

Language and literacy in the digital age

Since the development of human language, storytelling has been a significant teaching tool in all cultures, and it is particularly useful for teaching young children (Phillips, 2000). Additionally, young children who love to read, write and listen to stories are more likely to learn more about society and life in general from stories (Wright, *et al.* 2008). It has been discovered that both storytelling and story reading are effective teaching techniques that significantly enhance young children's language acquisition (Rahiem, M.D.H, 2021). Storytelling enhances oral language skills including vocabulary and phonological awareness. Maureen, *et al.*, (2022) found that both oral and digital storytelling activities significantly improved early literacy outcomes. In early childhood education, storytelling is becoming more acknowledged as a powerful link to digital literacy. Children are developing the abilities necessary to navigate and create in a digital environment as conventional storytelling transforms into digital formats such as interactive applications, multimedia, story books and digital storytelling projects (Giannikas, C. 2023).

Storytelling is a foundational pedagogical tool that nurtures children's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development. Through narrative, children learn to structure ideas, interpret events, and express emotions, fostering both comprehension and empathy (Dubiel, 2025). Storytelling supports emotional regulation by allowing children to explore feelings in a safe, imaginative context, enhancing resilience and social understanding (Jimenez, 2025). It also strengthens language acquisition by exposing children to rich vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and oral conventions, which are essential for literacy development (Jan Peterson Child Development Centre, 2025). In educational settings, story-based learning connects abstract concepts to lived experience, making content more relatable and memorable (Accelerate Learning, 2024). As one of the oldest forms of communication, storytelling remains a powerful medium for cultivating curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking in early childhood.

Storytelling is profoundly important to children's development, serving as a foundation for language, literacy, emotional intelligence and social understanding. Storytelling introduces children to rich vocabulary, narrative structure and expression. It supports phonemic awareness, listening skills and early reading comprehension (Wright and Dunsmuir, 2019). Ghosh, (2024) states that storytelling significantly boosts language development, laying the groundwork for literacy and a lifelong love for learning. The use of facial expressions are a powerful tool during storytelling. Isbell, *et al.*, (2004) implies that facial expressions and gestures help children to decode emotional content and help understand the narrative more deeply. Likewise, Isik-Ercan, Z (2012) adds that expressive storytelling, including facial cues, enhances emotions which is foundational for social-emotional learning. Furthermore, Sipe, (2008) that storytelling practices that include facial expressions provide children with a model for expressive communication, helping children understand how to use nonverbal cues in their own storytelling and social interactions. Dohinson

and Dockrell, (2021) highlight that expressive language strategies including facial cues enhance children's ability to articulate thoughts and engage in meaningful dialogue. This supports both expressive and receptive language skills. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), (2021) notes that oral language interventions including expressive storytelling can accelerate reading progress by up to six months. Prompts like facial expressions help children understand character emotions and narrative tone which improves reading and comprehension and empathy. Sipe, (2008) also argues that children exposed to expressive storytelling develop deeper literacy understanding and more vivid narrative writing. While not focused solely on facial expressions, Vygotsky's theory of social interaction and symbolic mediation supports the use of expressive communication which includes facial cues as a tool for meaning making. In storytelling, these expressions scaffold children's understanding of emotions and narrative intent (Brodie, K. 2024). Likewise, Froebel's play-based pedagogy emphasized the role of the adult as a responsive and expressive guide. Although he didn't explicitly theorize facial expressions, his belief in nurturing creativity and emotional connection through play aligns with expressive storytelling practices (Ryan, P. 2025).

Storybooks that use rhyming are valuable in early years as they support phonological awareness, memory, language development and engagement (Lysaker, J.T., 2018). Storybooks which use repetitive words that rhyme helps children to recognize sound patterns, which is foundational for decoding words and learning to read (Maclean, M., Bryant, P and Bradley, L. 1987). Additionally, Cousins, S and Minns, H (2023) add that children are encouraged to participate in rhymes as they enhance vocabulary and grammar through language that is both linguistically rich and deceptively simple. Likewise, Cousins, S and Minns H (2023) also add that children are active listeners and learners. Rhyming stories encourage participation and shared conversations about story events. Furthermore, Cambridge university Press (2018) says that rhyming improves children's expressive speaking, articulation and listening skills. Doherty, J (2023) adds that rhyming builds phonological awareness and supports embodied learning through rhyme and repetition. Although storybooks can help children to listen, speak and read, it can also help them to write as creating rhyming lines requires attention to grammar and sentence construction (Lee, W. 2024). Early childhood Queensland (2023) adds that rhyming makes writing fun and less intimidating as it invites children to invent characters, settings and plots throughout rhythmic storytelling. However, Shanahan, T (2024) a literacy researcher, argues that while rhyming can support phonological awareness, it is not essential for learning to read. He notes that many children struggle with rhyme recognition and that other skills like phoneme segmentation and blending are more predictive of reading success. Piaget's theory links with the idea of using rhyming and repetition throughout story books. Repetitive rhymes stimulate children's senses and aides them in the development of schemas throughout the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years) through cause and effect, play and predictable patterns. Children start utilising symbolic language in the preoperational stage (2-7 years) as rhyming helps them

develop their vocabulary, phonological awareness and egocentric speech, all of which are important building blocks for socialised communication (McLeod, S. 2025).

When reading stories with children, it is important to question them on what is happening. Thoughtful questioning encourages children to make predictions, infer character motives and evaluate story outcomes. It also shifts children from passive listeners to active meaning makers (Liu, Z.Y and Yoon, S.J. 2018). Walsh, R.L and Hodge, K.A (2018) adds that open ended questions prompt children to articulate ideas, describe events and use new vocabulary in context. This interaction strengthens expressive and receptive skills. Likewise, questioning helps children connect story elements to their own experiences, improving comprehension and emotional resonance. This also helps sustain attention and encourages turn taking in conversations (Zhou, N and Yadav, A 2017). As children get used to the sort of questions asked at storytime, it allows them to learn to ask their own questions, reflect on their understanding and become more independent learners (Birbilli, M and Christodoulou, I. 2024). Questioning children also has an impact on their oracy. Alexander, R. (2020) states that questioning encourages children to explain, justify and elaborate which supports dialogue teaching where children co-construct meaning through talk. According to Davied Crystals theory of language development, spoken language, context and interaction are crucial for children's language acquisition. His theory relates when questioning children during story time. He implies that if children are motivated to actively interact with language rather than passively absorb it then their linguistic proficiency will be improved. Children learn how to formulate answers, negotiate meaning and explore terminology in relevant contexts by asking questions (Crystal, D. 2003).

Reading with children is not only beneficial in schools but parents should also be reading at home with children too. Merga, (2017) states that some parents have lack of experience as some parents are hesitant to read out loud and are concerned about their own literacy abilities. Nazurity, *et al.* (2019) states there are three stages to reading, the first stage being pre reading, the next being while reading and the third being post reading. Although picture books help children to read, it takes children a lot of concentration to connect words and pictures (National Trust, 2019). Reading from a young age plays a pivotal role in shaping children's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. Early exposure to books and storytelling enhances vocabulary acquisition, comprehension skills, and phonological awareness, laying the foundation for academic success (Hoyne & Egan, 2019). Research by Niklas, Cohrssen, and Tayler (2016) demonstrates that children read to before six months of age show significantly stronger language outcomes by school entry. Moreover, shared reading experiences foster emotional bonding and support the development of empathy and imagination (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023). Daily reading routines have been shown to accelerate literacy and cognitive growth, with children read to six or seven times per week performing at levels equivalent to peers nearly a year older (Department of Education and Early

Childhood Development, 2012). These findings underscore the importance of integrating reading into early childhood environments to support holistic development.

Digital storytelling has gained prominence in education, research and cultural practice due to its ability to combine traditional narrative with multimedia tools, increase accessibility and foster engagement (Barber, J.F, 2016). The use of digital books in the classroom by teachers must be implemented gradually and iteratively, balancing learning with practise. Digital books come in a variety of multimodal forms of involvement and their application and in many ways, it challenges adults' conventional ideas about what it means to read and appreciate stories (Kucirkova, N. 2018). Robin, B.R. (2008) adds that digital tools make storytelling more interactive and enjoyable, increasing children's motivation to read, write and communicate which also supports differentiated learning. Although storytelling through digital platforms is important for children, Poveda, D. (2012) states there are at least three challenges. Bloome, *et al.* (2013) explains that digital technologies are a relatively new and rapidly evolving phenomenon in children's lives. All facets of social life are Impacted by the digital revolution. It can be challenging to draw from previous studies and theories because is a novel phenomenon. Rahiem, M.D.H (2021) furthers this by adding how excessive screen-based activities may reduce opportunities for face to face dialogue and turn taking as this can impact oracy development in early years. Savvidou, C (2023) also adds that children may struggle to manage multiple modes (text, audio, image and animation) leading to cognitive overload and reduced comprehension. Bandura's model of observational learning is highly relevant in digital environments, where learners engage with multimedia, tutorials, and peer-generated content. His work underpins the use of video, simulation, and interactive media in education (Shelly Terrell, 2018). Adding to this, Siemens introduced connectivism, a learning theory for the digital age. It emphasises that learning occurs across networks like digital tools, social media, and online communities, rather than solely within the individual. This theory is central to understanding digital literacy as networked and fluid (Leeds University, 2025).

To conclude, telling stories to children is crucial during early years. By using the three main points of this it shows that storytelling turns into a conversation, encouraging children to express ideas, understand language and build knowledge. Digital storytelling adds new ways to learn throughout pictures, sounds and videos, making story time more exciting and inclusive. While it may bring challenges, it supports children's holistic development.

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