

Improving young children's language development

To begin this article there will be a brief introduction of the current concerns in relation to children's language development and explanations of how story can impact on early development of language. Central to this paper will be an analysis of the storytelling techniques used during the story of *When I Go to the Supermarket* by Harker (1999). The story was chosen as it is simple yet effective. It includes rhyme, repetition, a teddy bear character, which enables the storyteller to change their voice to portray the bear and opportunities for the use of real props when reading the story to an audience. These aspects can support children in reaching some of the language development outcomes outlined in Early Years Outcomes Framework (Welsh Government, 2019).

There is a growing concern that young children beginning settings have poor language development. Most children are able to develop language skills effortlessly, however for approximately 7% of young children it is a struggle, which subsequently can have an effect on their academic and literacy skills throughout school (Roulstone *et al.* 2010). Although language delay is common in children aged two and three years, efforts need to be made to improve this to reduce the likeliness of long-term language issues (Bishop and Leonard, 2014). Welsh Government (2020) explain that one in four children who have poor language skills at the age of five continue to be below the expected standard in English by the time they leave primary school. Genetic factors can contribute to a child's level of language development such as Autism, Speech-sound disorders, and Dyslexia (Wright, 2020). Other factors such as hearing impairments, race, home language, socio economic backgrounds and environmental factors can also have an effect on a child's ability to learn and develop language (Brown, 2014; Marshall and Lewis, 2013; Pace *et al.* 2016).

Owning books increases children's likeliness of developing language at a higher rate than average by over six times (Busby, 2019). Listening to, and telling stories, can have a positive impact on language delay as it allows young children to begin to understand the many varying ways in which language is used (Basset, 2018). Learning through the use of books is beneficial to children's language development as story time tends to be fun and playful, therefore can hold the attention and concentration of young children for longer (Hsiung-Blodgett, 2020).

Stories are embedded into children's lives, through plays, books, television programmes, songs and music (Neaum, 2012). Stories have existed in order to communicate messages for many thousands of years and assisting children in understanding and making sense of these stories is important (Gibb, 2016). Evans (2009) explains that storytelling undertaken in an effective way can bring children great joy and offers the possibilities for children to ask questions or discuss their thoughts throughout the book, therefore challenging and enhancing their use of language. For very young children, reading stories aloud helps to prepare them for reading themselves. Gibb (2016) explains that hearing stories being read has the potential to allow children to become familiar with words they may not hear regularly or at all, and further widens their vocabulary. Whitehead (2009) agrees, explaining that stories are not only a way for children to communicate their feelings and make sense of their world but they also provide a new rich, unfamiliar and varied vocabulary for children.

Kalb and Van Ours' (2014) research shows that children who are read to at an early age are more likely to become readers themselves and develop a higher level of language development. Dirks and Wauters (2018) state that ensuring children who are deaf or have a hearing impairment have the same, if not more, storytelling interactions at a young age is important for their language and literacy development, as research suggests parental involvement and early interventions show a higher level of ongoing development for deaf or hard of hearing children. Incorporating British Sign Language into story interactions allows children to begin to build an understanding of cultural and linguistic traditions within British Deaf communities and British society in general (Sutton-Spence, 2010).

It is clear that identifying and supporting possible contributions to children's poor language development is important from as early as possible. Books improve children's understanding and knowledge of how language can be used and the broad variety of vocabulary available in a fun and authentic way. Also, storytelling interactions are highly important for the development of language and literacy for all children. To begin the analysis of the storytelling techniques used for the book *When I go to the Supermarket* by Harker (1999) the first focal point that will be discussed is rhyme. The story by Harker (1999) has a rhyme on each page for example, 'I help mum to choose a bottle of juice, and some slices of ham. I think I'd rather have some jam'. Read, Macaully and Furay (2014) carried out an experiment with children in

which the findings showed a storybook containing rhyme was much more effective in allowing the children to remember what was being said than a story with no rhyme. They believed that the rhyming story influenced the children to predict what words were coming next therefore contributing to their learning and word retention.

Brown (2014) states that developing a child's ability to identify rhyming words enhances their phonological awareness which is a child's ability to notice the sounds and rhythm of words and believes that reading books promotes this skill (Konza, no date). Wang (2015) agrees, stating that an indicator that children's phonological awareness is improving is their ability to recognise and identify rhyming words. According to Literary Devices (2020), rhyming is simply a pattern of words that end with the same sound giving the story rhythm. Tomasello (2003, cited in Kessler, 2010) believes that pattern-finding is a skill that is necessary for acquiring language and following grammatical patterns. He explains that research has been carried out with infants where a three minute series of trisyllabic words sounding the same were played to them and a three minute series of trisyllabic words that did not sound the same were also played; the infants were naturally drawn to the similar sounding pattern of words. This suggests that a story book containing rhyme would have more of an impact on infants and young children.

Harper (2011) reports children that are sensitively and frequently exposed to rhyme at a young age are more likely to develop casual but positive, future reading abilities. Whilst children who are given frequent training and instruction that focuses on rhyme has a strong effect on their future reading abilities. Rhyme plays an important role in allowing children to identify sound patterns that occur in language therefore allowing their early language and linguistic skills to develop.

Emphasising rhyme is important in allowing children to develop their awareness of sounds and patterns within books and also encourages memory and prediction of the text. The next focal point that will be discussed is repetition. Repetition is evident throughout the story by Harker (1999). Each page began with the words, 'I help mum to...' and then followed with items that the characters bought from the supermarket. Literary Devices (2020) explains that repetition can be used to allow children to remember a storybook or certain lines of the storybook. They also state that repeating

the same few words at the start of each sentence is known as anaphora - repetition of words within the story already presented.

The Montessori Academy (2017) explained Montessori believed that children learn through memorisation and repetition, and that through repetition children's neural processes in their brain strengthen to allow development. According to Smidt (2013) the more times a child experiences something, for example seeing, doing or saying something the stronger the neural pathway in the brain becomes which allows the child to remember said thing. Horst (2013) explains that each time a child hears a word they are able to think about it further and in different ways; they are presented with the opportunity to store further relevant information about the words, therefore developing an understanding of their meaning and when to use them, thus increasing their vocabulary. Following on from this, Aitchison (1996) believes repetition helps children develop an understanding of grammatical structure.

In the story by Harker (1999), the beginning of the sentence stayed the same but the nouns were the words that changed, promoting identification of grammatical structure. For example, the sentences on the main pages began with, 'I help mum to get' followed by the section that changed, 'a tin of beans'. A recent study reported in Dockrell, Stuart and King (2010) showed that children needed to engage in different memorial and linguistic processes in order to use sentence repetition. Their ability to do this is highly likely to improve with practise and exposure to activities where repetition is used. Bland (2015) explains that it is important for children to be exposed to the same few words enough times that they remember them; he believes that lack of repetition can be problematic for young children.

In early years practice, when reading the story by Harker (1999), the storyteller could point to the words that are repeated on each page so as to raise awareness of what the words look like, therefore enhancing the use of repetition by hearing them as well as seeing them. Penguin (1995-2020) explains that pointing to the words as you read, allows children to understand that words are made up of different letters. With time, children will eventually recognise the words that are being repeated, and in turn this will help towards them learning to read and write. According to Byington and Kim (2017), in order to develop a conceptual knowledge of writing, children must recognise

that marks, letters and symbols make words and sentences that can be written. This is made possible by continually exposing young children to print.

Repetition strengthens the neural pathways making it easier for children to remember and learn from experiences. It has the ability to increase awareness of grammatical structure, different letters and words. The last focal point that will be discussed is the use of props. Greimann (2017) explains that using props during story time adds another layer to an already existing learning opportunity. When presenting the story of Harker (1999), the storyteller could use props to enhance audience participation. An example of how this could be done is the storyteller could share out items that are bought in the book before reading the story. Throughout the story when the reader reads 'I help mum to find some pots of yogurt' for example, the audience will be encouraged to put their item in the trolley giving the opportunity to pay attention and respond when it is their turn. Bean Stalk Charity (2017) supports the use of props in this way as it encourages young children to pay attention and get involved, therefore giving them a deeper level of understanding towards the story and the language used. Cekaitea and Björk-Willénb (2018) also believe that using props during story time improves children's listening comprehension and creates an ideal environment for learning literacy.

Grudgeon and Garder (2013) explains that the use of props is an effective way to help the children remember the story. Each prop can be used as a memory aid that assists the children to relate to the story. According to Barton (2013), it is believed that giving children props to explore may allow the children to communicate their thoughts and discuss the props therefore exploring their use of literacy and language. It is expanded that using props throughout storytelling connects literacy and language learning with play, which in turn has a positive impact on the engagement of the children.

In a study carried out by Barton (2013) evidence showed that the group of children that used props during the story remembered and understood the story better than the group that did not use props which is a clear indicator that props are beneficial to language development. Massey (2013) believes that story telling activities in the classroom that include props promotes oracy development and audience participation. Grayzel (2019) states that giving the children something to do during the storytelling

activity gives them the opportunity to take part in language learning that is experiential and memorable.

Involvement can be increased by incorporating the use of props. Laevers (2015) believes that one of two important factors that contribute to the quality of care given in settings is the children's involvement. He believes that the involvement of children impacts their ability to learn confidently. He explains that when children are focused, motivated and mentally active the practitioner, or in this case the storyteller is fulfilling their role. When the opportunity arises to present the story to an audience they would need to stay focused and alert in order to put their item in the trolley when it was their turn. This would in turn give them motivation to listen to and comprehend the language as it was being spoken.

In summary, storytelling has a large impact on children's language and literacy development and can be delivered effectively in many different ways. Rhyming promotes children's phonological awareness, as well as enhancing their ability to identify patterns throughout language, which is an essential skill in literacy and language learning. In terms of practice in early years settings it is important that when reading the story to an audience time is given through pauses to give children the opportunity to predict the word needed for the rhyme.

Repetition has an effect on children's language and literacy development as it gives the child a deeper meaning and understanding behind the language used. Neural pathways are created and strengthened in the brain each time a child hears, sees, does or says something therefore the more times something is repeated the higher the chance the child will remember it and add to their vocabulary. This can also have a positive impact on children's emergent writing, as children exposed to print will slowly improve their phonological awareness.

Using props during story time is a way to connect language and literacy development with play, which in turn has an effect on the concentration levels of the children as well as improving their memory of the words used in the story. Using props as suggested, will encourage children to get involved as well as increase the need to listen and understand the story.

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