

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

A story read by an adult, practitioner or a story recounted by a child in Welsh or English is a powerful tool for communication and connections, it fosters a strong foundation for literacy skills (Welsh Government, 2022b). Any type of story, whether it comes from a book or a digital device, these all exposes children to a rich vocabulary and develops comprehension of stories by sparking imagination and creativity. It also facilitates phonemic awareness, children become more attuned to the sounds of language, helping when children start reading (Welsh Government, 2022a).

According to Albert, Schwade, and Goldstein (2018) children quickly learn from parental responsiveness done in real time, through eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, and posture, therefore the exposure to storytelling can foster a love of books and reading and allow the opportunity to improve concentration, focus and attention span by engagement. Moreover, Wright and Dunsmuir (2019) believe children are more likely to concentrate in a safe and happy environment.

According to the study by Laing and Bergelson (2020) and Wilkinson (2019) discovered that adult voices and the cadence of language are soothing to babies. When reading words themselves it may be beyond the child's comprehension, but according to Chomsky theory of language acquisition, cited in Caselli (2019) children have an innate to learning a language this means a natural capacity to learn therefore the child enjoys the way the adult voice naturally rise and fall while speaking. This gives the sense of safety and stability as demonstrated in Bowlby attachment theory, cited in van Rosmalen, van der Horst, and van der Veer (2016) where bonds are achieved between parent and child. It can also foster a sense of belonging and love achieving the basic needs of a child as demonstrated in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, cited in (Aubrey and Riley, 2017, p. 10).

When adults talk to children in an age-appropriate fashion, children may recognise communication and respond and babies babble back in response, which eventually helps them pronounce words (Laing and Bergelson 2020). Bower (2014, p. 5) agrees, to help children discover the power of language, excellent literacy practises should start at infancy. However, Auger, Reich, and Penner (2014) suggests this can only be possible if parents understand and believe the importance reading contributes to a child's development. The study by Laing and Bergelson (2020) also

found how verbal and visual input are filtered through the established consonants in an infant's repertoire to shape early babble. The sounds of babbling are not random when viewed through the perspective of early phonological development. Instead, the findings imply that newborns' own production skills influence how they perceive the world and how they move from babble to words. Children also learn about language and the mechanics of stories and books. For instance, when the children were asked, "Who will help to turn the page?" the children come to understand what a "page" is. This was used in the activity, making the children feel involved. This method will be used more frequent in future reading sessions in the nursery, whether it be from a book or a digital device as it allows the children to engage further in the story and the activity and to learn to help and take turns.

One of the rich language experiences important for language acquisition and development is reading to babies and young children, which includes a pleasurable and genuine interaction with rhyme and linguistic rhythms which was experienced in the reading activity. The results from the study conducted by Niklas, Cohrsen and Tayler (2016) suggest that reading to very young children does, in fact, make a significant contribution to a positive family literacy environment and promote children's language development and also believes that Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory cited in, Bradbury and Swailes, (2022, p. 20) a child's growth is mainly influenced by immediate family but extended family, community and society such as nurseries and pre-school settings play an important part too.

According to Lodge (2020) communication is a key life skill, and most influential of methods in which humans can communicate are by speaking and listening. These skills are used and past on to unborn babies in the womb who hear sounds, voices and come to recognise the mother's voice (Creative cloud design, 2013). According to McCormack and Klopper (2016: 417) the foundation of oracy is the capacity for speaking, listening, and understanding speech and all children could benefit from numerous opportunities to communicate creatively, meaningfully, and effectively in a range of circumstances that are exciting, engaging, and relevant due to oracy pedagogy. Moreover, the study by McCormack and Klopper (2016) also states music plays an important part in oracy pedagogy and all kind of music is present all the time in all societies, experiencing connection between music and language can start as early as six months of foetal maturity.

According to Schwartz and Sparks (2019) for children to be able to read, print must have significance, children need to decipher words, children must be aware of the various sounds in spoken language and be able to relate those sounds to written letters. According to Caselli (2019) Vygotsky theory play a significant part when children learn to speak through observing, listening, interacting, and repetition, especially from parents who model literacy activities, for instance reading. (Prosic-Santovac, 2015, p. 27) also agrees repetition is an important skill and this was experienced in both activities. It helps children to remember words, for instance in the activity the animal noises were repeated a few times making a connection what animals make what sound. The children were encouraged to join in and thought it was funny and over time a child will begin to correlate the sounds of the word if repeated, for example, "ladybird" if a picture or a toy ladybird is used during storytelling, this was demonstrated in the activity. Giving the children the experience of connection between words and objects.

Greimann (2017) recommends using props when reading a story from a book or when making up stories, these can be from any material. The aim of reading to children is not to aim for perfection but for the children to enjoy and have a wonderful experience. Props were used in both activities, and this allowed for the children to see part of the story in objects. However, it was easier in the activity to use the props when reading from a book as it was a far more familiar story than when reading from the iPad. The children were encouraged to name the animals and to join in with the animal noises. Different tone of voice was used to differentiate characters and animals, this kept the children's attention and interested in the story being read. Throughout the activity facial expressions, hand motion and eye contact were very important to show the children what certain words meant in feelings for example happy, disappointed, shocked and excitement giving the story meaning.

Moreover, engagement is important according to Wright and Dunsmuir (2019) it increases children's word, story understanding and on-task behaviour. Children must not be told to be quiet as encouraged by McGill (2015) as feedback from children should be encouraged, however a balance is needed between listening and speaking and for all children to be able to contribute, this was experienced in the activity when the children were asked questions and allowed the time to express

themselves through animal noises and the opportunity to dress up as the ladybird at the end of the activities.

According to Lodge (2020) children need to develop own voice, however due to digital technology children are becoming more semi silenced through being placed in front of a television, a phone, or an iPad at home or when outside the house.

Therefore, using digital technology to read a story may be a natural activity for the children and increases the development of digital literacy, it may foster the interest in digital content and technology, enhancing adaptability in the rapidly changing digital landscapes, however it may be a challenge for adults as it limits human connection and emotional engagement. Digital technology allows global accessibility to books however not all books are available online, especially Welsh books, this was one challenge encountered with the activity when the book chosen was not available to download. A similar book was found online but even that book would only download as a small book on the iPad.

Moreover, not everybody has access to a digital device or may even experience technical issues such as slow internet causing a child to be excluded. It is also difficult to be inclusive when a child has communication difficulties or additional learning needs. The UN on the Rights of the child (UNICEF, 2019) Article 28 states that all children have the right to education. Different methods may need to be explored such as a one-to-one reading session either from a book or digitally whichever suits the child and where a child can engage independently without having to compete with others. Maybe books that has simple language, for instance a short story that is repetitive therefore sharing the book and pointing to pictures (Fahim, 2018). According to Welsh Government (2022c) British Sign Language may be a method that can be used to teach in nurseries and in schools.

The Donaldson Report (2015) highlighted there were much needed improvements in raising children's literacy skills in schools and digital literacy and competence is as important in twenty first century as literacy and numeracy (Donaldson, 2015: 24). Changes were made to the Literacy and Numeracy Framework providing support to schools to integrate literacy into the curriculum and The Digital Competence Framework (2018) was developed to raise literacy standards and to assist children to reach own potential (Welsh Government, 2018).

Digital competence should be treated similarly in the curriculum to literacy and numeracy because it is becoming an increasingly important component of lifelong learning and should be an obligation for all educators and professionals who work with children to consider when teaching (Donaldson. 2015: 40). The report also highlighted children wanted lessons to be more interesting and fun therefore improvements to the Welsh Curriculum were a priority (Donalson, 2015: 17).

According to Department of Education (2023) children who struggle to learn to read often face problems throughout school and beyond. Therefore, early reading pedagogy has become an important area of education, in nurseries and schools whichever means possible.

However, according to Vaportzis, Clausen and Gow (2017) digital learning are not always possible due to lack of access to digital equipment due to the cost of the equipment. Moreover, Aubrey and Dahl (2013) suggest, it is the lack of knowledge and the confidence of using the technology, therefore preferring traditional methods such as reading from the book instead of encouraging children to engage on a digital equipment. Adults also concerned about exposing children to too much screen time. However, during the digital reading activity an iPad was used, and it was difficult to read and engage with the children as much as reading from a book, it is a working progress to gain confidence and further experience reading a story in this way.

In conclusion, storytelling whichever means is an opportunity for holistic child development, encompassing language, cognitive, emotional, social, connections and learning opportunities. Further experience and confidence are needed to improve digital reading with the children. A shorter story may be chosen next time allowing a more engagement experience where the children will be allowed to tell the story by using own ideas and imagination. This may allow the story to go a different direction fuelling imagination allowing them to escape into a new world. Song and music will be introduced too, to enhance communication and for the children to learn in a fun way.

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