

Language and literacy in the digital age.

Introduction:

Welsh Parliament (2021) emphasises the importance of literacy as it is prioritised as one of the cross-curricular skills. Additionally, Welsh Parliament (2021) values the development of speech and language skills in the early years to nurture the development of reading and writing skills. Storytelling sessions are important language and literacy learning opportunities in the Early Years and offer opportunities for children to become familiar with the written and spoken word (Melzi, Schick, and Wuest, 2023). This is supported by Auger, Reich, and Penner (2014) and Welsh Government (2015) who state that language ability is improved if children are read to during their early years. Additionally, Harrett, J. (2002) states that storytelling is important within the early years to spark oracy skills and that without storytelling oracy can often be basic and bland.

Main body:

The linguist Noam Chomsky believes that children are born with an innate language learning tool known as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and the ability to organise grammar unconsciously (BBC Radio 4, no date). Furthermore, McGaritty (no date) discusses a set of grammatical structures that Chomsky believes are in place across all human languages to categorise verbs, nouns, questions, plurals, tenses, male and female, and the ability to make a statement a negative, which Chomsky states are “fixed, invariant structural principles”. This is supported by Lieberman (no date) who states that studies show that infants acquire language in the same stages across the world (despite acquiring different languages) and learn words at the same pace as well, supporting Chomsky’s view of Universal Grammar. Moreover, Chomsky (1977) argues that children are not preprogrammed to learn one particular language, they are born with a framework which enables them to understand the structure of grammar, known as Universal Grammar (UG) to communicate. Yang *et al* (2017) supports this through arguing that in deaf communities, sign language can be created spontaneously to communicate. This is further supported by McGaritty (no date) who discusses the use of facial expression in sign language in order to provide grammatical context. Moreover, Yang *et al* (2017) explains that deaf infants babble as a stage of development as with babies who have heard language, suggesting that this is innate. During an interview

Putnam and Chomsky (1995) discuss UG as a grammatical system which allows humans to infer meaning, which may be different for different languages, however children are able to acquire these as they are innate. Additionally, Chomsky (1977) states that children are not taught how to acquire language through lessons or instructions and that language grows through immersion and experience. This is reinforced in Putnam and Chomsky (1995) as Chomsky states that although language is innate it still requires stimulation to develop. This can be achieved in practice by providing language rich environments (Welsh Government, 2022). Furthermore, including story time within practice, which also allows settings to achieve recommendation 2 of Welsh Government (2021a). Within both videos the storyteller engages the children in a story which is exciting, rich in text and illustrations to draw the reader in and engage them in the story time activity.

Traditional story time enables the practitioner to support the children's achievement of progression step one within the reading strand of the literacy framework (Welsh Government 2020b). The storyteller is able to model the correct way in which to hold a book and how we turn the pages, to follow a story in the correct order. This is a difficulty that is faced in the digital story, as the storyteller is not able to physically turn the pages. However, the presentation used within the video did include a digital peel transition, between the presentation slides, to imitate the turning of pages. Additionally, this could have been supported further if the practitioner had encouraged children to come forward and tap the digital device to turn the page. Moreover, had this been the case, this interaction with a digital device would have supported the children to develop digital confidence and to become familiar with digital devices to support achievement of progression step one within the citizenship and data and computational thinking strands of the digital competence framework (Welsh Government, 2020a). That being said, page turning is a more concrete concept when using a physical book, therefore this could argue that there is a place for both digital and traditional books within practice.

Rao, Newlin-Haus, and Ehrhardt (2016) argue that using props as well as questioning during story time, which they call Repeated Interactive Read-Aloud (RIR-A), enhances the children's enthusiasm, participation and understanding. The storyteller made use of questioning within both the traditional and digital story time activities in order to support the children to recognise the repetition within the story as well as to discuss the illustrations and make predictions for the next page. This

also supports the children's development of listening skills as within the listening strand of the literacy framework "listening as part of collaborative talk" (Welsh Government, 2020b). Moreover, the storyteller promoted the children to join in with repetition within the story, which will allow the storyteller to assess their ability to join in, repeat and memorise familiar stories as within progression step one (Welsh Government, 2020b). Rowland (no date) also argues the importance of word repetition within the early years to assist language acquisition. Additionally, Rao, Newlin-Haus, and Ehrhardt (2016) state that incorporating props and questioning also enhances the social aspect of story time and enables the children to exchange information with a more knowledgeable other. Moreover, Pathan *et al* (2018) states that Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory places an importance on learning from social interactions. Additionally, Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory places an importance on the environment which they learn in (Doherty and Hughes, 2014, p. 261) It is evident that the storyteller used a prop and questioning together to help to prompt the children to remember repetitive elements of the story, however in Rao, Newlin-Haus, and Ehrhardt (2016) the practitioner also has props for the children and as such the inclusion of props to represent more of the story, for example a crow, cat or Timothy's Dad, may help the children to be more involved and engaged in the activity going forward. Furthermore, it is evident in the traditional story telling activity that the storyteller invited the children to play with the prop, however with the addition of the other props, this play could have been more social and enabled the children to interact with one and other to reenact the story, explore new words and meaning extracted from the activity and potentially cement learning. This is supported by Massey (2012) who advocates the use of props to provide play opportunities and scaffold children's learning not only of words but also understanding of the story and the importance of children learning through play.

Additionally, as the storyteller chose to read the same story for both activities, revisiting the story interactively for the digital storytelling activity, the children have repeated access to rich and varied language. Bruner described revisiting a topic or idea, with progression in learning opportunities upon revisiting, as a 'spiral curriculum' and explains that progress is made when learners revisit knowledge and build on current knowledge (Gibbs, 2014). During the videos it is possible to see the storyteller revisiting and extending the learning with the addition of encouraging the children to join in during the second story telling session. Ireland and Mounthaan

(2020) state that each revisit should further learning. This is evident by the storyteller using appropriate language such as labelling the section in the story as “repetition” which enables the children to make their own links and understand the word in context. This is also supported by Welsh Government (2021b) which places an importance on revisiting learning in order to broaden knowledge and deepen understanding. Additionally, joining in is an important developmental stage of speech and language development, as seen in Welsh Government (2015). However, the book chosen by the storyteller included rhyme within the text, something that the storyteller did not highlight to, or investigate with, the children. To improve practice this could be highlighted in future to make use of the benefits of rhyme within stories. These include enabling children to predict the subsequent rhyming word. Read, Macauley and Furay (2014) highlight the benefits to vocabulary retention when rhyme is included within shared reading. It was found, when stories include rhyme, the children retained more vocabulary. Moreover, Book Trust (2018) states that, in early childhood, children will seek to read a rhyming book as a preference to one which does not rhyme. Book Trust (2018) also states that children who have an awareness of rhyme can find it easier to develop reading skills. This suggests that rhyming text should be considered when choosing a story in early years, and demonstrates the importance of stressing these rhymes when leading shared story time.

Theodosiadou (2019) argues that digital storytelling can enhance enthusiasm and enables the activity to become more relevant and relatable for the children as they are living in a digital age, where screens and digital devices are so pertinent. Theodosiadou (2019) continues to state that with enhanced enthusiasm and eagerness to participate as a result of the inclusion of digital devices it is argued that children will make progress in their language and literacy skills. Moreover, this is evidenced in Estyn (2018) which acknowledges the improvements made in children’s academic achievements in English within a school in Rhondda Cynon Taff, where digital learning has been encouraged across the curriculum, due to the engagement it encourages. This is supported by Haas and Tussey (2021) who state that e-books and digital storytelling can not only encourage those who do not normally enjoy interacting with books but also encourage enthusiastic readers to read more. However, this can cause a decline in the handling of traditional books. Despite this, Haas and Tussey (2021) argue that digital storytelling is an effective tool in helping

struggling readers to connect meaning to the text as it is possible to include videos and other media which can convey meaning to the reader, something which a traditional storybook is unable to achieve.

However, Melzi, Schick, and Wuest (2023) argue it was found that children who are exposed to oral storytelling (with no reliance on a book in either traditional or digital format) gained better literacy skills and were better able to produce longer stories, which were well structured in terms of chronology and syntax and used rich and varied language. This is supported by Malo and Bullard (2001), who argue the benefits of traditional, oral storytelling looking at international traditions in Hispanic and native American cultures. They state that simply listening to stories with no text enables children to develop skills required prior to reading and writing, which enables them to make sense of what they are reading and to elaborate on their written stories. These skills include knowing what a story is, developing comprehension skills, being able to visualise the story's characters and developing knowledge of prosody. This can be linked back to Chomsky who argued the benefits of language rich environments and absorbing language through interactions (Putnam and Chomsky, 1995) as well as Vygotsky who stated the importance of learning from a more knowledgeable other (Pathan *et al*, 2018) - in this case the storyteller being the more knowledgeable other, imparting a rich vocabulary. Due to the emphasis placed on book reading during story time, within practice and research, there is a decrease in the practice of oral storytelling sessions. This may result in a decline in cultural stories which are traditionally handed down through generations to enable children to make sense of the world around them and gain an understanding of cultural values and beliefs (Melzi, Schick, and Wuest, 2023). Therefore, there is an important place for oral storytelling in practice as well as book reading, in both traditional and digital formats. It may also be argued then that digital storytelling could work alongside oral storytelling in such that the storyteller could have used the storybook pictures, and orally recounted the story without the reliance on the words. This would bring together some of the benefits of using digital devices thereby drawing together two different techniques to extend the learning opportunities.

Conclusion:

The research within this paper has highlighted the many positive implications of both traditional storytelling and using digital storytelling within practice. The importance of storytelling in order to support language and literacy development through allowing

children to investigate and explore text, become excited by and engaged in the story to experience a wide range of rich and varied language and revisit familiar stories to cement learning, is clearly argued and evidenced within this paper. It is felt that each story telling activity offers a range of benefits and that they are all of equal importance and should be combined to provide the best practice. The benefits investigated include: oral storytelling skills providing socio-cultural knowledge, traditional book reading activities improve listening and comprehension skills, and the more modern approach of digital storytelling promoting engagement in literature.

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