

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

Introduction

Storytelling is the most powerful way to teach, influence and inspire, and helps unite people by conveying the culture and values they share (Boris, 2017). Children are able to engage with a story, whatever their current level of development, all benefiting differently from the experience. Fair Earth Foundation (2024) state that storytelling encourages purposeful talking and gives children increased enthusiasm for reading text, so they can discover new stories or re-read old ones. In practice, there are often discussions around the characters, settings and events in stories, giving children a focus for their oral input and exposure to the language needed to express their views. Storytelling also gives children motivation to write, as they will want to create their own stories, and share them with others. It also improves their listening skills, as they will concentrate for longer, wanting to find out what happens next in stories they hear. Digital literacy can be developed by using technology to listen to stories and learning how to operate the relevant device. Children can learn vocabulary, draw pictures relating to the story, or be given a link to a story related activity, to complete at home, on their own device (Giannikas, 2023). This gives an opportunity to embed their learning further at home. For the purposes of this assignment, the writer will focus on the importance of rhyme, expression and the use of pointing.

Rhyme

As an avid reader throughout childhood and beyond, the practitioner has always found rhyme to contribute to improved memory of the text read, and excerpts of text often come to mind, being easily recalled despite thirty or more years having passed. This

belief is supported by HomeSchool Better Together (2024) who state that the structure of rhyming verses, in the form of patterns, makes them easy first texts for children to memorize. The repetition and musicality of the words helps children to discriminate between sounds and articulate words more clearly. The National Literacy Trust (2024) stresses the importance of learning nursery rhymes in the Early Years. Nursery rhymes can support children's language development and give them confidence to speak aloud and attempt to write their own rhymes in the future. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (2024) supports this view, stating that language comprehension can only develop when adults and children share and discuss poems, rhymes and songs together. Upon achieving the early learning goals for speech and listening, a child aged five years should be able to listen and respond to texts they hear, with relevant actions or questions, and use newly learned vocabulary, acquired through stories or rhymes, to express their views or understanding. By sharing stories and rhymes, in a language rich environment, children will become confident to use language structures and extensive vocabulary independently. Of course, the unique child and learning and development aspects of the framework should be kept in mind also, remembering that children develop at different rates, and may not all reach the expected level of language development at the same time.

The practitioner's decision to use a rhyming text for this assignment is supported by the theory of Froebel (1885), who believed that rhymes and action songs play a crucial part in helping children learn through play, talk and representation. Giving the child ample opportunity to experience stories and rhyme first-hand, then practice and reflect on what they have learned, leads to knowledge being more firmly embedded. In addition, using fingers to represent objects in rhymes, for example 'Ten Green Bottles' or 'Five Little Speckled Frogs', also gives children with speech and language, EAL or SEND needs, a way to express themselves using actions and gestures, meaning they can still join in the activity, even if their speech is not yet fully developed.

According to Harper (2011), exposure to rhyme and stories can improve children's phonemic awareness, which in turn improves reading and spelling. Many nursery rhymes also make a good introduction to stories, in that they introduce children to story structure – beginning, middle and end. In addition, concepts such as alliteration and onomatopoeia are often introduced through nursery rhymes and poems. The EYFS (2024) emphasises the fact that language development underpins all other areas of the curriculum, a belief shared by HomeSchool Better Together (2024). Whilst the focus of this research relates to the development of oracy, reading, writing and digital literacy, there are a number of mathematical skills, such as counting, pattern, size and number, that can also be improved through the use of storytelling.

Expression

During both the traditional and digital storytelling recordings, the practitioner has used facial and verbal expression, to emphasise certain parts of the story.

Expression can be verbal, for example in the digital recording, when the practitioner uses an indignant tone, showing the pea's annoyance at being laughed at.

Alternatively, it can be shown by other physical responses, such as when the practitioner expressed the pea's relief at being out of the tumble dryer, by wiping her brow. According to the Oracy Framework (Voice 21, 2020), the understanding of facial expression is one of the skills needed for effective speech and communication.

Use of expression can also be helpful to EAL students, who may be able to relate to the story, using the facial expression shown, even if they cannot understand the words.

Early Years Resources (2024) stress the importance of using gestures and pictures when teaching new vocabulary. Additionally, the English words from the story could be displayed alongside the same word in the child's home language, together with matching pictures, to aid their understanding. According to Craig et al (2001), witnessing facial expressions during storytelling can help children of varying cultures appreciate the views of others, which may differ from their own. The inclusion of their

own language, however, helps to support their cognitive development, as per the Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). SEN Magazine (2022) recognises the importance of using facial expression when reading to children with special educational needs, helping them connect more with the feelings of the characters and narrator, understanding what each feeling involves. In practice, this could be linked with a discussion around feelings, using emotion cards or a rug showing different emotion pictures. Children could be encouraged to talk about how they feel in different situations and how they think the characters in stories may be feeling. This would contribute to the holistic learning of the child, helping them connect stories with their own experiences, whilst also exposing them to the vocabulary needed to express themselves clearly in future situations. Children's digital literacy could be supported by the opportunity to play emotion matching games on an ipad or similar device, where they may have to click or swipe the screen, to obtain matching pairs or to reveal the correct answers to questions.

Pointing

Research shows that pointing is a common way for children to facilitate word learning, during their early years as a toddler (Akhtar and Tomasello. 2000). Once children are older and familiar with basic vocabulary for naming items, the use of pointing may decrease, in favour of using open ended questions to elicit a child's understanding of what they have read. Contrastingly, a study by Murphy (1978) showed that fourteen-month-old children were more likely to use pointing independently, resulting from their parents having pointed whilst reading to them at age nine months. Throughout both the traditional and digital storytelling recordings, the practitioner used pointing, as a means of connecting words with pictures, drawing the listeners' attention to certain parts of the text and to follow the text, indicating to the children that print holds meaning and needs to be read in the correct direction. This will prepare them for early literacy activities, where they will need to know that in English, we write from left to right. They will also

learn new vocabulary, by linking the words read with the pictures being pointed to, that they may choose to use in their own work, when they begin speaking or writing.

Choi (2024) found that pointing is a valuable strategy for EAL students. Pointing, using semiotic resources (signs and symbols), allows practitioners or parents to translate signs into the child's home language, thus increasing their literacy development in school and assisting in their translanguaging process. In a similar way to this, the use of symbols and signs to facilitate understanding can be utilised in Early Years settings. Symbols can be shown during storytelling, accompanied by pointing to the item in question, or perhaps using a makaton sign to reinforce the spoken word.

During the digital recording, the practitioner noted that there were more opportunities for pointing to occur, as her hands were free of a book or props, giving more chance to point out important parts of the story. This would give children a greater chance of associating words with pictures. Suwardy, Pan and Seow (2013) consider that digital storytelling can engage children's auditory and visual senses far more than traditional storytelling. The stimulation of more senses adds to the holistic experience of the child. Encouraging children to also point to pictures or words can improve their hand eye co-ordination over time, giving them better control over buttons or interactive elements of computer games. When an adult points out certain letters in a text, this will help the child to recognise what that letter looks like, eventually helping them to write letters or find them quickly on the keyboard of whatever digital device they use. This process is supported by Piaget (1964), who believes that before children learn to read and acquire language, they must have good sensory and motor skills. In contrast to this, however, the University of Kansas (2017, p.2) states that unborn foetuses can tune in to the language they will acquire, through listening to the rhythm in their parents' speech. Chomsky (1964) also suggested this theory, believing that humans are born with an innate ability to learn language, rather than depending on their surroundings and experiences, to gain language skills. Research into this area, by Movallied et al (2023)

found that a foetus exposed to music or voices would begin to show a response to such sound, at around twenty-three weeks of pregnancy, which is in line with the development of their neurosensory auditory development. Retention of the response to sounds heard was considered as showing memory to be a behavioral change caused by a new experience. Therefore, learning something new can be seen as a process for acquiring memory. Reading and talking during pregnancy is therefore a good recommendation for parents, to increase the memory capabilities of their unborn child. Neuhauser (1993) found that learning originating from a story is remembered by children for longer than that gained simply from data. Similarly, Bruner (2007) found that information communicated through a story is twenty times more likely to be remembered. Despite this, Hibbin (2016) believes that storytelling is under valued and under used in UK primary schools. Often, more literacy-based schemes are favoured, and as a result, children's spontaneous oral skills can be overlooked.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the research undertaken that the importance of storytelling, whether traditional or digital, cannot be underestimated. From the foetal stage and throughout childhood, stories are considered a way to improve and develop a child's memory, listening skills, language development and later, their writing ability. Once mastered, these skills can be transferred for use in digital activities, giving children further scope to develop their understanding and early literacy skills. As practitioners, Early Years staff have a responsibility to provide a language-rich environment, creating areas and opportunities for children to talk with each other and with adults. Bringing print and text into the children's surroundings gives them the opportunity to talk about what they see and interpret the meaning of it, with the skilled interaction of practitioners in the setting. In practice, this could be as simple as putting real food packaging in the home corner or displaying familiar logos around the room.

From the practitioner's perspective, benefits can be seen in both forms of storytelling. Traditional style provides children with the chance to see how books are carefully

handled, pages are turned, and meaning is elicited through the text, whilst digital storytelling shows there are alternative ways to access stories and interact with them, receiving a different experience which stimulates more of the senses than a traditional method. Using the same story for both traditional and digital recordings has highlighted to the practitioner the benefits and downfalls of each method. Whilst the focus in this case has been Early Years, for older children the delivery of the story in both ways could be an exercise in starting a debate, encouraging the children to say which method they prefer and why. This would not only get them to think about their experiences but also give them agency over their learning, being able to express their own views and preferences in a safe environment. This would give a good opportunity to test their reasoning and persuasive skills, increasing their confidence in public speaking, later in life.

Reference List

Akhtar, N., & Tomasello, M. (2000) 'The social nature of words and word learning', in R. M. Golinkoff (Ed.), *Becoming a Word Learner: A Debate on Lexical Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr. pp. 115-135

Boris, V. (2017) 'What Makes Storytelling So Effective for Learning?' *Harvard Business Publishing, Corporate Learning*, 20 December. Available at:

<https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/>

(Accessed: 20th October 2024)

Bower, V. (ed.) (2014) *Developing early literacy 0 to 8 from theory to practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Bruner, J. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029019>

Choi, M.-S. (2024) 'Translanguaging space through pointing gestures: Multilingual family literacy at a science museum', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 24(3), 605-632. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1177/14687984241276290> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Chomsky, N. (1964), *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/93941> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Craig, S., Hull, K., Crowder, E., Haggart, A. (2001), 'Storytelling Addressing the Literacy Needs of Diverse Learners', *Council for Exceptional Children*, Volume 33 (Issue 5). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/004005990103300507> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Department for Education (2024) *Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Early Years Resources (2024), 'The Importance of Stories for Children with EAL', *Early Years Resources*, 31 January 2022. Available at: <https://blog.earlyyearsresources.co.uk/2022/01/importance-of-stories-for-children-with-eal/> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Early Years TV (2024), *Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development*. Available at: <https://www.earlyyears.tv/vygotsky-sociocultural-cognitive-development-zpd/> (Accessed: 25 October 2024).

Fair Earth Foundation (2024), *Storytelling*, Available at: <https://www.fairearthfoundation.org/storytelling.html> (Accessed: 20th October 2024)

Froebel, F. (1885) *The Education of Man*. Translated from German by Jarvis, J. New York: A Lovell and Company

Giannikas (2023), 'Storytelling and Digital Literacy: Research and Practical Tips', *Cambridge*, 2 April. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2023/04/02/storytelling-and-digital-literacy-research-and-practical-tips/> (Accessed: 20th October 2024)

Harper, L. J. (2011) 'Nursery rhyme knowledge and phonological awareness in preschool children', *The Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 7(1), 65-78.

Hibbin, R. (2016) 'Oral Storytelling, Speaking and Listening and the Hegemony of Literacy: Non-Instrumental Language Use and Transactional Talk in the Primary Classroom', *Changing English*, 23:1, 52-64, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2015.1121774, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rebecca-Hibbin/publication/297891765_Oral_Storytelling_Speaking_and_Listening_and_the_Hegemony_of_Literacy_Non-Instrumental_Language_Use_and_Transactional_Talk_in_the_Primary_Classroom/links/5acc912baca272abdc654e94/Oral-Storytelling-Speaking-and-Listening-and-the-

[Hegemony-of-Literacy-Non-Instrumental-Language-Use-and-Transactional-Talk-in-the-Primary-Classroom.pdf?origin=journalDetail&_tp=eyJwYWdlIjoiam91cm5hbERldGFpbCJ9](#)

(Accessed: 20th October 2024)

HomeSchool Better Together (2024) *The Benefits of Nursery Rhymes on Pre-School Development*, Available at: <https://pambarnhill.com/nursery-rhyme-benefits/> (Accessed: 20th October 2024)

Linuwih, Endar & Trihastutie, Nopita. (2020). Digital Entertainment to Support Toddlers' Language and Cognitive Development. TEKNOSASTIK. 18. 1. 10.33365/ts.v18i1.467.

Movalled et al (2024) 'The Impact of Sound Stimulations During Pregnancy on Fetal Learning: A Systematic Review', *BMC Pediatric* Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10116668/> (Accessed: 27th October 2024)

Murphy, C.M., (1978) 'Pointing in the context of a shared activity', *Child development*, pp.371-380.

National Literacy Trust (2024) *Nursery Rhymes in the Early Years*, Available at: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/nursery-rhymes-in-the-early-years/> (Accessed: 20th October 2024)

Neuhauser, P.C. (1993) *Corporate Legends and Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Piaget, J. (1964) 'Cognitive Development in Children Development and Learning', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 2, 176-186.

SEN Magazine (2022), *Multisensory Storytelling*, Available at:

<https://senmagazine.co.uk/content/activities/multi-sensory/18029/multisensory-storytelling/> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)

Suwardy, T., Pan, G. and Seow, P.-S. (2013) 'Using Digital Storytelling to Engage Student Learning', *Accounting Education*, 22(2), pp. 109–124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2012.748505>.

University of Kansas (2017), *Language Development Starts in the Womb*, Available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/07/170718084600/htm> (Accessed: 20th September 2024)

Voice 21 (2020) *What Is Oracy?*, Available at: <https://voice21.org/what-is-oracy/> (Accessed: 26th October 2024)