

Language and Literacy

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Reflective Essay

Storytelling plays a significant role in children's development from before birth through to the age of seven. Even in the womb, infants are exposed to rhythm, tone, and familiar voices, which begin shaping early language awareness. As children grow, storytelling becomes a powerful tool for developing vocabulary, listening skills, imagination, and understanding of narrative structure. These early interactions are central to emergent literacy, as they help children connect spoken language to later reading and writing (Isbell et al., 2004; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning occurs through social interaction, with language acting as a primary tool for cognitive development. Storytelling provides meaningful opportunities for dialogue, structuring, and shared understanding within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Similarly, Bruner (1986) emphasises the importance of narrative as a fundamental way of organising experience and constructing meaning. Through stories, children learn how events are sequenced, how characters think and feel, and how language conveys meaning.

In contemporary society, storytelling has extended into digital formats. Digital storytelling integrates images, sound, text, and animation, creating multimodal experiences that not only strengthen early literacy skills but also foster digital literacy, the ability to interpret and create meaning through technology (Robin, 2008; Maureen et al., 2020). Therefore, storytelling remains foundational in early childhood, supporting both traditional literacy and the development of skills required in increasingly digital learning environments.

For this activity, I recorded myself reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* in two different ways: first as a traditional oral storytelling session, and then as a digital PowerPoint version with images, key words, and a small, embedded video of myself reading in the corner. Although the story and expressive techniques remained the same, the experience of delivering it felt noticeably different in each format.

In the oral version, my voice carried most of the meaning. I relied heavily on changes in pitch, pace and volume to distinguish between Father Bear, Mother Bear and Baby Bear, and to create tension as Goldilocks moved through the house. My facial expressions and gestures became especially important in conveying emotion and action. Although there were no digital visuals supporting the narrative, I incorporated simple physical props, including three different sized bowls and a teddy bear, to represent the characters and key objects in the story. These tangible resources provided a concrete visual reference point, helping to grip the narrative in something children could physically recognise. The variation in bowl sizes reinforced the repeated structure of "too big, too small, just right," making the abstract comparison more

visible and memorable. Research suggests that combining oral storytelling with physical representation can enhance engagement and comprehension, particularly for younger children who benefit from concrete experiences (Sipe, 2008). This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is socially and materially mediated, as meaning was constructed not only through language but also through shared physical symbols within the storytelling environment.

The digital version felt more layered. The slides included images and only key words rather than full sentences, while my recorded video remained visible throughout. Instead of replacing my narration, the slides supported it. According to Kress (2010), digital texts distribute meaning across different approaches which can be visual, linguistic and spatial, rather than relying on speech alone. I became more aware of how the images reinforced the repetition of "too hard," "too soft," and "just right," while my facial expressions and tone added emotional depth. In designing the slides, I also intentionally assigned specific colours to each character's chair, bowl and bed, keeping these colours consistent throughout the story. For example, each bear's belongings remained the same colour across all slides to provide a clear visual pattern. I did this to support character recognition and help children make connections between objects and their owners. Maintaining consistent colour coding can reduce the amount of information children need to remember and process at once by strengthening pattern recognition and memory (Mayer, 2009), while also supporting Paivio's (1991) dual coding theory, as the visual consistency works alongside verbal narration to reinforce understanding. This combination reflects how verbal and visual information can work together to strengthen comprehension rather than compete against each other

At the same time, I had to consider balance. Mayer (2009) argues that too many competing elements can overwhelm the working memory. By limiting text to key words, I aimed to keep the focus on the story itself. Regarding both recordings, I do not see one format as superior to the other. The oral version foregrounds relational and embodied communication, while the digital version mirrors contemporary literacy practices where children interpret meaning across screens, images and sound. Together, they demonstrate that storytelling can support both literacy and the development of digital literacy skills in complementary ways.

There are some clear differences between traditional oral storytelling and digitally enhanced storytelling, especially in how they engage attention, encourage interaction, and shape the story. In the oral version, the storytelling felt flexible and personal. I could adjust my pace, emphasise certain moments, and use pauses to add suspense, which made the delivery feel responsive even in a recorded format. Although no children were present, this approach reflects how traditional storytelling relies on dialogue and relative cues. Research suggests that shared reading in traditional formats tends to support stronger adult-child interaction and conversation compared

to screen-based storytelling (Bus, Takacs and Kegel, 2015). Even though my audience was imagined, I noticed that oral delivery foregrounds expressive language, gestures and tone as the main tools for conveying meaning. The use of physical props, such as the three differently sized bowls and the teddy bear, further grounded the narrative in concrete representation, highlighting how traditional storytelling can still be multimodal without relying on digital enhancement.

The digital version, on the other hand, felt more structured and layered. By embedding a video of myself in the corner and using slides with images and key words, the storytelling relied on a combination of images, text and narration. The slides convey visual imagery, which reduced the need for children to imagine everything themselves. Lauricella, Barr and Calvert (2014) note that while multimedia features can increase engagement, they may sometimes distract from narrative comprehension if not carefully designed. Unlike the oral version, the pacing in the digital version was fixed by slide order, which made the storytelling less fluid but allowed me to accommodate visual and verbal cues deliberately.

Another difference relates to literacy and learning focus. Oral storytelling relies on imagination, emotional expressiveness, and communication, while digital storytelling introduces skills in interpreting images, navigating audio, and integrating visual cues with spoken words. Merchant (2009) describes this as “recontextualisation” of literacy in digital spaces, where meaning is shaped by design choices as much as performance. Neumann (2018) also highlights that well-designed digital storytelling can support vocabulary and recognising words and/or in young children.

Analysing both approaches, I can see that neither is better than the other. Oral storytelling emphasises relative engagement and imaginative thinking, while digital storytelling encourages children to interpret meaning across multiple modes and prepares them for screen-based literacy. Each approach has different strengths and combining them may provide the richest support for early literacy development.

This storytelling activity has strong potential to support children’s oracy, reading and early writing, and it aligns closely with contemporary early years frameworks and research. Both the oral and digital versions were designed to reflect how young children typically engage with stories in early learning environments.

Oracy is central to early literacy development, and storytelling provides a meaningful context for children to hear, practise and experiment with language. In both versions of the activity, expressive tone of voice, repetition and character differentiation model how spoken language can be used creatively and purposefully. The EYFS framework (DfE, 2021) emphasises the importance of strong language experiences and adult modelling in supporting children’s communication and language development. Through

listening to patterned phrases such as “too hard, too soft, just right,” children are encouraged to anticipate language and participate verbally.

Research highlights that high-quality talk and storytelling experiences strengthen children’s narrative competence and listening skills (Reese et al., 2010). By reviewing the activity, I recognise that both formats provide opportunities for children to engage with structured oral language, supporting confidence in speaking and storytelling.

The activity also promotes emergent reading skills. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2021), early literacy development is strongly influenced by children’s exposure to stories, vocabulary and comprehension activities before formal reading begins. In the oral version, children would develop understanding of story structure, sequencing and character roles through listening. By including props, such as the bowls and teddy bear, it could further support comprehension by linking descriptive language (big, small, soft, hard) to visible, concrete examples.

In the digital version, the use of key words rather than full sentences supports connecting and recognising words without overwhelming children. This design choice reflects research suggesting that digital texts can enhance early reading skills when text, images and narration are meaningfully aligned (Takacs, Swart and Bus, 2015). Seeing repeated words alongside spoken narration may help children begin to recognise words as carrying meaning, while still relying on oral language for comprehension.

Storytelling also lays important foundations for early writing. Before children can write independently, they need to understand how stories work. Exposure to clear narrative structures supports children’s ability to organise ideas and retell events in their own words, drawings and early writing attempts. Flewitt, Messer and Kucirkova (2015) argue that early literacy development increasingly involves multimodal experiences, where children learn to express meaning through speech, images and emerging written forms.

From a multiliteracies perspective (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015), the digital version of the activity reflects contemporary literacy practices by combining visual design, oral narration and minimal text. Reflecting on this, I recognise that the PowerPoint storytelling format not only supports traditional literacy skills but also introduces children to digital ways of composing and interpreting meaning, which may later influence how they approach writing in both print and digital contexts.

The activity supports literacy development holistically, strengthening oracy, comprehension and early writing through both traditional and digital storytelling approaches.

In conclusion, completing this activity has strengthened my understanding of how powerful storytelling can be in supporting early literacy development. Recording both the oral and digital versions of '*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*' encouraged me to reflect critically on my own practice, particularly the way I used tone of voice, facial expressions, props and gestures to shape meaning. I became more aware that storytelling is not simply about reading words aloud, but about intentionally creating an engaging experience that supports children's comprehension and participation.

The research and frameworks used throughout this analysis have helped to guide my reflections in theory and evidence. The EYFS (DfE, 2021) and EEF guidance (2021) reinforce the importance of communication, vocabulary development and early literacy experiences, while studies such as Takacs, Swart and Bus (2015) and Flewitt, Messer and Kucirkova (2015) highlight how digital storytelling can enhance engagement when multimedia elements are used purposefully. These peer-reviewed sources provide credible support for integrating both traditional and digital storytelling approaches within early years practice. However, it is important to acknowledge that some research on digital texts is conducted in structured or with adult guidance which may not fully reflect everyday classroom settings. Additionally, policy frameworks such as the EYFS serve as professional guidance rather than factual research. Despite this, combining policy and journal literature has provided a balanced and reliable foundation for analysing the activity.

On a personal level, I particularly enjoyed creating the digital version of the story using PowerPoint. It gave me the opportunity to use and develop my creative skills, which I consider to be one of my strengths. Designing the slides, selecting key words and embedding the video of myself reading encouraged me to think carefully about how visual and verbal elements work together to support meaning. This process not only enhanced my understanding of digital literacy in theory but also allowed me to apply it.

Overall, the experience has reinforced the importance of being reflective and intentional in my storytelling approaches. It has deepened my awareness that literacy development in early childhood is both socially grounded and increasingly multimodal, requiring practitioners to balance creativity with research-informed decision-making.

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