

How active storytelling can promote and develop essential language and literacy skills

This study reviews the significance of how active and emotional storytelling within the early years promotes and develops essential language and literacy skills for children. The study is based upon the foundation of emerging concerns for language development of children within today's society. Save the Children (2016a) found that eight out of ten teachers in Wales reported that they are seeing children start school struggling to speak in full sentences. In addition, a survey completed by teachers within a reception classes highlighted, over half of the practitioners, express concerns over children finding it hard to make friends, interact and show understanding in language because of their language delay (Save the Children, 2016b). Nearly all of those practitioner's state that a consequence for children who start school with delayed speech and language skills fall behind other children in their learning.

The study explores environmental factors and life experiences which impact and influence children's language development, and how key elements of repetition, physical movement and actions and onomatopoeia in storytelling promote and support effective language development. The paper expands using theoretical practice and research evidence, on how and why the areas of focus successfully promote development of essential language and literacy skills of oracy, reading and writing for children aged three to four years.

Active storytelling is an effective way of motivating cooperation and stimulating engagement with an audience. Yabe et al. (2018) state that emerging research suggests that stimulative activities, such as active storytelling, positively impacts on children's brain development, claiming that more connections are made within the brain when the experience and environment are more enriched and inviting. According to Zak (2014), the reason behind this is due to a chemical being released in the brain called oxytocin. Furthermore, the chemical has the power to heighten emotional responses, attitudes and behaviours. For example, developing trust, empathy, positive memories, happiness, and promoting a two-way communication, resulting in children developing secure attachments, self-motivation and confidence in building relationships, as associated with Bowlby's (1958) theory of attachment (Cassidy, Jones, and Shaver, 2013).

Babies as young as eight months old begin to learn and understand words that they frequently hear, through stories read to them (Jusczyk and Hohne, 1997). Reading to babies is significant for future language and literacy development and achievement. Strouse, Nyhout, and Ganea (2018) state that babies improve their own language and literacy skills by copying sounds and learning words from others. In addition to this, babies use their senses to develop understanding and make sense of what they are hearing (Ayres, 2005). For example, looking, touching and recognising pictures in story books helps them to develop imagination and introduce new ideas into their world. Additionally, reading to babies supports social development and thinking skills. Storytelling is a characteristically interactive way to empower an audience to interact with one another. Taking steps in the early life of children is essential to ensure children grow in environments where social, emotional and educational needs are being fulfilled, as the early years are the core years for cognitive, social and emotional development (The National Strategies Early Years, 2009).

The Department for Education (2010) reveals that children who are frequently exposed to a variety of stories are more advanced in language acquisition. Storytelling enhances children's development stages of imagination and interaction with others, as well as encouraging children's participation in learning experiences where children can extend their vocabulary development and understanding of the complexity of language. It is through participation and interaction of language, for example using repetition, that literacy skills begin to develop.

According to Collins (2018), repetition has been an important technique in oral tradition, as it helps storytellers and audiences to remember details that may have otherwise been difficult to retain. Stories that use repeated passages throughout the text allow the same set of sounds, words and sentences to be expressed using intonation and expression, rather than monotone, and are seen as a consistent rhythm allowing children to anticipate spoken language. Horst (2017) adds that repetition captures children's attention and interest allowing children to hear vocabulary and begin to understand the meaning. However, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) argue that repetition in stories has been criticized, with the authors noting that it is considered routine and meaningless.

Walsh, Murphy and Dunbar (no date) state, teaching children by rote and memory does not allow children to become critical, creative thinkers, resulting in them relying on the words of others to learn and develop. Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) further argue that repetition does not allow for a deep learning or understanding of a subject neither does it develop connections between new and previous knowledge. Consequently, children can misunderstand concepts and lose interest in learning. In contrast, Burner (2000) believes repetition is the one of the first principles of learning, suggesting repetition matters because it heightens and deepens oral language which is the foundation of learning to read and write. Ong (2002) agrees, stating that repetition is a key learning aid and supports the transition of language acquisition. Repetition helps children to develop decoding skills that are needed for speaking, reading and writing. Repeating the same sounds, words and phrases, allow children to consciously think about and hear individual sounds that make up the words.

According to Hulme and Snowling (2014), the development of language acquisition and the ability of acquiring decoding skills depends upon phonological language skills. Without these skills at the foundation of learning, problems begin to occur in learning to read and write. For example, it would become difficult for children to hear and discriminate between letter sounds in words, impacting on forming the correct sounds and words, which could result in the inability of organising and grasping spoken and written words, therefore becoming unable to write and read words correctly (Primary National Strategy, 2007).

Cowan (2014) states that predictable and rhythmic language are both important factors in capturing children's attention and understanding, further suggesting it helps children to remember important words and phrases by improving long-term retention and reducing the rate of forgetting. Additionally, Ghazi-Saidi and Ansaldo (2017) believe that repetition and imitation of words and sentences are by far the most successful and beneficial approaches for supporting language development in children. Yet, according to Smith and Scarf (2017) the benefits of repetition in children's learning and long-term retention clearly depend on the learner's engagement during a learning activity. Likewise, Piaget's (1936) cognitive development theory suggests that it depends on the cognitive stage of the children whether they retain the learning (Weibell, 2011).

The continuation of repeated refrains and words in stories allow children to process vocabulary and language. Experimenting out loud with vocabulary allows children to recognise phonological sounds and patterns in the words and sentences. Bowman et al. (2001, cited in Miller and Pennycuff, 2008) noted that allowing children to experiment with words and sounds through active and shared storytelling encourages a co-creative learning experience and a form of two-way communication. However, the pace and fluency of repetition within a story is also a significant factor of how to promote language, as fast paced and unsettled fluency raises possible concerns of missed opportunities for children to clearly process language and speech. Therefore, becoming unable to make connections and fully comprehend what they are listening to impacts on their own reading skills, attention skills and understanding of vocabulary (Nation, 2019).

According to Rosenbaum and Simon (2016), active experiences and social interaction that occur during the early years of childhood through experiences such as storytelling, are the foundation for development of actual language skills. From infancy, children learn to engage in reciprocal interactions and convey communicative intentions through non-linguistic means such as gestures, actions and movement. Soro et al. (2019) states that physical movement alongside repetition in storytelling activities increases deep meaningful learning opportunities.

Including physical movements and actions within stories, provides opportunities for children to actively participate, therefore, encourages simulative learning and increases children's attention levels and decreases the risk of children becoming bored (Kohl, 2013). According to Miller and Pennycuff (2008), storytelling is relaying a tale to an audience through voices, gestures and physical actions, suggesting it can motivate the most reluctant reader or writer. Furthermore, Blaydes (2004, cited in Luppe, 2008) suggests that bodily movement facilitates learning for all children; the brain likes to learn and will learn naturally, this way. Children develop skills and grow in understanding through physical play-based experiences. When children are left alone and given time, they begin to show curiosity, actively discover and explore objects within surroundings as observed from others (Yogmen et al., 2018). Children will imitate and make meaning of actions according to their own natural rhythms, continuum and in their own unique sense-making processes by moving, turning, pushing and pulling as well as use actions that relate to words heard (Zosh et al., 2017).

Additionally, according to the National Health Service (NHS) (no date), active bodily movements increase strength, flexibility and dexterity; skills that are required for children to become competent with written skills. For children to develop strong fine motor skills, they first begin to learn to manipulate the arm from the shoulder joint and through making big movements. Arm and finger control follow the same pattern. Children gradually develop muscle and control of the hand, moving on to developing and controlling the fine finger movements needed to mark make and write. The Early Years Foundation Stage (2008) state that physical movements stimulate listening skills of audiences and encourages development and structure within the creative process of language development, enhancing inspiration and imagination of children, in readiness for speaking, reading and writing. When children are immersed in active stories, they find it less demanding to write and talk.

The Welsh Assembly Government (2008) claim stories contribute to the development of children's personal and cultural self-awareness, as stories allow children to express themselves, their ideas and interests in their own way. This allows children, not only to show their knowledge and understanding, but to also gain more knowledge and understanding. This enables children to become communicative individuals with critical thinking skills through motivating, meaningful and interesting environments (White, no date). Thus, developing increasing levels of confidence in children, which encourages both spoken and written communication. For example, children interested in running and animals will show willingness to become involved in a story that includes both interests, by listening and participating. They become motivated to developing their interests while extending verbal communication, which then leads on to drawing corresponding images, later promoting writing skills.

According to Craig et al. (2001) the majority of children recall details of text and the content of information from actively participating in storytelling. Furthermore, indicating a multi-sensory and active experience has lasting impacts on children, making learning, especially the key connectives, more memorable resulting in the strengthening of oracy, comprehension and written skills (Research for Teachers, 2009). This allows children to incorporate movement that develops the use of senses and extends speech. For example, small or whole bodily movements and senses, such as touch, smell, sounds, and visual stimuli within a story encourages children to

deeply experience and immerse themselves within the whole story and imaginative play. Children also extend their vocabulary, using new words to describe experiences as well as develop links to real life situations, therefore gaining further knowledge and understanding for the world around them (O'Connor, 2015). However, Duncan et al. (2017) reported that physical movement was not significantly associated with emergent literacy, but suggested that increasing active movement and actions in storytelling led to growth in self-regulation, which in turn led to increased academic achievement in literacy and language development.

Similarly, Schwab & Lew-Williams (2016) state using actions and movements in storytelling aids learning from different perspectives, which in turn results in development of language and literacy skills. For example, storytelling can change views and understanding of language by adapting the focus and concepts of words and sounds children hear through stories and experiences through actions. This supports Piaget's second stage of cognitive development theory, known as the preoperational stage of life, where children begin to understand and grasp the concepts of objects, actions and language sequencing at their own developmental stage (Weibell, 2011). This suggests that physical movement and actions within storytelling allows children to physically share interests, and to learn and participate at an individual pace that is relevant to their own stage and ability of language development. Active participation in storytelling and shared reading allows and promotes enhanced language awareness supporting Welsh Government's (2016) policy in raising literacy standards and inclusive involvement which supports UNCRC legislation (UNICEF, 2008).

According to Laing (2017), onomatopoeia is the 'perfect' instrument and most natural way of increasing language acquisition as the intention of this is to emphasise the text of the story and make it real to appeal to children's senses. Emphasising and dramatizing the words within a story telling activity provides an enriched language experience and bring the story to life developing excitement in children. Furthermore, it supports children in learning to discriminate between sounds and language patterns in an audible way to enable them to extend in to reading and writing skills.

Modelling and emphasising sounds and language patterns of onomatopoeia through gestures helps children to think, feel, and act on what they have heard, which enables children to relate them to actual meaning. It also develops discovery of natural sounds, allowing children to grasp the content of the words with greater ease; this supports the work of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. He believed that scaffolding, in a meaningful context, provides the appropriate amount of input and guidance for children to develop optimal skills (Walker, 2010). The National Strategies Early Years (2009) stated providing rich language input and interaction highlights to children that listening to and talking about sounds is an effective way to transition into reading, as each requires the child to make meaning of a message and to understand vocabulary. According to Neaum et al. (2017), hearing words and understanding their actual meaning (the name is also the sound it makes), produces opportunities for children to exercise their imagination, communicate effectively, enhance their social literacy, and build a community in a different way and achieve a playful performance of reading and listen to books as well as active stories.

Eder (2007, cited in Miller and Pennycuff, 2008) suggested that onomatopoeia is a 'powerful' strategy for developing meaning of language, heightening emotion, allowing it to become more memorable. However, Chomsky (1965) argued children will not acquire the tools needed for processing an infinite number and meaning of sentence if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone (Cook, 2003). Thus, Wales' new, impending curriculum (Welsh Government, 2019) highlights the importance of language and literacy skills and has developed four core principles, ensuring skills and opportunities are taught and provided across all areas of development.

There are many ways to promote literacy and language development in children, and there is much evidence to support how to do this. However, research evidence suggests, unless children have the basic vocabulary and understand of sounds and words, reading and writing are virtually impossible. The evidence found that the key elements play a significant role in children's development of language acquisition, and for children to thrive and reach potential.

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