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# Role of Reading Children's Literature in Language Development

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**ABSTRACT:** Authors define literature as a body of writing that can be either factual or fictional. This includes all kinds of writing. However they also note that the definition of literature cannot be limited to text alone. Literature is a representation of the human need to communicate meaning, and is often tied into social or cultural contexts. Thus, literature itself encompasses significant sociocultural meaning. Children's literature is written predominantly by adults, for children. Its aim is generally to entertain and instruct children, and children's literature generally carries some form of theme or moral. Children's literature is fundamentally important for language development. Not only do children benefit from reading themselves, but their language skills also develop substantially when listening to another read. Literature influences children's language development primarily by providing a model for reading, writing and speaking. Through the provision of an outlet for engaged learning, children are given the opportunity to expand their language skills in an imaginative and creative way.

**KEYWORDS:** literature, children, language, development, entertain, skills, reading, writing, speaking

## I. INTRODUCTION

Without the introduction and expansion of vocabulary through literature, children would struggle to develop their own vocabularies. Literature provides an opportunity for children to do so in an imaginative and enjoyable way. Authors use features of language to engage children and develop their own skills. Through the use of these language features, and additionally through independent, shared, modeled and guided reading situations literature improves not only children's vocabulary but also their pronunciation. This is evident in texts such as 'Hurry Scurry' by John Parker. The text uses rhyme and rhythm to engage the reader. Consider the first line; "See the lightning flash on high, a yellow slash across the sky." The rhythm is repetitive throughout the text; each line containing seven syllables. This gives the reader a sense of confidence, as they are able to predict the flow of language. The story also introduces the early reader to descriptive language such as 'flash' and 'slash'. Use of rhyme and rhythm is also evident in the text 'The very long nose of Jonathan Jones', written by Max Fletchen and Craig Smith. However this text differs in that it uses a varying rhythm.<sup>1</sup> Consider the first paragraph;

"Jonathan Jones had a very long nose,

he felt that each day it was growing.

His Mother shed tears,

And his neighbors blocked ears,

At the thunderous sound of its blowing.'

Note the rhyme in the second and fourth lines, and in the second and fifth lines. This text is a good example of the importance of illustration within children's literature and its importance in language development. Through the illustrations, children can begin to make connections between words and images, particularly evident in this text is the use of illustration to depict adjectives. This is extremely beneficial for language development. This text is more suitable for older readers, and is an exemplary example of the benefit of learning through experience. That is, young readers' language development benefits far more through application and experience than through simply listening. Through the use of children's literature, young readers' language development is enhanced through reading, writing and listening. Whether children read for themselves, or experience literature through shared or modeled reading experiences, children's literature is extremely important in their language development.<sup>2</sup>



The importance of the role played by children's literature in the child's mental, social and linguistic development and in the development of his or her basic academic skills, such as reading and writing, has been confirmed by numerous studies. A central issue in developmental psychology is what activities related to children's books exert an influence on the child's development and in what ways. This interest in children's books and in child language development places our research into two scientific disciplines, viz. psychology and linguistics. The study explores the impact of systematic and regular reading of selected children's books in preschool institutions on the development of language competences in children aged four to six years, boys and girls.<sup>3</sup>

Oral language is one of the key components of literacy, it is intertwined closely with reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar. Children learn language competency through repeated exposure to increasingly complex words via conversations they have with the adults around them as well as through specific language instruction provided by the teacher. Picture books provide the opportunity to develop the students' knowledge of language and vocabulary further. The implications surrounding poor language knowledge are expansive and also indirectly affect the other components of literacy. It is important that language development is given special consideration so that children are able to communicate effectively and efficiently. Oral language is made up of three different components: The phonological component, The semantic component, and the syntactic component. The phonological component involves the study of sound patterns and their meanings, both within and across languages. An example of phonology is the study of different sounds and the way they come together to form speech and words. Phonology also relates to being able to name letters, matching rhyming words and looking at middle and end sounds of words. The semantic component is made up of morphemes, the small units of meaning that may be combined with each other to make up words, such as adding -s to the end of a word to change the meaning or joining two words together to create a different word, such as 'rain' and 'drop' being added together to make the word 'raindrop'. The syntactic component consists of the rules that enable humans to combine morphemes into sentences. As a child develops so does the complexity of their language, eventually creating questions, statements and learning to combine two ideas into one complex statement. It is believed that there are three dimensions when it comes to developing language comprehension; the physical component, the environmental dimension and the social dimension.<sup>4</sup> The physical dimension refers to the rate at which a child's brain is developing in correlation with their age. The environmental dimension includes where the child is living; is it remote or inner-city, what is the child's parent's socioeconomic status, and to what degree the child's parents were educated. Lastly, the social dimension refers to how frequently they are seeing people of different age brackets, as a child is more likely to gain greater vocabulary knowledge via talking to an adult as opposed to another child.<sup>5</sup>

Children's language development could be explained by environmental learning. He believed that using a behaviourist approach to model behaviour along with positive reinforcements over time a child would develop a vocabulary. For example, providing parent approval as a positive reinforcement when a child correctly pronounces a word or sentence. In contrast, Noam Chomsky's believed that all humans are born with an innate mechanism to enable them to learn language. He believed this was possible by a child listening to other humans talk, hence why their understanding of grammar develops so readily. Thus, starting the controversial debate of Nature Vs. Nurture. Authors discuss a case from the 1970's which is focused around a thirteen-year-old girl whom had been confined to a room for most of her life, often tied to a chair and was severely malnourished. 'She had been isolated and abused by her parents her whole life. Researchers used her to test the Nature Vs. Nurture theory, while they found initially the girl was able to learn a number of words, she was unable to progress when it came to learning grammar. Thus, leading to a belief that there are critical phases for learning language and that interaction with one's environment is crucial for the development of language. Children's language development can also be stimulated through imaginative play with words. For example, children manipulating individual words, or coming up with rhymes and songs. Language development is linked into so many other aspects of the child's development, while abilities will always differ between the children it is important that they receive enough of the right stimulation from those in their immediate environment to have success. However, some children have less access to these opportunities of exposure which can then result in a slower development of language acquisition which then in turn affects other areas of literacy, for example, reading and writing. Oral language can have a severe impact on reading development as it is an essential skill children must have grasped of before they are able to read with comprehension. Research has identified that children with a poor history of oral language are five times more likely to struggle with reading comprehension as opposed to their peers<sup>7</sup>.

Grammar, syntax and semantics are just a few of the literacy skills that influence both language acquisition and reading competence. Children learn new words through incidental exposure or through elaborated exposure. Incidental exposure occurs when children informally experience unknown words in conversations with others; for example, listening to a television program. Elaborated exposure is a more intentional approach in which children encounter new





words through reading a story book or conversations accompanied by meaning-focused explanations delivered by an adult. However, in order for a child to understand in depth the meaning of a word and the proper context the child must have repeated exposure to that word and then be provided the opportunity to use that word in conversation.<sup>8</sup>

## II. DISCUSSION

Instruction in Phonological awareness is also very important when it comes to language development. Phonological awareness involves activities focused around Rhyme, alliteration, blending and manipulating the word or syllable. An example of this may be asking the student to match rhyming words together or count how many syllables are in a word. Intensive instruction from the adult becomes more important as the student begins to get older and the sounds or words become more complex. An example of intensive instruction may be getting a student to blend sounds together or asking the student to segment a word into sounds. Another important aspect of language development is vocabulary instruction, this involves providing children with opportunities to develop a deeper vocabulary through exposure to multiple contexts. Vocabulary instruction should not only be measured on how many words a child knows but also their level of understanding of those words.<sup>9</sup> Children's literature plays a critical role in language development through play. For example, an author discusses a case where a teacher read a book where the duck would quack in different ways to indicate its enjoyment or boredom when a teacher asked How is the work? The students then mirrored the language from the picture book and would quack when they were enjoying their classwork. Reading storybooks to children plays a vital part in developing language skills as they provide children with the opportunity for frequent language-rich interactions that can then be turned into conversations about the book. Asking questions so that the child has to actively respond about the meaning of the text and what connections they can make to it, whether that be to their environment or to themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Concrete levels of conversation intertwined with children's literature can help support the development of oral language. A researcher states that the amount and quality of adult-child conversation is correlated with children's levels of language and literacy development. The complexity of the conversation depends on the level of abstraction used in the conversation. Four levels have been identified, the first being the most concrete level, this level focuses on labelling, locating and noticing present objects. An example of this would be a teacher drawing attention to a picture in a storybook using comments such as "Look at the bird in that tree". The second level expands on the concrete knowledge learnt in the first level by further describing characteristics of objects. For example, "Look at that blue bird in the green leafy tree". Level three and four correspond to the more complex levels of language, they require children to think and reason beyond what is present. Level 3 requires students to summarise, infer provide questions by drawing on their own previous knowledge. Lastly, Level four children are required to reason, predict, problem solve and explain the story. However, researchers also state that it is important that a child has a concrete foundation of word knowledge prior to elaborating with abstract language.<sup>11</sup>

Having a designated place for reading can be very beneficial to language development in a classroom setting. For example, a reading rug is an idea that all children sit on the rug and listen to a storybook while reading the teacher asks the children questions about what they are reading. This facilitates language development within the context of storybook reading and can be very beneficial to developing a child's comprehensive language skills. It is called interactive reading which is viewed by experts as an ideal setting to provide a meaningful context for a child to learn language skills<sup>12</sup>. It provides the teacher with an opportunity to interact with their students about the text, as they are able to analyse a word's meaning with the students or ask the child questions about the text or linking the text to the student's own life to keep them engaged in their learning. Reading the text would be quite difficult for a child in their early years of primary school; thus, making the conversations facilitated by the teacher quite valuable to developing language acquisition. Using this method also helps to keep the students engaged and focused. Through reading and re-reading different texts it also provides students with the opportunity to become familiar with the complex words throughout the text and the teacher providing prompting questions provides the students with a situation in which they are able to use those words<sup>13</sup>.

There are many texts that are designed to be used to support language development in early primary school, with a big number of those being picture books. The Mouse board book series written by Laura Numeroff is the perfect example of literacy promoting language development. The book series uses repeated characters across all of the books and contains a little amount of text on each page which leaves plenty of room for the pictures. These pictures provide teachers with the opportunity to facilitate a conversation with the students. For example, 'who's birthday do you think



it is?’ Or ‘Why do you think the big is wearing a dress?’ Language competency is an important aspect to develop at the beginning of all literacy programs as it provides the concrete foundation for the other aspects of literacy. Children’s literature contains many opportunities to facilitate language development and it should be viewed as a sound resource to support development in all areas of literacy. By providing both implicit and explicit instruction allows the child to succeed when it comes to language development. It provides a language rich environment full of experiences and opportunities to give the child the foundations to support their future education.<sup>14</sup>

### III. RESULTS

Literature can be defined as ‘writing and illustration which is concerned with exploring the value and meaning of human experience by imaginative recreation in language’. Children’s literature is literature which children respond; it relates to their range of experience and is told in language they understand. Like adults, children learn about the breadth and depth of life and human experience from literature. In order to skillfully engage readers, authors purposely use unique plots, information, illustrations, language and other features to deliberately position and persuade the intended audience. Literature produced for children is a dynamic and rich resource for expanding practices and experiences of language and literacy.<sup>5</sup>

Children’s literature is fundamental to learning about language, learning about the world and learning about self. Children who are captivated into the magic world of literature are going to have a rich language and vocabulary repertoire, imagination, creative thinking skills (related to high order thinking skills) and broadened world knowledge. Furthermore, exposure to quality literature enhances children’s motivation and positive attitudes towards reading, in turn helping their future literacy success.

The literary text ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff’ retold by Vera Southgate contains features that will enhance a child’s language and literacy development. The text encompasses repeated text which is highly appropriate for students in the early years. According to researchers, reading and writing skills, including comprehension are enhanced when they are engaged with stories with repeated text. An example of this is, throughout the book ‘trip trap’ is repeatedly used to represent the sound of the goat’s hooves. This is also an example of onomatopoeia<sup>8</sup>, which children enjoy saying aloud and therefore engaging in the story. In the early years students rely on illustrations to help comprehend the meaning of the story. ‘Illustrations in picture books encourage decoding and comprehension of a text’. Water colour has been used as the illustration technique, to assist children in creating images of the characters. Often illustrations rather than words provide the details of the character<sup>10</sup>.

Another appropriate text for children is the story ‘Time for bed’ written by Mem Fox and illustrated by Jane Dye. From the first page children are exposed to features that are beneficial in the contribution to their language and literacy development. Features including onset and rime, rhyme, repetition, use of commas, ellipsis and large detailed illustrations. Each sentence within this book is written to rhyme and repeat, which promotes student engagement. For example ‘It’s time for bed little mouse, little mouse, darkness is falling all over the house’. Here we can direct student’s attention to the words that rhyme, being mouse and house. Furthermore we can see that they both end in the same letter. By directing students attention to this will help expand their vocabulary and exposure to syntactic patterns. Another feature of this book that will promote language development and therefore literacy development is the use of the ellipsis at the end of the book. Students are able to predict the rhyming word that follows the ellipsis, thus enabling them to think carefully. These literary texts stated above motivate young readers to think, enhance their language and cognitive development and stimulates their thinking. In conclusion, literature expands knowledge and experiences, helps readers solve problems and moreover plays a significant role in children’s developmental journey.<sup>13</sup>

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

By the time children start kindergarten, they will know approximately 5,000 words in their native language. If they are raised in a bilingual (or multilingual) household, they may have a smaller vocabulary in each language, but know as many as or more words total than their monolingual counterparts. In both cases, we know that books have a significant impact on language learning. Here are a few examples of just how they help.



### 1. Exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary

Children pick up the vast majority of their vocabulary by paying attention to conversations adults have with them and with others. However, words that aren't commonly used in everyday language (e.g. sizzling, marvel, delighted) can be learned through books. The more times children are exposed to a new word, the better they can acquire its meaning. Additionally, if your child is not learning a second language yet, a robust vocabulary in her native language will be a true asset when she does begin.<sup>14</sup>

### 2. Language enjoyment

Books are a wonderful motivator to get kids communicating. When parents read to their children, they send the message that books are enjoyable. Children create pleasant memories of sharing stories and spending time with the people they love. This connection between feeling loved and language learning will stay with them as they grow. When they begin learning a second (or third) language, they will be motivated to explore books in this new language because of their gratifying experience with reading children's literature.

### 3. Grammar + vocabulary

Parents may find themselves using simplified sentence structures when talking to very young children. For example, they might say, "Mommy goes bye-bye," instead of, "Mommy has to leave." When we read books with our kids, they're able to learn correct grammar in the context of the story, along with the vocabulary. Again, the more often children hear something, the more likely they are to acquire its meaning and usage. Children will understand that grammar and vocabulary go together to create sentences and stories.<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Appreciation of culture

Developing a positive view of his or her own culture and that of others is an essential part of a child's social-emotional development. Children are naturally curious and often haven't developed negative stereotypes that might prevent them from appreciating cultural differences. This openness to the "other" is fundamental when it comes to learning another language because culture and language are intertwined. Adults can encourage children to explore different beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors through books that offer them a window to new worlds.<sup>14</sup>

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