



(Fredericks, 2018)

ECIE5008

Literacy – A Key to Learning

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Introduction

This is a reflective commentary essay which explores the writer's contribution to developing literacy skills with the Year 5 children they work with as a Learning Support Assistant; this essay will be discussed in two parts. Part One will focus on three theorists Vygotsky, Skinner, and Chomsky, who have had a great impact on cognition and learning; it will aim to compare their views and link them to the policies and practices in the writer's setting (Bates, 2019). In Part Two, the writer will use Gibbs' Reflective Cycle to reflect on their video and assess how well their storytelling and activity planning skills are, analysing where there is room for improvement (Gibbs, 1988).

Part 1

Literacy has long been a sought-after and desirable attribute; in the late "18th century Wales was one of the few European countries to have a literate majority" (BBC Cymru Wales, 2014). However, in modern times Wales has fallen short of this accolade; the latest reading performance score from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study tests showed Wales was "below average" of similar economic countries and was "significantly lower" than previous tests in 2018 (Welsh Government, 2023a). This trend started in 2012 and led to Donaldson's (2015) "Successful Futures" report, which highlighted the need for teachers to have more say in curriculum design and delivery (Sibieta, 2024). The report recommended that the curriculum be guided by four clear "purposes" with more scope for cross-curricular learning of literacy, numeracy, and digital competence; it states that literacy is "essential for learning across the curriculum, not least because of the fundamental role of language in thinking" (Donaldson, 2015).

Over the past three decades, the literacy landscape in Wales has evolved significantly, driven by educational reforms and targeted initiatives (Newman, 2016). The Welsh Government has focused on enhancing literacy skills across all age groups, specifically emphasising early years education. One initiative was Flying Start which began in 2007 and originally focused on children in deprived catchment areas of schools, it has since expanded this criterion to include those in need of support who may live outside the catchment area; its purpose is to increase socialisation and play skills which lead to better learning development "such as enhanced language skills" (Thomas, 2021; Welsh Government, 2024b). In 2010, the introduction of the Foundation Phase (FP) curriculum for children aged 3 to 7 years

emphasised developing literacy through play-based learning, this significantly differs from the traditionally used formal methods of education and has been associated with improvements in early literacy skills (Estyn, 2017; Welsh Assembly Government, 2008a). Additionally, the FP aimed to raise reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards in both English and Welsh, reflecting Wales's bi-lingual context and ensuring poverty and deprivation were not barriers to learning (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008b; Welsh Government, 2015). Poverty in Wales has had a significant detrimental impact on learning, as pupils often suffer from a range of symptoms such as inability to concentrate, hunger, ill health, bullying, poor behaviour, and tiredness (Martin and O'Neill, 2019). It is believed that children who consistently experience poverty and whose language skills are below average at age seven score 35% less on reading tests, and by age eleven they score 22% less on comprehension tests (Finnegan *et al.*, 2015).

In 2012 the National Literacy Program was implemented, to improve literacy levels and its efforts have been persistent and multi-faceted (Andrews, 2012). This was supported by the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF), which provided a clear continuum of skills development for learners aged 5-14 years (Welsh Government, 2013b; Welsh Government, 2013a). However, the latest biggest investment in Welsh education has been the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales which aims to be cross-curricular and therefore recognises the importance of literacy in all subjects, not just the traditional literacy lesson (Welsh Government, 2021a). The writer has experienced this first hand, for example, via storytelling and a literacy activity which also linked to the class topic of 'Coasts and Survival'; the book chosen had local beach names and talked of headlands, caves, and stacks that the local coastline has. In the writer's setting, the Literacy Policy acknowledges literacy as a "key life skill" that is an entitlement to all pupils, because it is "central to children's intellectual, emotional and social development" (Ysgol Gelli Aur/Golden Grove School, 2023). Whereas the Curriculum for Wales recognises the importance of raising standards in education and addressing the attainment gap so that there is "universal access to, and acquisition of, the experiences, knowledge and skills" children need to succeed in life, including those with additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2024c; Welsh Government, 2024a).

The FP and the Curriculum for Wales reflect Skinner's (1965) behaviourist theory, operant conditioning, which argues that the environment a child is exposed to shapes their ability to

learn language and communication skills. This is due to external stimulants and reinforcements shaping a child's linguistic behaviour; for example, through imitation, role-modelling, role play and cross-curricular activities, all of which feature heavily in the FP curriculum and are a key part of learner progression in the Curriculum for Wales (Skinner, 1986; Skinner, 1965; Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2015). This contrasts with Chomsky's (1964) view that children would automatically gain these skills regardless of their learning environment due to their biological pre-programmed linguistic ability, called the "language acquisition device" (LAD), which he believed would allow them to pick up structures and rules of language easily. Conversely, Vygotsky (1978) hypothesised that children learn language through both biological and social factors; through his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, he reasoned that children could be scaffolded by a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) to acquire knowledge. Furthermore, he acknowledged the importance of play, imitation and imagination in child development; he surmised that as children internalise language, they improve their cognitive development, proposing that language was the basis for all other learning (Vygotsky, 1978). This supports Donaldson's (2015) view in his recommendations for improving and implementing the Curriculum for Wales. Likewise, the FP targets child development through "the serious business of play" and the Curriculum for Wales advocates that language and literate ability support learning throughout "the whole curriculum" (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021a).

Overall, there are clear links between Wales's current educational pedagogies and the conclusions of theorists such as Vygotsky and Skinner; notably concerning the role of play in child development and the importance of language, literacy, and communication to enable learning in all areas of the curriculum (Vygotsky, 1978; Skinner, 1965; Skinner, 1986; Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021a). Despite Chomsky (1964) having a differing view of language development, he did argue that emphasis should be placed on children learning critical thinking skills and gaining knowledge that is applicable and useful to them; this idea has also been adopted in the Curriculum for Wales (Chomsky, 1986; Welsh Government, 2022; Bates, 2019). In summary, ensuring all children have access to an unimpeded education is paramount, particularly regarding literacy as:

Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development ... For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right (Annan, 1997).

Part 2

As mentioned in my introduction I will use Gibbs Reflective Cycle to reflect on my five-minute storytelling video, which included an introduction to a follow-up activity (Gibbs, 1988). I had to record a five-minute video capturing me telling a story to children of a specific age group and then introducing a follow-up activity. I considered my class topic and then researched books I thought would be appropriate. I found a suitable book for my Year 5 class of children aged between 9-10 years, which was colourful, rich in descriptive language and had pictures and references to local places. I wrote down the instructions I would give the class which consisted of 18 children; they would work in four small groups to discuss and work together to choose suitable descriptive words for the main character, regarding his image, clothes, and characteristics. After this, they had to discuss and come to a consensus about their group's opinion of him. I then made resources to accompany the activity I planned. I thought the laminated visual aids would help jog their memories and increase the discussion in their consensus circles; as visual literacy precedes verbal literacy, it is also the starting block of being able to read and write in child development (Stokes, 2008). Visual aids would also benefit those who find literacy more difficult, especially those with additional learning needs (ALN), as they get the learner's attention and make the activity look less threatening (Kelly and Phillips, 2022). Furthermore, it links well with our Voice 21 stream of work, which seeks to enhance communication skills (Voice, 2022).

I planned to film this video during a literacy session the following week. Unfortunately, my teacher was off on the day we agreed, which meant I had a supply teacher whom I had never met. Before the lesson I was feeling nervous, I think this was because I knew I was going to be recorded and I was working with someone new; although anxiety is a normal reaction to being filmed (Chopra, 2024). I asked the children to sit so that everyone could see the pictures in the book and follow along with the story and I reminded them of our class rules of good listening. The purpose of the lesson was to engage the pupils with the story, and for them to be able to recall the descriptive words from the text. Additionally, I wanted them to use their communication skills to discuss their opinions and ideas of the story and to reach a consensus on their thoughts as a group. The children needed to be interested in the story and characters and relate the book to our class topic which involved learning about the erosion of our local coastline; for them to enjoy their discussions and confidently voice their opinions.

The Curriculum for Wales aims to develop critical thinking and confidence in all learners, I believe that my lesson supported that (Welsh Government, 2022).

Some children were excited as they generally enjoy literacy lessons, however, some were less enthusiastic as they find literacy lessons difficult, especially those with ALN; this is commonly found in schools (Fredericks, 2018). In 2023, the Welsh Government (2021b) reported that “speech, language, and communication difficulties are the most common ALN” affecting 33.1% of pupils, which has increased from the 26.4% reported in 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021b; Welsh Government, 2023b). Therefore, I tried to read the story in a fun and engaging way, that would grab all the children's attention. However, in hindsight, I think that there were a few things I could have tweaked to improve the lesson further; I could have acted out the scene from the book instead of just sitting in a chair or had a few pupils pretend they were the story characters, this may have enhanced their learning further (Bianca O'Neill, Banoobhai and Smith, 2016). I could have also planned more than one follow-up activity and rotated them in groups; this is common practice in many schools, including mine (Teacher Starter and Holly, 2024).

Overall, my storytelling was a good experience, the children listened well and were enthusiastic about the follow-up activity. Even though it was nerve-wracking being filmed, watching it back has allowed me to critically reflect on what I could do to improve in future (Cottrell, 2019). Upon reflection, my storytelling and the follow-up activity contributed to their use and understanding of adjectives, descriptive language, and communication skills. Additionally, this was cross-curricular as the book was linked to our current class topic and had many local geographical references. Furthermore, it touched on empathy skills, engaging the children's critical thinking to make connections and form their opinions (Fredericks, 2018). Upon analysis, my story and the activity fit well with the Curriculum for Wales, which advocates that all these elements are needed for children to become successful learners and independent citizens of the world (Welsh Government, 2021a). Likewise, theorists Skinner (1965), Vygotsky (1978) and Chomsky (1986) deemed these as necessary for children to acquire good language skills, enhance their development, and become effective learners. To develop my skills further, I think I need to do more story-telling activities in class and try out different methods such as the use of puppets and props, acting out characters or getting the children involved in some way with telling the story; multi-sensory approaches could also help visually impaired children (Cherry-Cruz, 2001; Kamei-Hannan, 2024). I may still get

nervous about being recorded, but if I practice storytelling regularly it will get easier (Chopra, 2024). I will consider whether having a rotation of different activities would be more beneficial than one single activity and use this book again next time we have the same topic, as I feel it has covered a lot of areas of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024c). Most importantly, I will continue to use Gibbs' Reflective Cycle in future as reflective practice is key to continually improving my self-development (Gibbs, 1988; Cottrell, 2019).

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