Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

Introduction

Crawford, Roberts, and Lacina (2024) highlight that picture books play a crucial role in learning, and impact lives of young children. These complex experiences, offer unique opportunities for making meaning through storytelling, as readers engage through reciprocation between text and illustrations. Using picture books, adults can support children's reading and responses while nurturing development. BookTrust (2023) agree with this, as they aim to help children in the crucial developmental years, from vulnerable, and low-income families from birth to primary school. Facilitating time to read with children from the earliest age establishes a regular reading routine, which can be beneficial in the short and long term. Laing and Bergleson (2020) state that research has connected continuity, babble and first words, with early babble becoming increasingly pronounced and similar to speech (Menn and Vihman, 2011, Oller et al.).).

Storytelling is a part of children's general language proficiency. The home literacy environment, fosters shared reading between parents and children, increasing children's understanding and encouraging competent storytelling (Marjanovič-Umek,*et a*l., 2012). Vissar-Bochane *et, al. (*2019) state the development of language is important for life success, therefore, caregivers need to encourage and support this. Ramos (2012) emphasises children need to be introduced to books from birth, so they can experience enjoyment through stories, making literature captivating from the earliest stages. However, Auger *et al.* (2014) points out, that children are likely to read with their mothers, if the mother has experienced encouraging reading opportunities in the past. When there is a passion for reading, and an understanding of the benefits it provides, the shared experience is meaningful and engaging.

Whitehead (2009) emphasises that stories can be repeated or practised, children repeat movements that bring excitement and provide new sensory experiences. Familiar stories, songs, and words can be listened to and repeated by young children. The

reader enhanced the digital story by introducing an action song where the children could join in and relate the song to the story's theme.

Montag *et al*. (2015) shares children revisiting the same story countless occasions will enhance vocabulary. This co-insides with the spiral curriculum theory which highlighted the significance of children revising experiences whilst practising skills. Bruner recognised that all children have an innate capability to obtain language which is underpinned by others (Bruner, 1982). Both stories provide time for children to join in, as each had predictable narratives that were repeated. According to Hibbin (2016) It is evident, that story themes and variety of story characters that are available to practitioners during oral storytelling, enhance children's intrinsic commitment, that give opportunity to look past oneself. This allows children to explore and develop their understanding of different personalities, behaviours, and emotions, giving identity and empathy through the narrative, Hibbin (2016). According to Berkowitz (2011) oral storytelling has a positive impact on young children’s learning and development, compared to stories read aloud from picture books. It provides children with the opportunity to engage in creative activities, communicate effectively, enhance social literacy, and imagination, whilst exploring community in a different context. The Empowered Educator (2023) acknowledges children who are unwilling or reluctant to listen, and the significance of creating a story time that everyone can share and appreciate. Using props during story time can improve attention and interest. Children should be supported and encouraged to have regular access to books and stories and shared reading experiences The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Intonation

Wilkinson (2019) emphasises the importance of making story time fun and interactive to keep the children engaged, to develop their curiosity and affection for books and stories. During both traditional and digital stories, the reader provided many facial expressions and exaggerated body movements which included hand gestures. The reader used intonations, different voices, and pauses to keep the children entertained, that promotes

a fun and exciting interactive story session. Medlicott (2019) states that adults need to make story time interesting yet fun, reading at an appropriate pace, using different animated voices for characters and making intentional pauses to allow time for children to gather their thoughts and join in. To build excitement, practitioners should use dramatic changes in pitch and intonation and use a multiplicity of voices (Cekaite and Bjork-Willen, 2018). According to Barbee (2021) the prosodic features of speech are particularly important not only for what we say, but how we say it. Words alone are not enough to portray meaning. Therefore, we need to use prosodies, which are variables in our speech that effect how a message is communicated. Prosodies are affected by factors such as pace, intonation, volume, pitch, and paralinguistic features where speech and communication are assisted by facial expressions, gestures, body language and posture. However, if paralinguistic features are portrayed incorrectly, the meaning can be missed. Gestures can support what we want to say, however, they can also contradict and portray a different message entirely.

Rhyme

The reader chose a rhyming story for the traditional reading session, that contained rhyming text and repetition. According to Bower (2014) It is widely believed that children's language skills, reading and writing can be supported by using rhyme, rhythm, and repetition. McKay (2023) states children that share stories which include rhyme and repetition can be exciting and engaging. Children are likely to predict certain parts of the story, which promotes excitement and encourages willingness to participate and interact with the storyteller. Stories that contain rhyme, can also enhance vocabulary as children use memory skills and benefit from word retention (Read *et al,*2014). Introducing rhymes to children from an early age intrinsically provides spoken language which is easy to engage with, retain and repeat (Kuppen 2018). The traditional and digital stories the reader chose, emphasised key words using different pitch and tones which encourages children to turn take and join in, to become part of the story. Children are stimulated through the sounds of rhyme and will vocalise using the same or similar sounds. When recognising rhyming in sounds and words, children facilitate their auditory distinction by creating prosodic patterns of rhythm and sounds

Burke (2019). However, Medicott (2019) indicates that if a story is being read mundanely with no pitch or intonation, children will lose interest and disengage.

Props

Griemann (2017) points out the importance of engaging children in creating or sourcing props, to help children interact with the reader during the narrative. Whitehead (2009) agrees with this, and highlights making story props is a magical way of bringing story books to life. Providing props is beneficial to children to enable them to recall and re-tell stories. The reader used a selection of props including several farm animals which are identified in the traditional story, and a variety of real fruit displayed in a basket, which supported the narrative within the digital story. The children had the opportunity to handle the props, using their senses while comparing and referring to the pictures within both stories. Vasalou *et al*. (2020) discusses when props are used it can enhance children's imagination and promote the use of descriptive language. It provides a valuable opportunity to revisit, investigate, and discuss further. (Burke, 2019, p.36) suggests when props are provided for children, they should be relatable, functional, and appropriate for re-in-acting stories and facilitate dramatic role play, as these items will be well used. During the traditional story, the reader provides opportunity for children to Imitate the behaviours and sounds of animals, to visually make comparisons and connections that relate to the story. The reader also provided traditional story books in Welsh and English text to look at after the digital story had finished. This successfully promoted interaction and conversation, this links to Languages, Literacy and Communication Guidance (Welsh Government 2022c). Brodin and Renblad (2020) discuss the importance of allowing children access to books after the story has been told, which encourages development of communication and reading skills as they reflect on the story and share information whilst interacting with others.

According to Kucirkova (2018) the carpet environment is ideally positioned for group-based reading by a practitioner focused on one story. This form of reading participation is based on socio-cultural theories of early childhood education, which emphasises dialogue. However, in print books, the format of the book is an essential tool of group

reading sessions, which can be shared in a variety of sizes, hardback, and paperback. Current digital books (such as iPads and Google Chrome books) are designed for individual use or small group reading and are not very practical for larger groups Kucirkova (2018).

Harrison and McTavish (2016) completed a study which identified that there is potential to develop language and literacy with the use of technology through educational apps, that work alongside children being exposed to social interactions. The curriculum for funded, non-maintained settings focus on developing skills so children can save and retrieve digital work, access apps, recognise icons and produce a camera roll (Welsh Government, 2022b). Children of today are growing up in a digital world that is forever changing and moving at a fast pace. Where adults may find it difficult to keep up with modern technology, young children feel comfortable with the use of digital devices, this can happen even before language acquisition is established (Harrison and McTavish 2016). The Curriculum for Wales states that capable learners who are ambitious should be exposed to and engage in technological and scientific change. This will deepen understanding and can help learners to lead fulfilling lives, contributing to culture and society in many ways (Welsh Government, 2019). Donaldson (2015) points out that prominent scales of digital understanding required today, so it is imperative that children are given time to develop these in conjunction with other skills that are required The Digital Competence Framework is dedicated to all children. This is to provide a proficient level of digital comprehension to help them in the future (Welsh Government, 2018.

Rahiem (2021) found that when teachers use basic digital technologies, storytelling becomes significantly more dynamic, engaging, and theatrical. This method enhances children's learning experiences by making them more exciting and communicative. However, Ponti (2023) states' growing use of screen time in young children is linked to changes of inactive behaviour, less physical activity, and changes in sleep patterns. According to Bus (2015) electronic storybooks are interesting because they not only simulate the involvement of listening to a story, but also provide technological enhancements that make the experience different from a traditional story book. Electronic books have numerous features, such as sounds, music, and animated

pictures that encourage interest and engagement for young children. However, Ponti (2023) argues that young children struggle conveying what they recognise from digital screens to real life, therefore children do not learn efficiently. Children learn best through face-to-face interaction. Early learning is most enriching and significant when the experience is lived and when interaction occurs with real people.

Conclusion

To conclude, investigations that have taken place through research and evidence have shown significant benefits to children accessing digital technology through apps and programmes to underpin language and literacy development. That intonation, rhyme and props support learning and are a valuable link to enhancing understanding through storytelling. Nevertheless, digital technology should never substitute traditional storytelling or real-life interactions, as these encourage children to become more involved and build confidence through communication. Combining these elements can enhance language and literacy experiences that are dynamic and rich in culture. Furthermore, in the ever-changing society, children need to have access to digital resources to develop digital skills that will be beneficial to them in the future.

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