

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

Introduction

Language and literacy in the early years are the skills that children develop to communicate and to read and write. In this digital age, children's communicative practices are more complex and diverse than ever before. They include both traditional reading and writing, and a growing range of new competencies across multiple digital media contexts.

Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, developing through the interactions and experiences that a child has with others. In early childhood, literacy can develop through hearing stories that are read from books and showing children pictures with words that are appropriate for the child and their age.

Language also develops through a child's interaction and experiences, from the first moment they hear their mother's speech to the sounds and words they hear over time, as babies develop, they quickly learn which words that are connected to certain objects and people.

Language and literacy are key areas of early childhood development, these skills of development are connected, but at the same time also differ, language development refers to communication and literacy development is the ability to read and write.

Digital storytelling combines oral storytelling with technical tools to present personal tales with images, music, graphics and sound. This story is digitally presented on a smart board or another device.

Traditional storytelling is an oral storytelling condition of reading a story book, talking about the book and allowing for discussion about the story that was just read out, presenting images for visualisation while the book is being read out.

The importance of language and literacy in the early years

Children are individual to their own learning and development; each child's cultural and linguistic background is a unique and individual experience, through interaction with the people around them, this is a fundamental medium of learning. All children should be offered equal opportunities to progress and develop, the curriculum offered to them should support this. The Early years and Foundation stage framework, (EYFS, 2024) shows that two prime areas of learning that are particularly important, are communication and language, with literacy being a specific area. Oracy is a key part of the Early years and Foundation stage (EYFS) framework (2024), under communication and language, this area covers, listening, attention and understanding. Oracy is the ability to use spoken language to express ideas, to develop an understanding, and develop listening.

Early Learning Goals in the EYFS

Literacy – children are expected to demonstrate an understanding of what has been read to them. **Reading** – they can say the sound of the letter, phonic knowledge and sound blending, read expected words and simple sentences. **Writing** – letter formation, write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others. **Physical (fine and gross motor) (gross)** build up core strength to be able to sit comfortably, build girdle and arm strength for writing. **(Fine)** to hold a pencil effectively for fluent handwriting, using the tripod grip, to also begin to show accuracy in drawing. Montessori (1897) believed that children were ready to write before they were ready to read. **Speaking** - using vocabulary from stories, rhymes and poems, also expressing ideas and feelings. **Listening, Attention and Understanding** - To listen attentively, hear relative questions, hold discussion, clarify their understanding.

Language comprehension is necessary for both reading and writing, this skill develops when adults talk to children about the world around them and about books they have read together, helping them to decode words and the recognition of words,

Phonological awareness is an important skill linked to acquisition and development of reading skills in school (McLachlan and Arrow, 2010). It is an awareness of sounds in spoken words that is revealed by abilities such as rhyming, matching initial consonants, learning phonemes in spoken words and isolating signal sounds in these words, (Murry et al. 1996).

Print awareness refers to children's ability to recognise the function and form of print, and the relationship between oral and written language, (Pullen and Justice 2023). Even when young children are unable to read, they can recognise a certain print or logo and know the meaning behind it, such as a supermarket logo and knowing where they are and what they are going to be doing without having to be able to read that sign but can tell an adult where they are; (Kassow 2006).

How early can babies recognise language

Babies from around the age of 18 weeks, can hear sounds from inside the womb, at 24 weeks, babies can respond to sounds outside of the womb and will have a response to hearing their mothers voice and at full term babies can hear at the same level as an adult. Babies are exposed to language from when they are inside the womb, according to the (National Science Teachers Association, 2013) study, babies begin absorbing language while they are still inside the womb, stating that sensory and brain mechanisms for hearing develop at 30 weeks of the gestational stage. This study also shows that unborn babies are listening to their mothers talking during the last 10 weeks of pregnancy, and at birth they can demonstrate what they have heard. This study explains how babies that are hours old, can differentiate between their native language and a foreign language. The (University of Washington, The Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, no date) suggests that newborn babies are ready to learn and begin to discriminate between language sound within the first months of life, however there is no evidence to suggest that the learning of language occurred in the utero.

Studies have shown the importance of brain development in the first year of life, at birth the brain is highly adaptable and rich in potential, but because the brain cells are not yet connected to the important neural pathways that make satisfactory emotional development and complex thinking possible. Daily experiences trigger these pathways to join by being stimulated through interaction, babies' brains are literally created in sociable and enjoyable relationships with their first carers. Stated by (Gerhardt 2004), the necessary stimulation for growing a social brain is learning companionship from ordinary sensory and sociable experiences in families and small groups (Trevvarthen 2002). Babies seem to be great communicators from birth by using their instincts to enable them to communicate and form bonds with their carers. Bruner (1961) believed that children are born with the ability to develop language, he also believed that children needed regular interaction with their caregivers or teachers to learn and understand language to a full level of fluency, this idea is known as the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), which focuses on the importance of interaction and the scaffolding of language learning.

Traditional Literacy

Traditional reading methods focus on teaching children to decode and understand written text through systematic and explicit instruction, to introduce children to books, to demonstrate to children how use books and take care of them. Imagination and creativity are created through reading, introducing children to new information, culture, ideas and vocabulary. Through the introduction of text, children are taught the relationship between letters and sounds, building up to words and sentences by using phonics. (Gray and Rogers, 1987) state, reading is a linear process by which readers decode a text word by word, linking the words into phrases and then sentences. By children experiencing a whole language approach, they start to have understanding and meaning over phonics, enabling children to learn, to read recognising whole words and sentences, exposing them to rich literature and engaging stories. Piaget (1896) believed that children learned by interaction and in stages, children are also taught to recognise words by sight, allowing them to recognise high-frequency words, rather than just relying on just sounding them out. This helps children to learn reading with fluency, when adults share a book with a child, it creates discussion and engagement with the story, supporting children to develop a love for reading and improving their comprehension skills by explaining the story and the meaning behind of what they have learnt from reading. Vygotsky (1896-1934) believed that children working with a learning facilitator such as a teacher or parent supports children's learning with a task that is just within or beyond the child's capability, he also believed working in groups supports a child's skill and knowledge acquisition. In an educational setting there is opportunity to have guided reading groups, where a professional can provide support and guidance at the groups instructional level can, develop reading strategies and build on comprehension skill. Also encouraging the children to read out aloud will improve their fluency, pronunciation and confidence, this gives children the chance to practice expressive reading and to understand the rhythm and flow of language, The methods used in traditional reading are combined to create a balanced reading program, this addresses the diverse needs of young learners, allowing for them to learn in a peer group of similar levels allowing for interventions and extra support to be put in place when needed.

Digital Literacy

Today children are growing up in a world in which communication and everyday Literacy practices have been transformed by the digital turn (Mills 2010). From birth, many young children's lives are immersed in their families use of multiple media. Children from a young

age experiencing the phenomenon of the 21st century of digital communication, entertainment and gaming. Technological change has inescapable implications for young children, not only for the early development of literacy, but also in terms of how parents and professional educators can help prepare young children for a digitally connected future (Saljo 2010). As a professional educator it must be recognised how best children can be supported in their literacy development, which is continually changing and fast evolving due to multiculturalism and multiliteracies. Digital technologies have changed children's childhoods and literacy experiences, the term 'digital literacy' refers to the diversity of young children's literacy skills and practices across digital tools, technologies and media. The concept of 'digital literacy' has been much debated since the 1990s (Gilster 1997; Lankshear and Knobel 2008; Hobbs 2011; Ng 2012). (Street 1995; Gee 1996), state we adopt plural from 'literacies' in recognition of diversity that young children take part in and the different ways this concept has been interpreted in academic accounts. Also arguing the expansive view of digital literacies is significant and beneficial for children's teaching and learning at home, in the community and formal educational environments. Suggesting also that practices where being 'digitally literate involves "being skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical subtleties of words. Above all it means being at home in a shifting mixture of words, images and sounds" (Lanham 1995:200), making meaning with children becoming skilled users and designers of new model combinations.

Comparative Analysis

Analysing the two different practitioner's recordings of digital and traditional reading;

In the digital recording, on delivery the practitioner read out the story, The little red hen and talked about being kind and helpful, it was felt that the practitioner could have added more discussion into the story as it was being read out. When talking to the children the discussion about the story of how the little red hen friends were unkind for not helping, the practitioner could have added more by asking the children what they would have done to help the little red hen, also props may have been used to act out the story in areas, to encourage more discussion on other topics that could have come into the conversation. The practitioner tried to deliver with expression but needed to turn their head more to the screen to read the story, it felt slow to read which could have a disadvantage.

The traditional reading recording, was delivered with a lot more expression and prosody, using expressive actions and encouraging the children to become interactive with the story. By choosing the story superworm, the text in the book is rhyming words that can be read

fluidly and even sung, the practitioner used facial expression and changed the pitch of their voice throughout reading, they showed the children the pages of the story, so they were able to see what was happening throughout the time the story was being read out. The discussion after was also about being kind by helping others, the practitioner asked the children what they noticed about the words in the story and the children pointed out that the words were rhyming, however more discussion could have been had about this and the children could have added their take on rhyming words and could have been tasked to write them down.

Summary

The effectiveness of both digital and traditional reading has their benefits, they can both complement each other to support children's reading, especially if the English language is a second language for some children, digital reading could be used to support the child, Comenius (592-1670) all children should be taught in their native language. The role of the practitioner is to provide the children with the resources they can use to freely make their own markings on paper exploring their drawing and writing formation, to be independent and free from constraints, Rousseau (1712-1778).

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