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Language and Literature in the Digital Age.

Introduction

This paper analyses traditional storytelling and digital storytelling activities in how they promote children's language and literacy skills and digital literacy development that is supported with research and theory.

There has never been a more important time to share books and stories with children to support language and literacy development.

In the news this week the Welsh Government has accepted the need to improve the methods of teaching reading in school. Rhys William (ITV ,2024) reported that the standard of reading in school has fallen putting Wales in a reading crisis.

Storytelling dates back thousands of years. It is the way we have passed down knowledge, wisdom, and values to other generations. Stories can be told through books songs and nursery rhymes. These natural ways light up children's worlds with curiosity, empathy, and creativity. That plays an important part in children's language and literacy development and supports the children's holistic development. Listening to stories helps children to learn and understand language and gives them tools that are needed to communicate and listen. Through stories children understand and make sense of the world around them which supports their emotional and social development in which children understand and manage their feelings, emotions and empathy allowing children to experience different point of views. Stories open children's imaginations where the anything is possible which inspires children's creative thinking and problem-solving (Parent ,2024).

Digital technology also has a role to play in children learning literacy skills through apps, eBooks, and games. With children having the opportunity to use these digital devices this has changed the way children can access reading (National Literacy Trust ,2024). Using these devices will develop the digital literacy skills of being able to identify, understand, interpret, create, and communicate with digital text on a screen. Studies have shown that children engaging with storytelling and play-based activities in a digital and oral way is effective in supporting children's literacy skill and developing their digital literacy (Maureen et al ,2020).

Main body

Reflecting on these storytelling activities in the traditional story telling with the book The Smartest Giant in Town which has rhyme, repetitive phrases and songs included this encourages children to join in. The story teaches children about empathy and kindness that bring happiness to others emphasising the importance of this also the need to look after yourself. The book is beautifully illustrated, and the pictures, rhyme and repetition in the story are engaging for young children. (National Library of Medicine,2022). The digital book that the storyteller chose to read was Dear Zoo. The book has rhymes and simple repetitive phrases throughout this book with big illustrations that engage the children effectively. Which supports children's memory, vocabulary and listening skills.

Stearling Honig research has shown that children having the opportunities to hear and join in with rhyme will be more successful in developing reading skills saying that 'Children being aware of rhyming sounds boosts brain activity' (Anne Harding Training ,2018). Supporting this they are hearing repetitive rhyming song throughout this story, so the children are learning rhymes and understanding the fun in word play developing their phonological skills which is an important skill needed to start reading (Harper,2011). When the storyteller was reading the story to the children they were encouraged and given the appropriate opportunities to join in with the repetitive

phrases, rhymes, and songs in the story. Hearing these repetitive words and phrases in both the traditional and digital book helps develop children's language and literacy skills. Jean Piaget suggests that children's language comes from a child's cognitive development. Children must be able to understand the word before being able to correctly use it in language. Repeating words through schemes and playing is the way children understand the concept of language which is called egocentric speech (LibreTexts,no date).

Furthermore, children learn language when they have a playful language rich environment full of songs, rhymes and stories giving the children firsthand experiences to explore sound patterns in words, carry out the actions when joining in. Repetition helps children to learn new words and to develop their spoken language skills (Department of Education ,2022). As is stated in the Curriculum for Wales, children should have regular and frequent stories, rhymes, and songs to help them develop their vocabulary and grammar skills (WG, 2022). The University of Reading (2023) collected data from how vocabulary was learnt through listening to the words. It was established that vocabulary was improved and learnt by repetition. The storyteller used the song of the Smartest Giant in town because this repeats the storyline of all the animals that he had helped. Learners need to have repetitions at least seven times before the vocabulary is learnt. This shows that language needs to be taught by listening to repetitions of words in stories, both traditionally and digitally read and through play. This repeating of new words will promote learning new vocabulary. But some children with Additional Learning needs may find it hard to communicate and may find learning language difficult. These children will need more support by the early years practitioner to process language. Another way the storyteller assisted children with verbal communication difficulties in her story was using some Makaton sign language to indicate the animals and used more actions. Makaton is a language system that uses hand signs and symbols in addition to vocabulary. This system is used alongside spoken language that can be used with babies from 6 months and children to give them the tools they need to express themselves. Sometimes children find it hard to find the spoken words to communicate (family ,2019). Furthermore, research has shown that children that use Makaton helps improve their vocabulary. Children that use signs first

find it easier to learn words when they understand the meaning of the sign that then links to the spoken word (Grove, no date). Therefore, it is important to use signs when reading stories in the early years. The storyteller found signing easier when using the digital story as this freed up her hands and enabled her to be more animated. Jana Iverson (2010) suggested that there is a link between physical development and language development, but it is complex and has different aspects. The motor system gives an opportunity for developing and giving skills that are crucial for language and supporting learning about speech sounds and their meaning. Just as the storyteller found it easier to use her hands whilst reading from a screen a baby with good physical development and co-ordination is enabled to focus their attention on interacting and communicating. (Iverson (2010) cited by Haunch & Behrens, ND).

Furthermore, David Crystal's (1973) language development theory suggests that young children learn in unstructured steps by trial and error to learn the language successfully. They learn in stages of grammar, diverse types of questioning e.g., intonation and recognizing the rhythms of voices (Cameron Blog,2017) The storyteller changes the tone of her voice, and facial expressions to match the emotions in the story. Also, changing the pitch of her voice provides communication cues. As Ramirez and Kuhi (2017) stated that changing pitch, contour and higher tone of voice engages the child's attention and reinforces the development of language (National Library of Medicine,2021). Through using the rise and fall of pitch and the way speech sounds move from one sound to another the reader was making the vocabulary she read more meaningful. Moreover, Fernald (1992) stated that changing pitch when speaking to children directly, is more interesting to the child and easier for them to understand, than the adult directed speech in one tone. Fernald also suggested that depending on the age or ability of the child these pitch cues are interpreted differently (Quam and Swingley,2012).

Telling stories using digital technology has many advantages over telling stories traditionally. It allows the storyteller to control all elements of the presentation including the pace and timing of the narrations and the visual aids used which creates an exciting

experience for the children. In research carried out by Raheim (2021) they found that teachers in the early years used simple digital technology and described this as making telling stories more theatrical, entertaining, exciting, and communicative. In reading a digital story to early years children, this links with the digital framework in the curriculum for Wales. During the story telling activities the storyteller provided the opportunity for children to participate by clicking the icon to turn the page. This is one of the progression steps for storing and sharing digital information (Welsh Government, no date). Moreover, the National literacy trust outlined in their research that half of parents with low income do not read daily to children under 4 years old. This is lower than it was in 2019, and many families have fewer than ten books in their homes Book Trust ,2023). Reading stories is often something that parents cannot find the time to do and say technology has been a distraction from reading to their children. Some say that children's books are too expensive and so technology provides children with opportunities to hear stories which helps overcome the barrier of a lack of books that the parents have (Durham's Partership for children,2016).

In conclusion, the storyteller appreciates that reading stories to children in the early years is of upmost importance. It has recently been declared by the minister for education that Wales is in a reading crisis due to the teaching methods of reading in school and with only half of low-income parents reading to their children. There has never been a more crucial time to share books and read stories to children whether it is through digital books or printed copy both methods have positive outcomes. Storytelling is a fun and enjoyable way for children to learn language and literacy and to develop knowledge and understanding of the world. Stories can also support their emotions. Language needs to be repetitive for children to learn new vocabulary. By children hearing sounds in words through rhymes supports children's phonological skills which is the first step to reading. It is important when telling stories that the reader makes use of their voice in changing the pitch to give emphasis and to make stories more interesting and easier to follow and understand the vocabulary. The reader discovered that using a digital story enabled her to use her hands more effectively and Makaton signing could be a very useful way to

enhance communication especially with babies and young children not yet able to communicate verbally. She also recognised she was more able to tell the story with animation and in a more theatrical way. The reader feels that it is beneficial to read stories to young children either in the traditional way or using digital technology and this assignment has raised her awareness of just how much this contributes to children's holistic development especially their language and literacy.

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