

Language and Literacy in the digital age.

Introduction.

According to National Literacy Trust (2020) regular reading can be powerful to children. Its benefits include increased confidence and uncapped imagination. Hook-Sopko (2022) suggests that reading to a foetus can also help develop early language. By reading regularly it can help stimulate the senses of the baby and improve brain development. Children on average will have five thousand words in their vocabulary by the time they reach school age. Lowry (N.D) believes that for children to reach this they need to be exposed to unfamiliar language. Books are a way to expose children to this, as they have unfamiliar words, are repetitive and have the same words in a range of sentences throughout to help further understanding. In recent years, due to digital technology having such an impact on children's everyday experiences, it is now desirable for practitioners to help promote and develop digital literacy skills. It is suggested that digital storytelling integrates images and sounds to traditional storytelling. (Maureen, Van Der Meij, and De Jong, 2018).

Main body.

There are many approaches to storytelling, there is traditional storytelling where the practitioner is using a book, there is storytelling without a book, however this is often harder to engage the children, and there is digital storytelling among a few (Medlicott, 2019, p. 17-18). Storytelling is not just reading, storytelling engages the audience and engulfs them in the story, making them participants not just listeners. Traditional storytelling is an ancient tradition that allows the teller to connect with the audience by using body language, facial expressions, voice, and eye-contact. Whereas digital storytelling is a modern approach that whilst still using all the same traits as a traditional storyteller does, digital technology such as, the use of an ipad or an interactive board has been incorporated (Choo, Abdullah, Nawi, 2020, pp. 46-47). In the two videos here, the practitioner is using the traditional storytelling approach and the digital storytelling approach.

On reflection of both storytelling videos, the storyteller is using positive reinforcement and encouragement when the children answer her open-ended questions. B.F Skinner's 'The reinforcement theory' suggests that when children are encouraged and given immediate feedback or praise, desirable behaviour is shown and repeated, therefore skinner proposes that this is how language is developed (Omomia and Omomia, 2014, pp. 174-178). However, according to Nath (2010, pp. 4) and Tancock (2014, pp.137-138), language theorist Noam Chomsky argues with Skinners' reinforcement theory and suggests language cannot be acquired through reinforcement, he believes that all humans have an innate mechanism called 'The Language acquisition design'

also known as 'The LAD'. This mechanism, he believes allows children to naturally organise the language that they hear. Chomsky believed that the human brain has evolved over time so that neural circuits hold linguistic information from the start of their development. He suggests that languages all share common principles. For example, all languages have verbs and nouns (Montsaye academy, N.D, p. 2-3).

According to Rumfola (2017), when Skinner's positive reinforcement is active within a learning environment all children are aware of the wanted behaviour. By following Skinner's theory of positive reinforcement within this storytelling activity, the practitioner is maintaining the children's attention and encouraging the other children to participate in the discussion of the story. This helps develop language and literacy skills by developing conversational skills and allowing the children to express their opinions.

The questions asked within both storytelling activities were open-ended questions. According to Wasik and Hindman (2013, pp. 302), open-ended questions are a tool that practitioners are encouraged to foster in their learning environments, to help a child's language. For example, during the traditional storytelling activity, the storyteller asks the children "If you are hungry where can you look for food?". This approach sparks conversation and debates during the story, on where the children can find food or who they can ask to help them, whereas if the children were asked, "Can you ask your parents for food when you are hungry?" is a closed question which can only be answered with a yes or no. Brustlin (2021) suggests that to help encourage language development practitioners should ask questions that spark curiosity, such as how? And why? Brustlin (2021) also believes that when asking open-ended questions, practitioners are sharing knowledge, broadening learning experiences and initiating conversation, which will help develop the children's language and literacy skills.

By using the open-ended question technique, it is supporting Vygotsky's Scaffold theory. Scaffolding during language development is when practitioners help children learn a new words by building on the words they already have. This is done through story telling and discussion. Vygotsky believed that by assisting children regularly in the moment, they will be able to do the same thing confidently and independently in the near future (I CAN help, N.D). There are many benefits to scaffolding children's learning, this includes ensuring the children are gaining the desired skills, motivating children to engage in learning and providing differentiation for each child. However, scaffolding can be time consuming and there is the possibility that the zones of proximal development may be misjudged (Lombardi, 2018, p. 11:8).

Sternstunden (2018) suggests that often there can be a misunderstanding with early language development also known as Quines GAVAGAI problem. For example, children may have the ability to say the word, however it may have a different meaning to them if they are unable to fully communicate what they are saying to us. A way to support children's understanding of words during a storytelling activity, is to ensure that hands-on experiences are offered. This can be achieved with the use of props and story bags. When practitioners use resources such as props, they are providing children with opportunities to not just hear words in a story, but they are able to visually see and touch relevant props for a deeper understanding of the language. By using visual props and story bags children can also develop skills such as story sequencing and can then begin to develop the language needed to transfer into their own learning and play. (The empowered educator online, N.D).

During both storytelling activities the practitioner used a range of props to support the experience. When comparing the use of props in both the traditional storytelling video and the digital video, it was clear to see that the traditional storytelling experience had more props. The practitioner clearly felt more confident in using story bags during this activity, as well as real life props such as the cocoon. The book seemed far easier to use for the practitioner, than the Ipad in the digital video. After reading each piece of food the caterpillar ate, the practitioner would pick up the corresponding wood slice and repeat the word to the children and show them the picture. This approach can help children understand the meaning of the word and visualise what the word means, helping to prevent Quines GAVAGAI problem. To help understanding further, the practitioner could also offer fresh fruit for the children to see, and also offer them in different shapes and sizes to the book so that can avoid semantic overextensions and underextensions.

According to Harrison (2014) semantic over extension is the main semantic error that is made by early years children. It occurs in early language development, and it means that a word is given a wider meaning than what it should. For example, unable to differentiate snakes, worms and centipedes from caterpillars. A semantic underextension is an error where a word has a narrower meaning. For example, when showing the picture of the apple during traditional storytelling, some children may not understand that apples come in different shapes and colours, therefore may not be aware that, although they may look different, they are still apples (Harrison, 2014). Barton *et al.* (2013, p. 1-3) believes that when children are subjected to the use of props during storytelling experiences, they are likely to use a greater amount of language when engaging in play after.

Theorist Vygotsky (1966) had argued that when children use props, they are likely to engage in play which then facilitates learning. It is argued that by incorporating props such as pictures, or in this case story slices, this approach can help implement literacy skill development. Vygotsky suggested that the use of props within play, including storytelling can encourage the children to develop the oracy skills needed to re-tell the story. It allows them to visually remember the stage of the book and reminds them of the words needed to correspond. At this particular stage of development, it is believed that the child does not yet have the ability to recognise specific symbols, however they are beginning to master the prerequisites of thinking symbolically (Bodrova and Leong, 2015, p. 371-375.)

According to The Welsh Government (2022) and Billington (2016) the world is becoming increasingly digital, therefore it is essential children can develop and explore their knowledge, skills and understanding. Blum-Ross, Kumpulainen and Marsh (2020, p. 1-38) suggest that digital literacy plays a vital role in social inclusion and quality of life for children. It is seen as a twenty first century skill set that all citizens should now develop. According to Welsh Government (2018), The Digital Competence Framework (also known as 'The DCF') gifts children with the confidence and ability to become informed, capable learners. Digital literacy should be an approach that views the children holistically, whilst providing numerous pathways for development to suit a range of children and the way they learn.

However, according to Kim *et al* (2022, p. 1), practitioners are reminded that exposing children to digital experiences does not mean allowing the children to use iPads or other digital devices to complete their work, it is to incorporate digital devices to enhance purposeful and authentic experiences. For example, in the digital storytelling video, the practitioner used a YouTube video to read the story instead of the hard copy. The video was not played for the children to watch, the practitioner instead, integrated digital devices into the activity by muting the video and reading the story over it. There were plenty of pauses to stop and communicate with the children, and by taking this approach, this helped develop the children's' language and literacy skills.

Digital storytelling is an approach that is used to encourage meaningful learning and engagement for children. By providing innovative approaches such as digital storytelling, it is suggested that as well as children's engagement being enhanced, motivation and their sense of achievement is also heightened (Smeda, Dakich and Sharda, 2014, pp. 1). National Literacy Trust (2020a) believes that technology has a key role in supporting language and literacy within the early years with the support of video calling, eBooks and apps. They suggest that technology is a tool that can allow

children to gain the skills needed to begin the journey of reading for many different groups of children. It is also believed to be advantageous to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However according to Gaffarovna (2023, p. 42-43), although practitioners now will be offered training on their own digital literacy skills, if they are digitally illiterate and are unable to use technology, they will possibly be replaced for practitioners who are. The use of digital technology has also been proven to be addictive and therefore can affect and possibly be detrimental to children's physical and mental health. During this activity the practitioner encounters a technical glitch, this is a disadvantage that can come with technology, however the practitioner finds her place quickly to ensure children's engagement is not lost.

Conclusion.

In conclusion when children are exposed to reading on a regular basis, they have increased confidence and are able to use imagination with ease. To ensure children have the best possible start to their language development, it is advised to begin reading from conception (National Literacy Trust, 2020 and Hook-Sopko, 2022). Theorist Noam Chomsky argued with Skinner's theory that language is developed through positive reinforcement, he believed when children are born they have an innate mechanism called The Language Acquisition Design which is also known as The LAD (Nath, 2010, pp. 4 and Tancock, 2014, pp.137-138).

Digital technology is an approach used to help engage children in their language development as it integrates many images and sounds to traditional storytelling. Practitioners are required to help promote and develop digital literacy skills (Maureen, Van Der Meij, and De Jong, 2018). Practitioners are reminded that digital technology through storytelling it is key to language development, however, avoid allowing children to participate in digital activities with no quality learning purposes. Practitioners should use their traditional storytelling skills to enhance the children's learning. For example, as in the digital video, the practitioner used techniques such as open-ended questioning and props to engage the listeners as well as using the online version of the book (Kim *et al*, 2022, p. 1).

Vygotsky supports the use of props and open-ended questioning within language development and suggests that children are scaffolded during these approaches, and further language is encouraged when questioning and props enhance deeper meaning when children are faced with unfamiliar words (Bodrova and Leong, 2015, p. 371-375.).

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