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Literacy – A Key to Learning

Introduction

This essay is divided into two sections. Part one examines the concept of literacy, the effects of poor literacy skills on individuals, and key theorists who advocate effective approaches to improving literacy.

Part two will reflect upon and critique a video using Gibb's Reflective Cycle of a storytelling session featuring the story "The Cave" narrated by myself.

Part 1

The development of literacy skills in children is a fundamental aspect of education that underpins all other areas of learning within the curriculum, and yet, literacy skills are so much more than is learnt within a classroom. Literacy extends way beyond the basic ability of reading and writing, and starts long before a child sets foot in the classroom. Literacy encompasses communication, critical thinking and the capacity to create meaning to everyday experiences from a very young age (lu.edu, 2025). The process of emergent literacy skills (a concept that language, symbols and print are a developing skill learnt by children before formal education takes place) begins at birth (although some may argue in utero), when those wonderfully enriching human interactions take place (Carter-Smith, 2021). It's of paramount importance in a child's early development that parents and caregivers nurture and provide those key skills that form the basis that educators build upon. Reading to your child in an exciting, expressive manner, pausing to allow engagement, back and forth conversations and discussions during everyday activities are fundamental in those early years to develop those emergent literacy skills (Hanan.org, 2019). Knowing the importance of early acquisition of skills is crucial and yet there has been a significant

decline in those emergent skills that is impacting children in their readiness to start school (National Literacy Trust, 2017). In a recent study by PBE, insufficient literacy skills from an early age will cost the economy a staggering £830mn per year group of five-year-olds during their lifetime, which is £7,800 per child on average (PBE, 2025).

Schools globally are now feeling the impact from poor emergent literacy skills, (Crawford et al., 2024) but what is being done to plug the gaps and ensure children have the skills necessary to lead on to have a fulfilling life?

Historically, approaches to education have been heavily influenced by the theorist B.F. Skinner (McLatchie et al., 2024). Skinner's theory of operant conditioning (1937) where a reward system was in place to condition behaviour, rewarding positive behaviour and punishing negative behaviours (Staddon and Cerutti, 2003). In literacy teaching this could translate to structured phonics programmes, repetition and reward-based learning however this can, in time become boring and students can lose the incentive to learn. When rewards such as praise and instant gratification become relied upon, it leads to a reward dependency, and requires a tangible reward every time as an incentive (McLeod, 2025). This isn't easily remedied and learning can become stagnant, losing the social dimensions of literacy development.

In contrast to Skinner, Noam Chomsky's theory of language acquisition challenged the behaviourist theory, suggesting that humans possess an innate ability to acquire language (Dunaway, 2024). In the 1950s, Chomsky conceptualised the Language Acquisition Device which implies that all children are biologically predisposed to learn language, and that language acquisition is a spontaneous process (Lee, 2025). Building on the LAD theory with a rich and varied language exposure, is crucial to further develop those early linguistic skills, and by creating a fun and exciting curriculum, teachers can really set those literacy skills in motion (NeuroLaunch, 2024). Immersing children in language-rich experiences such as storytelling, class discussions and role play gives meaning to language rather than relying on rote learning. This, however, is a restrictive view and doesn't account for children with learning delays that fail to develop sufficient language or have the ability to adequately communicate, however that's not to say that exposing those children to literacy rich activities isn't without benefit, as without speech doesn't mean without understanding (Tuhin, 2025).

Chomsky's theory can be further extended by adding Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (1978) into the mix by highlighting the importance of social interaction in learning. Vygotsky argued that cognitive development occurs through engagement with others particularly within the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), where children can learn more with guidance than independently (Panggalo et al., 2025). In education, particularly literacy, this is supported with guided learning, peer discussion, carpet time. The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning and scaffold existing knowledge, providing initial support that is gradually withdrawn as the child's confidence and knowledge grows. This approach may be effective however it can restrict child-led learning which allows children to develop language skills through social interactions with peers.

Much like education theories have changed and developed over time, literacy education has too. Over the last three decades, literacy development has been sculpted by a variety of policy developments in Wales. The introduction of the National Curriculum following the Education Reform Act 1988 established a standardised framework which divided learning into key stages, setting attainment goals and setting out prescriptive learning (Gareth et al., 2013). Whilst this may have brought a consistency between schools, it led to fragmented learning with subjects being taught as stand-alone lessons and literacy being taught as an individual lesson rather than being taught as a cross-curricular subject.

Subsequent reforms such as the introduction of The Foundation Phase aimed to address these limitations in the early 2000's which introduced play-based learning for children under seven. This approach recognised the importance of being ready to learn in a formal setting (Waters, 2016) and applied a more holistic approach to learning.

A pivotal moment in Welsh education came with Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report (2015). Donaldson identified that the existing curriculum was "overloaded, complicated and, in parts, outdated" (Donaldson, 2015). He proposed a radical shift in education which focused on the four core purposes: developing ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy confident individuals (Dauncey, 2015). Literacy was positioned

as a cross-curricular subject alongside numeracy and digital skills, reflecting its importance in all aspects of learning.

Reflecting on the shift in education perspective on the teaching of literacy in the classroom is monumental. Changing the ways educators teach literacy can have a lasting effective on the way children view literacy but it is prudent too remember that lessons should be inclusive of all children as it is usually the children with lower socioeconomic status, EAL (English as an additional language) or ALN (additional learning needs) learners that will benefit most from enhanced provision (Ofsted, 2011). Literacy needs to be taught not only at a desk but in language rich stories, funny poems, in role-play areas, on a stage, in outdoor areas and in the most engaging way possible. Students with learning differences gain amazing exposure to language through immersive play with peers and can learn more from hands-on experiences than any textbook can teach (Beloglovsky, 2024).

In conclusion, the development of literacy education over the past three decades illustrates a clear shift from behaviourist, skills-based instruction towards more holistic, socially embedded approaches. While theories such as Skinner's operant conditioning retain limited value in the teaching of foundational skills, they are insufficient in addressing the complexity of literacy as a lived, meaning-making practice. The integration of Chomsky's and Vygotsky's theories provides a more balanced and inclusive framework, recognising both innate capacity and the critical role of social interaction.

The Curriculum for Wales represents a significant advancement in positioning literacy as a shared, cross-disciplinary responsibility. However, its success relies on reflective, well-supported educators who are able to adapt theory into responsive practice. Ultimately, literacy education must remain flexible, inclusive, and deeply engaging, ensuring that all learners, particularly those most vulnerable to disadvantage, are empowered to develop the skills necessary for lifelong learning.

Part 2

This is a personal reflection using Gibb's Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988), of a storytelling session featuring the story *The Cave* by Rob Hodgson (Hodgson, 2025).

The story telling session takes place in a Progression step 1 classroom at the end of a school day. I sat at the front of the classroom, in front of the children and held the book so the children could see the illustrations whilst they sat on the carpet. This was an adult led activity with myself reading the story whilst the children listened and engaged with the story. This activity was planned to align with the Languages, Literacy and Communication guidance in the Curriculum for Wales Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE)(Welsh Government, 2019).

My initial feelings to this activity were that of enjoyment, as I love to read stories to my class, however, I felt awkward and uncomfortable asking a work colleague to film me whilst doing this activity which I feel filtered into the fluency of my reading. I regularly engage my class in storytelling sessions, however, this one felt staged and unnatural due to the nature of the context, and whilst I may have appeared calm throughout the story, I actually felt quite embarrassed and out of my comfort zone.

On reviewing the video of the storytelling session, I feel there are a number of positive attributes to the session. I feel I was able to read the story fluently, engaging the children with the story throughout. I was able to show the illustrations to the children which allowed the children to make the connection between spoken words and visual imagery. This is important as our brains are thought to retain visual imagery better than standalone text (Gately, 2021) due to a process known as *the picture-superiority effect* (Higdon et al., 2024). The story was read with good expression, pausing to ask questions and ensure the children were still engaged. This is important to help develop children's attention and listening skills, checking that they have a good understanding of the story's content. There are however areas for improvement. The session lacked opportunities for predictive and open-ended questions, only giving limited options for learner engagement and further development of oracy skills. I gave no follow up activity, largely due to the fact that it was read at the end of the day, however, in hindsight an activity could have been for them to think or do something at home. This would have encouraged parental engagement with a fun, literacy-based activity.

My overall analysis highlights both effective literacy strategies, and areas where my practice could be improved. One of the key strengths was the use of a shared storytelling session, which supports early literacy by exposing learners to a rich

language in a meaningful context. The Curriculum for Wales states that early literacy develops speaking, listening, reading and writing opportunities that are purposeful and engaging (Welsh Government, 2019). However, literacy at Progression Step 1 should also be interactive. Research suggests that children learn language most effectively through dialogue and participation (Maine, 2024) and as my session was predominantly adult-led, learners played more of a passive role rather than being active contributors. Finally, there was no follow activity to extend literacy beyond the story which is important to ascertain understanding and further develop language acquisition skills.

To conclude, I have shown that I am able to create a positive literacy experience by sharing a story and engaging young listeners. I was able to read with expression whilst giving visual representation to the learners. I have, however, also learned that effective literacy teaching requires the learners to be active participants in the story, and the limited interaction in this story telling session restricted opportunities for developing oracy and comprehension skills.

In future reading sessions I will aim to create more opportunities for learners to actively participate by asking open-ended questions during and after the story, encouraging the children to repeat key phrases or predictions. I will also plan follow-up activities such as role-play activities, sequencing, or comprehension tasks.

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