books, with this figure rising significantly in minority groups. However, this research suggests that where children are immersed in early storytelling where they do not feel represented, the child is more likely to go on to create literature in the future where they are represented in the characters.

A study by Speaker, Taylor and Kamen (2004) found that when children aged four and five were immersed in a regular story telling program their language development was supported and extended. Speaker, Taylor, and Kamen's recommendations following their findings, supported the need for regular and consistent storytelling as part of early years curriculum.

Knowing the story inside out is a key element to a successful and immersive story telling activity (Johnson and Watts, 2018, p.76). Additionally, Agosto (2016) states that story telling is not the process of reading a story but recounting a story or experience from memory. Agosto says that children are able to make deeper emotional connections with literature through story telling in comparison to reading a story, however there is little research to confirm this. And in contrast, National storytelling Network (no date) suggest that storytelling can take many forms but always includes five key elements, these are; story telling is interactive and the listener is actively involved in the process, story telling uses language either spoken or through sign, story telling uses actions, gestures and body language, story telling encourages the listeners imagination awakening all the senses and storytelling follows a narrative. Between the ages of two and six years, children begin to develop narrative competence (Baldock, 2006, p.1-5). Baldock explains that in order to understand a story the brain must remember the experiences and then recall them in order. furthermore, a study by Petersen *et al.* (2010) suggested that through regular immersion in storytelling, where prompts such as pictures are used to support the narrative, children aged six to eight years were able to better demonstrate understanding of sentence structure and language patterns in their own story telling.

One of the ways in which this can be supported is through the use of literary devices. literary devices are used in storytelling to help the listener or reader understand what

the author is trying to convey (Englashing, 2020). One of the literary devices seen in the digital storytelling element of this assignment was rhyme. Throughout “What the Ladybird heard” Julia Donaldson (2009) uses rhyme to create a natural rhythm. Rimmer (2022) suggests that rhyme allows the listener to understand specific sounds used in a language and the rules around that sound, allowing the child to learn to manipulate sounds within words, forming the basic foundations for early reading. However, McNorgan *et al.* (2014) suggest that as literacy develops so is a child’s ability to rhyme, thus suggesting that rhyme has no impact on literacy but the reverse. Nevertheless, Şimşek and Işıkoğlu Erdoğan (2021) suggest that rhyming is a good way of introducing new language to children therefore promoting language development. Despite this, Shanahan (2015) suggests that there is little evidence to suggest teaching rhyme supports phonemic awareness and therefore should not be focused on as a tool for developing literacy skills. Regardless, Treiman and Kesler (2014, p. 65-83) suggest that rhyme provides opportunities for fun and interaction during storytelling, providing memory prompts and boosting motivation to engage with literature.

Johnson and Watts (2018, p.76) state that bringing the story to life is a sign of a good storyteller, creating a multisensory experience through the use of props, eye contact, movement and vocal expression, all of these elements were seen during the storytelling element of the assignment. During the traditional storytelling element of the assignment, a range of voices were used to depict each character. Pauls and Archibald (2021) suggest that changes to tone, speed and voice pattern can make narration more captivating, encouraging children’s engagement and interest in the stories content. Through use of varying tone and pitch, children can gain a greater understanding of the emotions felt by the characters, enabling the child to link the character and their emotion to real life situations, this in turn promotes and develops a child’s empathy and emotional literacy (Gasser, Dammert, and Murphy, 2022). Elswick (2018, p.21) states that when a character in a story book is brought to life and a child can connect with the emotion of the character, the emotional wellbeing of the child can instantly be promoted through enlightenment of their own situation, likewise this response allows the child a viewpoint of others emotions, boosting empathetic responses, understanding of the world around them and a child’s ability to be ethical

and informed citizens. Elswick suggests that when carefully selected, storytelling can be used to support children through many challenges in life.

Including books in every part of every day is one of the key elements for encouraging children to become competent readers (Said, 2019). Opportunities for digital storytelling provide children with early experiences of how the digital world can support learning. The Digital Competence framework Wales states that from September 2022, children in Welsh schools must have cross curricular opportunities to learn in the digital world, including opportunities for developing listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills (Twinkl, no date). During both the digital and traditional storytelling elements of this assignment, the storyteller allows pauses and provides prompts to the children, giving opportunity for the listener to make comments and join in with the story. Şimşek and Işıkoğlu Erdoğan (2021) state that during their research there were only minor differences between the language and literacy development of children who read traditional story books and those who read the digital stories, however, there was a notable difference when storytelling became interactive, and the storyteller engaged in dialog around the story with the child. Suggesting that the role of the storyteller in providing opportunities for conversation both during and after the story is vital in supporting children's language and literacy development. This backs up earlier research that showed when the use of technology enhanced storytelling provided prompts for discussion, there were increased parent child interaction around the story and the quality of those interactions were improved thus boosting the child's vocabulary knowledge (Teepe, Molenaar and Verhoeven, 2017).

In conclusion, there are many schools of thought on a child's natural ability to acquire language, research shows that the foundations of early language acquisition are in place before birth with multiple factors coming into play during the early years. What is apparent is that storytelling allows a child to find an emotional connection to the world around them and that the vital role the adult plays in supporting and developing a child's language and literacy skills is pivotal to this. Through rich and immersive communication and storytelling opportunities the adult can help foster a love and thirst for learning from a child's earliest moments and promote literacy as the world moves into the digital age.

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Module - ECEY5004
Student Number – 2204711
Word Count - 1967

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