Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

Introduction

Akron Children's, (2023) and Kids Health (2018) states that reading aloud to a baby is a fantastic bonding activity and experience that can be enjoyed for many years, it plays an integral role in supporting a baby's brain development. Furthermore, Clinic (2020) and Sheldon-Dean, (2023) state that when a baby is read aloud to it supports babies to understand communication, introduces key concepts like numbers, letters, colours, and shapes in an engaging way, strengthens listening skills, memory, and vocabulary skills, whilst providing valuable information about the world around them.

Moreover, Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego (RCHSD) (2024) further supports this by stating by the time babies turn one, they will have absorbed all the sounds needed to speak their native language. The more stories you read to them, the more words they'll hear, helping them develop stronger language skills.

Cambridge Montessori Global (2019) suggests that there are many benefits to reading stories to young children. Furthermore, Parent (no date) also states that it encourages creativity and imagination, improves active listening skills, it aids in instilling values in children, facilitates academic learning, promotes cultural awareness, an excellent aid for enhancing memory, strengthens linguistic abilities, supports navigating challenging situations with confidence and promotes concentration and social skills.

Agosto (2016) and Media (2017) acknowledges that story telling supports children's literacy through understanding the world around them. Creative storytelling allows them to invent their own narratives, drawing on their interests, experiences, and imagination.

Smeda, Dakich and Sharda, (2014) and Vev (no date) suggests that like traditional storytelling, digital storytelling emphasises the exploration of a selected theme or focal point. During this process, children usually brainstorm concepts, research, write scripts, and craft engaging narratives. Furthermore, Bouchrika, (2021) and Blogs Brighton (no date) suggests the main distinction between digital storytelling and its traditional counterpart lies in the use of various digital multimedia tools. Digital story telling incorporates a blend of graphics, text, recorded audio narration, video, and music to convey information on a specific topic through technology.

Traditional Story Telling

The reader in the traditional story telling of Pip and Egg by Alec Latimer (Latimer, 2021) and illustrated by David Litchfield (Litchfield, 2021) demonstrated clear intonation throughout whilst displaying the emotions of the characters. This included facial

expressions to support non-verbal communication for the inclusion of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) children involved.

BBC Bitesize (no date) acknowledges that reading aloud is important to make it engaging to hold the children's attention. One way to achieve this is by using intonation. This involves speaking in a dynamic and expressive manner, bringing the story to life.

Furthermore, Teaching English (no date) states that intonation, often called the melody of speech, plays an integral role in the linguistic system of languages that use it. Geikhman, (2016) and Learn English Today (no date) suggest in English, for example, intonation is utilised to manage conversational flow, signal grammatical meaning, highlight new or significant information, and convey emotional tones or a speaker's attitude toward events in the conversation. It also supports turn-taking during discussions. Moreover, Frota and Butler, (2018) acknowledge that intonation is one of the earliest features of a language that children acquire when learning their first language.

Raising Children Network, (2017) and Team (2023) suggests that non-verbal communication is an integral part when storytelling to young children because it enhances their understanding and engagement. Through facial expressions, gestures, and body language, storytellers can communicate emotions, emphasise key moments, and create a more immersive experience.

Furthermore, Speech and Language UK (no date) acknowledges that children, especially those who may not yet fully understand language, rely on these visual cues through non-verbal communication to interpret meaning and context. Fire Story (2023) further suggests that non-verbal communication helps capture the children's attention, making the story more dynamic and memorable, while also fostering emotional connection and comprehension understanding.

The reader also extended the visual interpretation of the story through the use of props. This embedded the children's conceptual understanding of the difference between the pip to the tree, and also egg to the bird.

Bruce, McNair, and Whinnett (2020) and Toddler Tales (no date) suggest that props capture children's attention and enhance engagement during storytelling. Ebrary (no date) notes that Lev Vygotsky's theories on play and cognitive development support this, as he demonstrated how props encourage abstract thinking by symbolizing other items in imaginative play.

Moreover, Lewis (2020) proposes the concept that children use objects in imaginative play to symbolise other items, fostering their abstract thinking and symbolic understanding, is widely supported by various developmental psychologists and educators.

Teach HQ (2023) recognises that Jean Piaget, a notable developmental psychologist, highlighted the significance of symbolic play in his cognitive development theory. He observed that in the pre-operational stage (ages 2-7), children participate in symbolic play, which is integral for developing conceptual thinking and their language abilities.

Moreover, Panchal (2023) and National Association for the Education of Young Children, (NAEYC) (no date) address contemporary educational materials, along with child development specialists, emphasising the importance of symbolic play in cognitive and language growth. They described how children use objects, gestures, or concepts to signify other items, which support in stimulating creativity, problem-solving skills, and social communication competence.

During the observation the reader frequently changed how they held the traditional storybook, which altered the book's presentation and could potentially distract the children participating in the storytelling. Incorrectly holding a book can affect traditional storytelling in various ways, especially regarding the significance of visual cues, the children’s engagement, and the storytelling flow (Valdez, 2024).

Traditional storytelling depends largely on the connection between the storyteller and the children. If the book is held in a way that obstructs the storyteller's face or the illustrations, it can interfere with eye co-ordination and weaken the emotional bond (Chi, 2019). Eye co-ordination plays an integral role in expressing emotions, building suspense, and setting the tone, which helps keep the children engaged. When visual connection is disrupted, the story may feel less intimate and engaging (Roos, 2022).

Smart Books (2024) suggests that many traditional stories, particularly those told to children, depend on illustrations to enrich the narrative. Kristen (2024) acknowledges that if the book is held improperly, the children may struggle to see the images clearly, making it harder for them to grasp or appreciate the visual elements essential to the story. This is especially important for young children, who often use illustrations to follow the plot.

Improperly holding the book can disrupt the natural flow of storytelling. If the storyteller keeps adjusting the book or awkwardly turning pages, it can interrupt the narrative rhythm and create distractions (Kirsten, 2024). Traditional storytelling relies on steady pacing and smooth transitions to build suspense, excitement, or emotion throughout the story. This conceptual understanding can be traced back as far as Aristotle (Literary Hub, 2022).

Additionally, how a book is held can affect the storyteller's posture, voice projection, and facial expressions. If the book is held too close to their face or awkwardly, it may muffle their voice or hide their expressions. Since traditional storytelling relies on vocal

variation and expressive gestures, this can diminish the performance's quality, making it less engaging for the children.

If the book is held in a way that highlights the storyteller's discomfort or mistakes, such as upside down or sideways, the children may focus on these accidental errors instead of the story. This could result in a less immersive experience and disrupt the atmosphere that traditional storytelling aims to create (Brown, 2023).

In many traditional storytelling contexts, particularly with children, storytelling also serves as an educational tool. Children may be learning how to read or understand how books function, such as turning pages or following text from left to right. Holding the book incorrectly can confuse or mislead them, impacting their grasp of reading mechanics and story structure. (Accelerated Learning, no date and Victorian Government, 2023).

Digital Story Telling

Rahiem, (2021) and Saptaparna, (2023) acknowledge that digital storytelling offers several key benefits for children in the early years, supporting their cognitive and emotional development. Digital storytelling captivates young children by bringing stories to life with images, animations, and sound. In the classroom, their attention is instantly drawn to colorful characters and lively sound effects, transforming learning into an interactive, enjoyable experience. This multimedia approach makes lessons more engaging and memorable.

Khan, Azidah Abu Ziden and Baksh, (2023) and Smeda, Dakich and Sharda, (2014) propose that digital storytelling helps children improve their reading, writing, and language skills by making learning fun and interactive. As they create and listen to stories, they naturally build vocabulary, strengthen sentence structure, and enhance their comprehension.

Robin (2016) Smeda, Dakich and Sharda, (2014) both acknowledge that digital storytelling sparks children's imagination, allowing them to create their own stories and express concepts both visually and verbally. It nurtures creativity by giving them the tools to bring their unique narratives to life.

Bouchrika, (2021) states that digital storytelling helps children improve listening and focus by combining visuals and audio, while also enhancing their comfort with technology and visual literacy. It provides a platform for emotional expression, allowing children to better understand and communicate their feelings. Moreover, Story Book App (2023) further suggests that the process of creating and sharing stories boosts confidence, strengthens critical thinking by encouraging problem-solving, and promotes teamwork and social skills through collaboration.

Ponti *et al.*, (2017) and Ponti, (2023) suggest that while digital storytelling offers many benefits, it also has potential downsides. One concern is the increased screen time, which can negatively affect children's physical health, leading to problems like eye strain, poor posture, and decreased physical activity. Jam Teaching and Consulting (2024) propose that additionally, children may become overly dependent on technology for creativity and communication, limiting the development of traditional storytelling and social skills.

Unequal access to digital tools can create learning disparities, and technical issues such as software malfunctions or limited digital literacy may cause frustration for both teachers and students. Another drawback is the potential decrease in face-to-face interactions, as children may focus more on technology rather than engaging with their peers or teachers (McCarthy, 2022 and Miah, 2024).

Education Scotland, (2020) suggests that the multimedia features that enhance digital storytelling can occasionally become distractions, pulling focus away from the story's core message. If not properly managed, digital storytelling may also result in passive media consumption, where children simply absorb information without actively engaging with it.

During the observation while the reader used digital literacy to enhance the children's understanding and enjoyment of the story Pip and Egg, they did not appear fully confident with the text, leading to moments where they seemed uncomfortable and anxious.

This observation holds considerable importance. Tamer and Walsh (2016) acknowledge that the first, engagement is a pivotal part of storytelling. When a reader is not fully confident with the text, their ability to captivate the audience of the children can be less effective. Williams (no date) also states that children are perceptive and can pick up on the reader’s discomfort, which may lessen their own interest and enjoyment in the story. A confident, relaxed reader draws children in, while hesitation may distance them.

Furthermore, the learning opportunity here is notable. Reading aloud confidently models fluent reading for children, guiding them in following and comprehending the story. A reader who struggles with the text might unintentionally disrupt this flow, potentially hindering the children’s understanding and affecting their overall learning experience.

Digital literacy also plays a significant role. Digital literacy can add richness to storytelling but using it effectively requires comfort with both the technology and the story itself. If the reader feels uneasy, it may reveal a need for further practice or training in digital literacy to make sure these tools truly support the storytelling experience (University of Houston Education, no date).

Lastly, there's the element of emotional connection. A confident storyteller can bring a story to life, conveying emotions and subtleties that allow children to connect deeply with the characters and themes. However, discomfort can interrupt this connection, lessening the impact of the story and the lasting impression it leaves on the children (Excite Media, 2023).

In conclusion, the reader effectively used the screen to highlight focal points for the children and displayed some props visually. However, due to time constraints, it remained unclear if these props would be integrated into the digital literacy session.

Conclusion

To summarise, traditional storytelling fosters social connections, preserves cultural heritage, and engages children through eye contact, non-verbal cues, and intonation (Accelerate Learning, no date). However, it may reinforce outdated stereotypes and lack accessibility in a digitalising world (Heinemeyer, 2018).

Digital storytelling increases accessibility, engages technologically aware children, and enriches narratives with multimedia like animations and sounds. However, it faces technical barriers, screen distractions, and risks a reduced emotional connection if not used thoughtfully (ASCD, no date; Dillion, 2014; McCusker, 2023).

Combining traditional and digital storytelling blends personal engagement with exciting digital features, creating immersive, inclusive, and culturally rich experiences that appeal to children of various ages (Agosto, 2016; Lisenbee & Ford, 2017; Maureen, van der Meij & de Jong, 2020; Rahiem, 2021).

Acknowledgements

Word Hippo: To change persistently used vocabulary

My Bib: Check referencing through Cite Them Right

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