

Language and Literacy in the digital age

It is of vital importance that young children are supported to communicate from birth. Effective communication enables young children to communicate their needs, form attachments with the people around them and to support their learning. The first area of learning mentioned in the Statutory framework (Department for Education, 2024) is 'communication and language'. Communication and language is one of the three prime areas of learning, that form the basis for all other learning. The Statutory framework (Department for Education, 2024), The Reading Framework (Department for Education, 2023), and Development Matters (Department for Education, 2023) all stress how important quality interactions with adults are if children are to successfully acquire language and master communication skills. All three documents, also agree on the importance of reading to children, to expose children to new language and to promote a love of reading. Reading to children can also address the word gap (Oxford University Press, 2018, Oxford University Press, 2021). The Book Trust is a charity that supports children from low-income and vulnerable family backgrounds, to increase their exposure to books and reading (The Book Trust, 2024).

Working in partnership with parents is essential, to ensure that children become 'committed and enthusiastic readers' (Department for Education, 2023). The National Literacy Trust offers advice for practitioners to support families with reading at home (National Literacy Trust, 2021).

In both video 1 (the traditional storytelling activity) and video 2 (the digital storytelling activity), the practitioner stressed how story time was a daily occurrence and a 'favourite' part of the children's daily routine. Daily story time is 'sacred' and 'non-negotiable' according to Brown (2022). The author Michael Morpurgo, also famously stated in his Book Trust lecture about the importance of daily story time in school (2016). Storytime can be enjoyed by both practitioner and child. The practitioner in video 1 was seated by a cosy fireplace and was clearly enthusiastically enjoying sharing the story with the children. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Development Model (1979) examines the profound impact that relationships and the environment can have on a child's development.

The practitioner in video 1, used actions to help the children to understand the language of size (big, medium and small), demonstrating the meaning of each term and encouraging the children to also do this as they said each word. According to Early Years Wales (2018), using physical actions when story telling is beneficial as this stimulates cognitive development, as well as having physical advantages when the children join in too. The practitioner also had different sized bowls to show the children the differences between 'big', 'medium' and 'small'. This would be particularly helpful for children who speak English as an additional language. According to the Department for Education (2023), EAL learners may require more explicit teaching of vocabulary. The practitioner also explained the meaning of unfamiliar words, such as 'nosey', 'peckish' and 'leapt', using alternative words that the children were already familiar with.

In video 2, the practitioner helped the children to learn the unfamiliar word 'Cockrell' by using 'my turn, your turn' and getting the children to repeat the word.

The practitioner in video 1 stimulated the children's senses through inviting the children to smell the porridge. The theories of Steiner and Montessori both value sensory stimulation to aid learning.

In both video 1 and video 2, the practitioner asked the children questions throughout each story. This enabled the practitioner to assess the children's understanding of the story and then offer further explanations or highlight illustrations if necessary to aid the children's understanding. Asking questions, also promoted the children's oracy skills, enabling the children to articulate their thoughts. According to the non-statutory guidance; Development Matters (2023) children in Reception should be able to answer simple 'why' questions and be learning to engage in Storytime. The practitioner in Video 1 also invited the children to talk to their partner about what they had for breakfast. This further allowed the children to perfect their oracy skills, practising articulating their own individual thoughts and listening to the thoughts of their partner. In video 2, the practitioner asked the children to discuss with their partner how the gingerbread man might cross the river. According to Development Matters (2023), children in Reception should be learning to articulate their ideas and thoughts in well-formed sentences. The practitioner invited some children to share their ideas, allowing the children to learn from each other and providing encouragement and promoting self-esteem for the children sharing their ideas.

In both videos, the practitioner pointed to the illustrations. This will aid the children's understanding, particularly the understanding of EAL children or children with limited vocabulary. As the illustrations were bigger on the whiteboard in video 2, it would be easier for the children to see the illustrations and they may have longer to look at each illustration, and be more likely to notice finer details. The practitioner discussed some of the illustrations, similar to 'sportscasting' when a practitioner describes what is going on in the setting. This will further language acquisition.

In both videos, the practitioner occasionally pointed to text and moved their hand from left to right. This demonstrated to the children that print conveys meaning and is read from left to right. This is knowledge that the children will require when they start to read words. According to Development Matters (2023) this knowledge, as well as knowing that print can have different purposes, the names of different parts of a book, and knowing about page sequencing are five key concepts that children aged three to four should be learning. The practitioner could have improved the storytelling activity by discussing the front cover, spine and blurb, when they introduced the story.

In video 1, the practitioner appreciated the holistic nature of learning in the early years, and took the opportunity to count the three bears, thus practising a maths skill, even though it was 'story time' rather than 'maths time'. In both videos, the practitioner discussed the emotions of the characters, thus enabling the children to develop empathy. The practitioner took the opportunity to consider the Personal,

Social and Emotional Development of the children. Development Matters (2023) suggests that practitioners use story time to think about the perspectives of others. In both videos, the practitioner also talked about keeping safe, questioning if the children should enter a stranger's house or keeping safe by water and trusting the fox.

In video 1, the practitioner changed their voice for different characters, to assist the children's understanding and to make the activity more entertaining. The practitioner also added some sound effects, such as snoring and crying.

In video 2, the practitioner had selected a story that had lots of repeated refrains. Predictable text that reoccurs throughout the story, such as "run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man" allows children to join in with telling the story, increasing their enjoyment of the storytelling activity, building their confidence and self-esteem and helping them to recall the story. Noticing repeating refrains in a story can also support children's mathematical development, as they start to recognise patterns (Department for Education, 2022).

In video 2, the practitioner reflected on previous learning, when she talked about when they had previously read the book 'We're going on a bear hunt' and repeated the phrase "the deep cold river". Revisiting previous stories and repeating language will help the children to remember new vocabulary.

In video 2, the practitioner sounds out the cvc words 'c-a-t', 'd-o-g', and 'p-i-g', encouraging the children to use their phonetic knowledge to read each word. According to Development Matters (2023), children in Reception are learning to blend sounds into words. A benefit of digital storytelling, is that the text can be visible to all children, and enable the children to start to read along with the story or notice known sounds on the page. According to Development Matters (2023), children in Reception will be learning to read individual letters by saying the sounds for them. Hearing and seeing sounds and words, will support children's writing, as eventually they will begin to copy what they have seen. It important for the environment to be print-rich (Davis, 2022).

In video 1, the practitioner referred to speech bubbles and ellipsis (referred to as "wait and see dots" by the practitioner). It is important for practitioners to explain such features of text to children as they start to read for themselves, to enable the children to be able to interpret a text and read it fluently. In the Reception class, there may be children still working at phase one phonics, where they are distinguishing between environmental sounds, or starting to blend sounds orally, and there may be children working at phase two or even phase 3, starting to read captions and know common exception words. (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). Differences across the cohort can be vast, and all children's individual needs should be recognised and supported. Practitioners could use a tool such as WellComm to screen children's language understanding and their spoken language, to identify children who require intervention or referral for speech and language therapy. Children who are learning English as an additional language will also

require additional support as they acquire new vocabulary. Having a hearing impairment may also affect a child's language development, or a genetic condition. Children's language may be delayed if they have not had adequate interactions with an adult. This could be due to a lack of knowledge by the adult, neglect, the adults poor mental or physical health or their ability to communicate themselves. Increasing dependence on modern technology may also impact on a child's language development, if they spend prolonged periods on electrical devices, rather than interacting with people.

Hart and Risley (1995) found that young children had good language development if they had been exposed to high levels of interaction, and poor language development if they had been exposed to low levels of interaction.

Other research and theories into children's language development have been undertaken. Vygotsky believed that children developed an understanding of their culture through stories, and Tomasello believed that children learnt through language to achieve social ends. Chomsky believed that language acquisition is innate, which is similar to Bruner, who acknowledged that language acquisition happens naturally, but Bruner also understood that language acquisition was affected by the environment, and required the child to have interactions with others, similar to Hart and Risley. Maslow believed that in order for children to learn language, first their basic needs, according to his hierarchy of needs, must first be met.

In conclusion, both storytelling activities provided many learning opportunities and were enjoyed by both the practitioner and the children, which is crucial to promote a life-long enjoyment of reading. Evidence suggests that there is a connection between reading enjoyment and attainment (Clark, 2011,, Clark and Douglas, 2011,, Department for Education, 2012).

Digital storytelling can provide the opportunity for an entire class to read along together, if the book contains known sounds, or the ability to be able to view illustrations or photographs, more easily than in a hand held book (unless working in a smaller group). Digital books make it possible to have access to an unlimited quantity of books, that would otherwise not be available. Increasing advances in technology, mean that Tonies, kindles and various other new devices are becoming increasingly available, and changing how stories are shared.

There is still though, very much a place for the intimate act of traditional storytelling, where practitioners or carers share a book with children, and endeavour to inspire their imagination.

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