

Language and literacy in the digital age

Firstly, the purpose of this paper will be to discuss and analyse the benefits of storytelling and how it promotes young children's language and literacy skills in a joyful way. (Neaum, 2012, p.106) describes how stories are embedded in many aspects of children's lives that bring meaningful rewards by extending language and listening. (Whitehead, 2009, p. 54) agrees stating that as a result, high ability and confidence in the recognition of sounds and letters from books show how early literacy can begin. Central to this paper is an analysis and comparison of the two different methods used for the story the 'Big red bath' By Julia Jarmin (2005) and what techniques the storyteller uses to promote language and literacy for children aged 2-3years old.

According to Minai (2017) at just a few days after birth, human language development can begin. Further studies also suggested how fetuses can hear speech sounds in the womb and can differentiate languages (Minai, 2017). With this in mind reading in pregnancy can capitalise on brain development, meaning from birth, infants will possess neural memory for sounds and will prefer familiar nursery rhymes that had been read aloud whilst in the womb (O'Farrelly, *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, Kisilevsky, B.S *et al*, (2009) state that there is evidence recording foetal heart rate response from hearing familiar voices, which indicates memory and foetal attention suggesting that these sensitive responses are the origins of speech and language being formed before birth. Further studies show that parents from all different educational and economic backgrounds can provide their children with good language support from birth. All parents have the potential to nourish their child's development if they have engaged with them through responsive interactions, that result from strong attachment relationships formed, which go on to improve children's language ability (Dickinson and Morse, 2019, p.12). Bruner identifies, that it is when children get exposed to various play and interactions that are meaningful to them, that this will help them understand language more easily, which he called the Language Acquisition support system (LASS). However, this is in contrast to Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD) whereby his perspective is that for language to develop; minimal intervention from adults is required. Stating this is due to the 'built in' factors individuals are born with – mouth, tongue, brain and voice. (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014, p 92).

It cannot be denied however, that social interactions are what enables babies to develop language skills and communication. This early interaction is an important part of bonding and attachment that stimulates babies brain development (Neaum, 2012, p. 39). This statement supports Bruner's theory that children's language cannot just be learnt, but that it is important for children to have a social network that can facilitate language development (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014, p 92). Babies are born with a need to communicate that develops through positive early relationships. This supports Bowlby's attachment theory whereby infants who have formed secure attachments are able to develop the foundations for good language and cognitive skills that are essential for social communication (Jethava, V., Kadish, J., Kakonge, L., & Wiseman-Hakes, C, 2022).

Likewise, Whitehead, (2009, p.6) agrees explaining how from birth babies are already great communicators, and it is through modern research that parents and carers own senses of how attentive and playful their newborn is, that this research will validate these instincts. Babies show communication through gestures long before they talk. Indeed, effective and meaningful parent - baby interaction have been linked with supporting the development of good expressive and receptive language (National Literacy Trust, 2023). Yumus and Turan, (2022) point out that it is when parents start associating such signals by responding, that babies will start to learn, and language development is being strengthened. O'Farrelly *et al.* (2018) explains that it is infants that are read to by parents in their first few months can comprehend more words by 12months of age. Murray and Egan (2014); Canfield *et al.* (2018) suggest that by infants mouthing and handling books will start to show an awareness of literacy skills, such as talking, singing about the pictures and being shown the words and functions of the books by an adult. All of which have been well-documented to show that times spent with literacy activities will have positive developmental outcomes. Notably, this statement supports Welsh government (2017) who agree that children should have opportunities to be shown how to use books and observe adults handling books. Furthermore, Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory claims that children learn most effectively within their social environment and interacting with others as they observe how to do things, that enables them to make various different achievements (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014, p. 80).

To begin the comparison of the two-storytelling activities – one using a traditional book to read and the other using a digital appliance. The three points to focus on will be repetition, use of props and onomatopoeia. Let us begin with repetition as the first focal point to discuss. Throughout the story of the 'Big red bath' by Jarmin, (2005) it is apparent to see that repetition is used throughout the story. Following a study by Horst *et al*, (2011a) which demonstrated how children learn new words if hearing the same story repeatedly, rather than a variety of stories. Therefore, this provides the child with opportunities to store information about that word. Hence, over the course of time, the word becomes familiar to the child and they develop an understanding of what that word means (Horst, 2013). In addition, (Bower, 2014, p. 127) agrees by saying how children's vocabulary extends more from hearing repeated stories. However, according to the Montessori academy, (2017) Montessori believed that this type of repetition does not necessarily always need to be the case, rather that repetition can be more greatly diverse involving various activities for children to practice language skills in a stable environment where children know what to expect. As a result, this repetition strengthens the brains neural connections that assist children's learning showing the importance it has on child development.

BookTrust, (2019) emphasises that children love to hear their favourite storybook repeatedly which help them learn, and that books and literacy are fun. The storyteller uses repetition throughout the story of the 'Big red bath' by Jarmin (2005) where each page started with the sentence 'Ben and Bella in the big red bath, splash you; splash you, splish, splash, splosh. Literary devices, (2023) describes this as 'Anaphora' which is a means of emphasising and reinforcing what the words mean, albeit having an excitable effect that appeal to the children that will hold their attention. Equally, digital devices can provide support with language and literacy development whilst also attracting children's attention through the features of colours and sounds from the device (Neumann and Merchant, 2022). During the story using the digital device there were no sound effects, however the storyteller engaged the children by stimulating the children the same way used whilst reading the traditional story method. This was with the use of props. Which now moves on to the next discussion and focal point. According to Cekaite and Björk-Willén, (2018) they state that with the use of props it builds on children's curiosity and excites their interest further in the story if one wants to hold children's attention, this invites them to participate allowing the storyteller to make suitable pauses.

Greimann, (2017) explains that by using props it adds another layer to the story building on an enjoyable learning experience. For example, during a case study using props to tell a story, it highlighted how the story becomes a more enjoyable experience allowing the children to become more engaged and familiar with the story forming positive connections with the book (Neaum, 2012, p.109). This can be linked with Vygotsky (1966) whereby he mentions that all play brings purpose to children and how they learn by forming meaningful connections from actions, whereby the objects can provide more meaning (Barton, 2013, p.1). Additionally, (Whitehead, 2009, p.77) expands more by stating that story props can be used to indicate each character in a story that allow the storyteller to change their tone and pitch of voice to re-enact parts that can bring stories to life. Whilst reading the 'Big red bath' story by Jarmin (2005) the storyteller was able to use this technique after every page where a new animal entered the bath, also the bubble machine was able to provide a good visual effect that was real that could build on the children's imagination.

Barton, (2013) carried out a study that evidenced how children remember and understand a story better with props than if there are no props used. This indicated well how make-believe play together with literacy exposure could strengthen memory and comprehension (Barton, 2013).

Following on, the last point of focus will be onomatopoeia. Laing, (2019) points out how onomatopoeia is a fun and exciting way to learn words. Imai and Kita, (2014) cited in Laing (2019) explain how onomatopoeia brings advantages helping young children link speech sounds and the referent of a word. Furthermore, Asmaa and Sofia (2017) agree by examining how onomatopoeia could help improve children's pronunciation whilst acquiring new lexical words. According to Karina, (2017) children should be able to understand the meaning of words being read to them, which is why onomatopoeia is so commonly used. Additionally, Laing (2017) agrees indicating how young children are more fixated on words they understand better from hearing onomatopoeia. For example, 'bang', 'clack' or 'meow. Splash is also an onomatopoeia, which is frequently used throughout the story of the 'Big red bath'. The storyteller emphasises the word loudly to imitate the sound of a splash giving the impression of what a splash sound would make.

It is generally considered, that in the 21st century children are becoming fervent users of the ever-evolving technologies (Evans, 2004, p 8). It is more evident how traditional literacy is changing and that there are various other literacy options emerging (Lankshear *et al*, 2002 cited in Evans, 2004, p 8). Furthermore, computers and other devices are viewed to enrich children's learning experiences in the early years (Barratt-Pugh and Rohl, M, 2000, p. 130). However, Kucirkova (2018, p. 2) states that even though digital books can be beneficial to children's learning there is still further research that is needed. With this in mind, the Digital competency framework, (2022) acknowledges this ensuring the safe behaviour for young children's online use in the digital world, as the framework outlines the importance of children learning digital skills and having the opportunities of progression in this area (Welsh government, 2022). This includes the use of different digital storybook options. According to Kucirkova, (2019) when it comes to the use of digital books evidence shows it depends on the parent-child interaction and if these behaviours can have a positive or negative effect on the emerging literacy skills in children. During the digital storytelling of the 'Big red bath' the storyteller appeared to be more distracted by the digital appliance being used and did not give as much eye contact or prompts as they did using the traditional method, thus possibly hindering the children's comprehension, interactions and engagement. Similarly, during a recent study by Munzer, Miller, Weeks, Kaciroti and Radesky, (2019) it was commented on that whilst using digital books adults or parents used less dialogic reading strategies compared to traditional print books (Kucirkova, 2019). Timing also appeared to become an issue during the 'Big red bath' digital story, as the storyteller was unable to control the anticipation of what was coming next. This may have been due to the particular digital device being used or the lack of experience the storyteller had using this method.

Lastly, Donaldson, (2015) states how digital literacy is just as important as numeracy and literacy in the 21st century. Donaldson continues by saying digital use is clearly fundamental to children's learning and they should develop high competency levels that are effectively scaffolded by adults.

To conclude, it is clear that children who have stories read by responsive adults can nourish their language acquisition through meaningful parent-child interactions. Adults who endeavour to do this regularly with stories that could be delivered in a fun and exciting way that will grasp children's attention. This in turn make it a more enjoyable experience. By acknowledging a Digital era it can enhance children's literacy skills and confidence in a growing digital world.

Personally, I prefer the traditional story telling method as I felt more in control in delivering the story and using suitable pauses where children can build on their oracy skills, however with more practice and embracing this method research shows how effective it can be to children's learning when adults model such skills.

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