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Literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, it is a complex process which includes speaking, listening, and comprehension. Strong literacy skills underpin cognitive development, academic achievement and social skills. However, literacy development is not universally experienced, and achievement gaps continue to reflect larger social inequalities. To understand how literacy skills are developed, it is important to consider a range of theories and perspectives on language and learning.

Starting with Skinner's (1957) behaviourist theory of verbal behaviour, language is proposed to be acquired through interaction, imitation and reinforcement. From this perspective, children learn language in the same way as other behaviours — through stimulus, response and reward. For example, when a young child points to a drink, a parent may provide a verbal model by saying the word "drink." The child then imitates the sound they have heard, and when the parent responds by giving the drink and offering praise, this positive reinforcement strengthens the likelihood that the child will use the word again. In this way, language becomes associated with successful communication and reward (Skinner, 1957).

This theory highlights the importance of modelling, repetition and reinforcement within educational settings. 'School A' (2025) states within its Language, Literacy and Communication provision that "Speaking and Listening is explicitly modelled" and that learners are encouraged to develop their communication skills through structured classroom activities. Through guided practice and gradual release of responsibility, such approaches reflect behaviourist principles by modelling language before encouraging independent application. However, whilst Skinner's theory remains influential in classroom practice, it has notable limitations. It struggles to explain so-called 'virtuous errors', such as a child saying "I goed" instead of "I went." These utterances are not directly imitated or reinforced by adults, yet they occur naturally, suggesting that children are actively constructing internal grammatical rules rather than merely copying language. This challenges the behaviourist assumption that language development is solely the result of external reinforcement, indicating that cognitive processes also play a significant role.

To address these limitations Chomsky (1959) proposed a Nativist theory. Arguing that language acquisition is not a product of conditioning but is driven by an innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD). The LAD suggests that learning language is instinctive rather than learnt. Meaning the LAD is like a 'mental toolkit' children are born with that helps them figure out language just by hearing people talk. Because the child has likely never heard an adult use the incorrect words they are not modelling, instead their LAD has created words from what they know to replace words they don't. Chomsky's theory supports the Learning Language Continuum (LLC) in the Curriculum for Wales (2022) in that it recognises language learning as an active developmental process and instead treats them as one learning journey as opposed to separate subjects.

However, a significant limitation of Chomsky's theory is its failure to account for the role of social interactions and quality of social interactions. Because while the LAD provides the hardware for learning, Bruner (1983), argues that language cannot develop without social interactions. It requires a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS). This states that the environment of a child, including the frequency and quality of adult-child interaction is just as important as biology. This perspective shifts the focus from what abilities humans are born with to the quality of interactions they receive from adults and others around them. Through interactions with adults and peers in social environments, others model correct language and gently extends the child's vocabulary within a supportive social context. This emphasises on supportive interactions and language rich environments which are mirrored in Welsh Government guidance on Language, Literacy and Communication. An area of the Curriculum for Wales which states that schools should provide;

‘language and literacy-rich environments... support learners’ communication and speech through the explicit modelling of language... and use a range of real-life and imaginative context to develop and extend the learners knowledge.’

While more locally at ‘School A’ (2025) their policy of Language, Literacy and Communication emphasises structured support for speaking, listening, reading and writing. Ensuring these skills are taught consistently and progressively across the curriculum. For example, the policy states; ‘Speaking and listening is explicitly modelled’ and that learners are encouraged to express themselves during activities. This reflects Bruner's concept of LASS, as it demonstrates how adults actively structure and support interactions to extend children's language within social context.

However, whilst Bruner's LASS highlights the importance of the adult interaction in supporting language development, it assumes that all children have consistent access to rich, supportive and loving social environments. Unfortunately, this may not be the case for all children. Children growing up in poverty or deprivation may experience fewer opportunities for sustained high-quality language interactions. There are many different factors such as financial stress, parental workload and limited access to books can all contribute to reducing the time or ability for shared reading, extended conversation or language modelling. Research by the Literacy Trust highlights that fewer parents are engaging daily in key early literacy activities such as talking, playing and reading with their young children. With lack of time due to working patterns accounting for 44.8% and the cost of activities and resources accounting for 30% being among the main barriers reported in 2025. This lack of early language scaffolding means by the time these children start formal schooling, they are already struggling to bridge the gap in development that can hinder their long-term literacy progression. Additionally, children who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's), such as domestic conflict, neglect or household instability, may have unmet emotional needs that can affect concentration, communication and engagement that can directly hinder their ability to learn. This impact is best understood through Maslow's

hierarchy of needs (1943) which states that a child's basic needs, such as feeling safe, fed and loved must be met before a child is ready to learn. As when a child's emotional security is compromised, they remain in a state of hyper-vigilance (fight or flight) meaning their mental energy is consumed by survival rather than learning. Research shows us that as the number of ACE's increases the likelihood of developmental delays also increases. Research by Public Health Wales (2015) found that almost half (47%) of adults in Wales had experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience, with 14% experiencing four or more, highlighting the widespread nature of early adversity and its potential impact on development.

The long-term consequences of poor early literacy can continue into adulthood, shaping life chances and socio-economic outcomes. Children who begin school with delayed language and literacy skills are more likely to struggle academically throughout their education, often achieving lower qualifications on leaving school. This can limit their access to stable employment and higher-paid careers, as many roles require strong reading, writing and communication skills. Adults with low literacy are more likely to experience unemployment, insecure work or lower wages, contributing to cycles of poverty that can persist across generations. In addition, limited literacy can affect an individual's confidence, self-esteem and ability to engage fully in society. Difficulties understanding written information may impact everyday tasks such as completing job applications, managing finances, or supporting their own children's education. Research consistently demonstrates a link between low literacy and wider social inequalities, including poorer physical and mental health outcomes. In Wales, approximately 12% of working-age adults were assessed as having literacy skills below Level 1, meaning they lack basic literacy competencies that can affect everyday tasks and employment prospects (National Literacy Trust, 2024). Therefore, early language disadvantage is not simply an educational issue, but a broader social concern with long-term implications for individuals, families and communities.

In conclusion, literacy development is shaped by a mixture of interactions between biological capacity, cognitive processes and social experience. While Skinner highlights the role of reinforcement, Chomsky emphasises innate ability, and Bruner underscores the importance of supportive interaction, no single theory alone fully explains how literacy skills are gained. Instead, literacy development must be looked at as a process influenced by both individual and environmental factors. When children lack access to language-rich, emotionally secure environments, early gaps in literacy can widen and persist, reinforcing existing social inequalities. The evidence from Wales further demonstrates that poor literacy is not only an educational challenge but one with significant long-term socio-economic consequences. Therefore, addressing early language disadvantage through supportive, inclusive and well-structured educational practices is essential to improving life chances and promoting greater social equity.

Part 2.

In this video I delivered a storytelling session to a small group of five children. The story was told without props, actions or exaggerated facial expressions. The children remained seated, quiet and attentive throughout. However, I was positioned on a chair while the children sat on the floor, meaning I did not lower myself to their physical level. Following the story, I introduced a linked task focused on identifying and labelling parts of the body, which provided clear curriculum continuity and meaningful context for learning.

Before beginning, I felt confident as the story was familiar to me from childhood. However, on reflection, I relied heavily on reading directly from the book rather than telling the story fluently, which may have limited my eye contact and reduced opportunities for sustained shared attention. While I was pleased that the children remained calm and engaged, I recognised that the delivery lacked energy and interactive elements.

A strength of the session was behaviour management. The children listened attentively, which may reflect established classroom routines and reinforcement of expected behaviour, aligning with Skinner's (1957) behaviourist theory. However, their participation was largely passive. Although I incorporated pauses to encourage prediction — for example, when a child suggested “nose” before the rhyme concluded — I could have extended this interaction further through questioning or elaboration. From a Vygotskian perspective, this moment presented an opportunity to scaffold learning within the Zone of Proximal Development by building on the child's reasoning (rhyming and visual cues) to deepen language understanding.

Bruner's (1983) concept of the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) emphasises the importance of adult mediation, shared attention and responsive interaction in language development. By remaining physically elevated and limiting expressive delivery, I may have reduced opportunities for joint attention and emotional engagement. Research in early communication highlights that facial expression, gesture and vocal modulation enhance comprehension and support meaning-making. Greater use of these strategies could have strengthened vocabulary development and narrative engagement.

Overall, while the session was organised and purposeful, a more dynamic and interactive delivery would have better aligned with social constructivist principles, promoting richer language exchange and deeper learning. Overall, the storytelling session was calm, structured and clearly linked to subsequent learning, demonstrating effective planning and behaviour management. However, reflection has highlighted that effective storytelling is not solely about content delivery but about the quality of interaction and engagement. While the children listened attentively, the session relied heavily on passive participation, which may have limited opportunities for deeper language development. Theories such as Bruner's (1983) LASS and Vygotsky's social constructivism emphasise that language learning

is most effective when adults actively scaffold, model expressively and create shared meaning through interaction. By remaining physically elevated and relying on reading rather than expressive storytelling, I did not fully maximise opportunities for joint attention, emotional engagement or extended dialogue. This reflection has reinforced the importance of storytelling as a dynamic, relational process rather than a one-directional activity.

In future storytelling sessions, I will ensure I position myself at the children's physical level to promote shared attention and engagement, aligning more closely with Bruner's concept of adult scaffolding. I will practise telling the story fluently in advance so that I can maintain eye contact and use varied tone, gesture and facial expression to enhance meaning-making. I will also incorporate more open-ended questions and pause points designed to extend children's responses, drawing on Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development to build on their existing understanding. Additionally, I will consider the use of simple props or actions to increase multimodal engagement and support comprehension. By implementing these strategies, I aim to create a more interactive, language-rich storytelling experience that supports both engagement and deeper literacy development.

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