

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

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Digital session- [https://uowtsd-](https://uowtsd-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/2418805_student_uwtsd_ac_uk/IQAayRTlMtYeQIAOJyNSA0RuAdEgdDQHKALMBk_q_lch5h4?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOmsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAIoiJPbmVEcmI2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzliwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYilsluZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkiX0&e=EZJkdf)

[my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/2418805_student_uwtsd_ac_uk/IQAayRTlMtYeQIAOJyNSA0RuAdEgdDQHKALMBk_q_lch5h4?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOmsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAIoiJPbmVEcmI2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzliwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYilsluZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkiX0&e=EZJkdf](https://uowtsd-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/2418805_student_uwtsd_ac_uk/IQAayRTlMtYeQIAOJyNSA0RuAdEgdDQHKALMBk_q_lch5h4?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOmsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAIoiJPbmVEcmI2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzliwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYilsluZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkiX0&e=EZJkdf)

Reflective Essay

Within early childhood education, storytelling is a narrative experience that serves as a primary vehicle for oracy and emergent development (Cremin *et al.*, 2017). With its use of narration, repetitiveness and imagination, storytelling contributes towards a child's development and understanding, resulting in imagination and oracy skills enhancing (Sitinjak *et al.*, 2025).

Theorists such as Vygotsky, Bruner and Halliday explore how storytelling is more than just reading a book. Vygotsky (Erbil, 2020) provides the social interaction element in storytelling, his key ideas are that language develops through social interaction, and how children tend to learn faster through interactions with adults. Meanwhile, Bruner (Myers, 2021) attempts to understand how narration is a fundamental tool that humans use to organise experiences. His theory outlines cognitive and narrative structure. Halliday (Thwaite, 2019) believes that language is a tool for making meaning, and that children tend to use this for different purposes such as imaging and regulating behaviour. Throughout the early years, communication and language is in its prime era. As highlighted throughout The First 1000 days (NHS Wales, no date.), the child's brain is developing rapidly and needs stimulation. Reading a book to a child contributes towards development, especially in language and communication (Cremin *et al.*, 2017).

As humans continue to develop and evolve, digital literacy and learning evolve with them. Digital literacy throughout early childhood refers to the ability to interpretate and make meaning of multimodal texts (Narendran *et al.*, 2025). Kress (Adami, 2017) argues that literacy is no longer confined to printed words or work, but instead is constructed through combinations of image, gesture, layout and sound. While these digital examples provide rich multimodal scaffolding, some questions remain regarding their impact on a child's imagination skills and dialogical engagement within early year settings.

Within this essay, I will reflect upon two storytelling approaches I conducted to understand the difference between a traditional story book and a digital one, and how effective both methods are to contributing towards a child's imagination and engagement. For the traditional book, I used "A Squash and A Squeeze" by Julia Donaldson. While for the digital story, I used "The Gruffalo", also by Julia Donaldson.

For the first activity, a traditional story read, I chose a book that would support imagination and engagement for the early years. "A Squash and A Squeeze" focuses on two main characters accompanied by four other characters who are animals. The use of props added towards the external scaffolds that Vygotsky notes in his theory (Mermelshtine, 2017). Props can reduce confusion and help children to understand the differences between each animal, and their sizes. For example, the old lady in the book complains her house is a "squash and a squeeze", so adding animal props helps them to understand spatial awareness and emphasise on the size of the house to support repetition.

This session was structured in a way to intentionally encourage dialogic interaction, with pauses for prediction and questions to ensure the children are still engaged and understand what they are listening to. By using this structure, it reflects Vygotsky's theory that language develops through socially mediated interaction (Mermelshtine, 2017). By making the storytelling a collaborative process, the activity fostered active participation and narrative sequencing. This suggests that traditional reading can function as a powerful vehicle for emergent literacy and language development (Talibong and Abdulfattah, 2020). Vygotsky (Karantalis and Koukopoulos, 2022) argues that children learn best when supported slightly beyond their independent capability. This is also referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD (Ness, 2023). By pausing for prediction and prompting children with scaffolded questions, I positioned myself within this developmental structure. Supporting children to articulate ideas that may not have emerged without guidance is what Vygotsky (Mermelshtine, 2017) believed would contribute towards a child's development, especially socially (Ness, 2023). When reading, I modelled descriptive vocabulary with hand and facial gestures to illustrate how language functions not only as a communication tool but also a cognitive tool (Stefani and Marco, 2019). According to Garcia-Carrion (2016), dialogic engagement directly supports oracy development, narrative sequencing and vocabulary expansion. All of these underpin emergent literacy within the early years (Garcia-Carrion, 2016).

From a Halliday (Thwaite, 2019) perspective, this storytelling functioned as a field for meaning-making, where children can use language to interpretate events and understanding. The repetitive structure encouraged collective participation, stimulating their mind through engagement and using expressive facial gestures to really get them involved. While Vygotsky (Mermelshtine, 2017) focuses on the social scaffolding and the importance of harbouring strong communication to further language development, Halliday (Law and Matthiessen, 2023) explains why and how children use language during storytelling. Halliday (Law and Matthiessen, 2023) believes that children develop language by using it for different functions, not just by memorising vocabulary. Some of the functions include; questioning, pretending, interacting, informing and personalising (Thwaite, 2019). The diverse use of functional language throughout this session suggests supportive flexible communicative development rather than an isolated vocabulary. With the use of repetition and question asking, it contributes towards the child's current knowledge and understanding offering them a new perspective on emotive language.

My use of props explored the deeper comprehension of what the story actually details, without being too overpowering or distracting. By doing so, I am supporting cognitive processing and

externalising key narrative elements. Providing a visually tracked prop helped the children to visualise the concept of overcrowding, which is the key theme of this story. This reduced cognitive load and enabled children to focus on narrative meaning rather than attempting to mentally construct character representations independently (Shahid and Khan, 2022). I used emotive language and strong facial gestures to ensure the children were still engaged, and provide emphasis on words that stuck out. I also utilised the final moments after the story had ended to ask questions about what animals we met, what noises they made and how the story ended.

In contrast to the traditional storytelling session, the digital storytelling session presented a distinct pedagogical dynamic. The digital storytelling session involved presenting "The Gruffalo" in a screen-based format, incorporating visual animation while still using simple props. Unlike the traditional session, meaning was constructed through layered visuals and narrative elements, reflecting upon Kress's (Jewitt *et al.*, 2025) argument that literacy is inheritably multimodal. Using a digital animation to support the story helped the children become immersed in the story and visually understand the descriptive language that can be hard to understand during the early years. "The Gruffalo" is a descriptive book, using adjectives to describe what the Gruffalo looks like. Making this visual helps the child to determine what exactly each description refers to, and it makes it easier for them to enjoy the story without being confused.

Kress's (Jewitt *et al.*, 2025) theory supports literacy not only being confined to print, and that meaning is made through multiple modes. The animations and narrative expression positioned meaning within layered semiotic modes. While multimodality enhances accessibility, it potentially constrains imaginative interpretation by pre-determining visual representations.

Expanding on Kress's (Jewitt *et al.*, 2025) argument, the digital format harboured meaning-making across visual, auditory and textual modes. Instead of only relying on spoken language, my digital session supported facial expressions, colours, movement and sound effects, which engages in multimodal semiotic processing (Adami, 2017). While the video played, the text was highlighted as I read, this supports writing and understanding that some letters have different sounds when used in new words. For example, the descriptive adjectives such as "terrible tusks" supports vocabulary acquisition by pairing meaning with visual representation (Cremin *et al.*, 2017).

While the animation provided visual representation, imagination was not eliminated but reframed in a new format. Rather than constructing and deciding upon the Gruffalo's appearance independently, children engaged imaginatively through emotional response, anticipation and narrative engagement (Cremin *et al.*, 2017). However, the degree of interpretative understanding may have been reduced compared to the traditional session.

Although the traditional session supports dialogical and narrative interactions, the digital session offered a multimodal approach which supports Vygotsky's (Ness, 2023) scaffolding theory. Both sessions reflect how important storytelling is to the early years, and how they both contribute different aspects that enhance a child's language and literacy skills. Ending the digital session by asking predictive questions allowed the digital format to function within the ZPD, demonstrating that multimodal storytelling can still operate within a sociocultural framework (Ness, 2023).

The traditional session offered opportunities to ask questions, and deepen the understanding of what the story entails. This again supports Vygotsky's (Mermelshtine, 2017) scaffolding theory, and the importance of learning socially and asking questions. Although the digital session was engaging, both visually and narratively, it often positioned the children as viewers not co-constructors. This visual format could shift a child's language use towards descriptive commentary rather than exploratory questioning. As Halliday (Lukin, 2024) mentions throughout his theory, the visual session could suggest a narrower range of functional language. For example; responses may become shorter, fewer opportunities for open-ended questions, fewer imaginative extensions and less questioning coming directly from the child (Rahiem, 2021).

The digital session's multimodal design, as described by Kress (Muge *et al.*, 2023), reduced the inferential demands placed on the child, whereas the traditional session required greater imaginative engagement, which in turn potentially strengthens narrative cognition, as mentioned in Bruner's (Sherwood and Makar, 2022) theory.

But does higher engagement equal deeper literacy? Although the digital session generated high levels of visual engagement, that alone does not necessarily equate to sustained literacy development (Saracho, 2021). The traditional session appeared to cultivate a more deeper dialogic interaction, suggesting that storytelling mediated by an adult or practitioner may hold particular value for oracy development in the early years (Bruce *et al.*, 2020). However, dismissing the digital session's benefits would overlook the capacity to reflect contemporary literacy skills and broaden a child's multimodal skills (Cremin *et al.*, 2017). Having the words appear on screen as I read the story during the digital session contributed towards a child's vocabulary and reading skills. While listening to the story during the traditional session contributed towards a child's oracy and imaginative skill.

Rather than positioning one approach as superior, the contrast between the two sessions suggests differing pedagogical strengths. The traditional session reflects upon Vygotsky's (Mermelshtine, 2017) socially constructed approach to learning, where meaning is collaborative through interaction, dialogue and scaffolded questions (Mermelshtine, 2017). In contrast, the digital delivery emphasises the multimodal approaches theorised by Kress (Jewitt *et al.*, 2025), where meaning is produced visually and auditory. Within this session, literacy is not confined to spoken interaction but is expanded into a deeper semiotic system. Knowing this, it may reduce the cognitive and imaginative demands placed upon the child, as the visual session may do all of the work for them, the traditional session tasked children with imagining on their own.

Ultimately, both sessions demonstrated strong literacy in the early years, and how it is shaped by social interaction, cognitive demand and multimodal methods.

This reflection has demonstrated how both traditional and digital approaches to language and literature can support early year literacy development, though they operate through differing theoretical mechanisms.

While sociocultural and functional frameworks provided valuable insight into interaction, language and imaginative engagement, their origins within pre-digital contexts and methods suggests that the theoretical adaptation must continue to evolve multimodal literacies that are holistically effective.

Through critical analysis throughout my own practice, I have developed a deeper understanding and awareness of how intentional questioning, scaffolding and multimodal designs can shape a child's literacy experiences, and benefit their development in the early years. If provided with the chance to explore these sessions again, I would expand upon the digital session making it more independent and imaginative with more opportunities to ask more predictive questions.

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AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of AI tools such as Copilot and ChatGPT to structure my work correctly and academically.

I used the following prompts;

1. Provide me a strong academic structure for my reflective essay
2. Alphabetically organise my reference list

I can confirm I have not presented any AI generated text as my own, and all original copies have been kept.