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The Importance of Children's Literature and Poetry

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Home Literacy & Child Language Development

The Importance of Children's Literature and Poetry

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Abstract

The prerequisites of language acquisition and language development remain disputed in the field of language studies. Most children go from uttering their first words in their first years, to fluent readers and writers of their native language, which usually occurs at school entry. However, it is viewed that language skills begin to develop in children's first years, when the home is the main environment in which they thrive. Therefore, the effects of home literacy activities, such as storybook reading, have been foregrounded in numerous language studies. This essay will give an overview of the discussion.

First, theories of child language acquisition and development will be reviewed, An emphasis will be on the socialization perspective, in which it is viewed that children adopt the immediate behaviors of their culture, and therefore the language which is reflected there within.

Secondly, home literacy will be introduced and discussed. Home literacy consists of reading activities which are considered as being either formal or informal. Formal literacy experiences are claimed to have more extensive effects on emergent literacy, while informal literacy activities, such as shared book reading have been found to have greater effects on oral language skills.

Lastly, classic literature, nursery rhymes, and poetry in English will be looked at in relation to their various characteristics which have been found to positively influence general language skills.

According to numerous researches within the field of child language development, exposure to literature and poetry can have a great influence in shaping the child's language skills, which are further developed when the child reaches school years.

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1. Introduction

Language acquisition is perhaps one of the most debated issues of human development. Throughout history, scholars and researchers have attempted to solve the mystery of how people acquire their first language and develop their language skills. Numerous theories have been proposed in this field of research, each one differing from the next, mainly due to the divided emphasis on nature vs. nurture. Some may say children are born with no language skills. Most children begin developing their capabilities at an early age, which further evolve as the child matures (Crystal, 1986). Some children, however, do not become sufficiently able readers and/or speakers of their native language, nor any other language, for that matter, despite receiving proper training and education. Due to these individual differences the matter of ‘abnormal’ language development has been a heated subject within the field of research, mainly for scholars who have attempted to establish and comprehend the prerequisites of ‘normal’ language acquisition (see e.g. Crystal, 1976; Carroll et al., 2003). These prerequisites are constantly being explored, as well as the question of whether people are born with some innate quality enabling us to acquire language, a perspective shaped by Chomsky’s innateness hypothesis, or whether we acquire language as a result of frequent language exposure, initially from our caretakers, and later from teachers. Consequently, research has differed substantially on the importance of the social environment as a part of child’s language development from the nursery to the classroom (see e.g. Snow, 1996; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1996; Crystal 1976, 1986, Sénéchal et. al, 1998).

The first years of a child’s life can be considered as being a critical time for the child’s development. The home is the predominant environment in which children thrive, solely interacting with their caretakers, family members and/or siblings.

Activities in which children are engaged within the home vary across cultures but throughout history, in Western cultures, a tradition of storybook reading has prevailed, an activity which is considered as a major part of home literacy and therefore a substantial part of the child's first language experiences. Much of the debate within the field of child language development revolves around the question of whether early language experiences, such as home literacy activities, may have an essential effect on children's language skills, and what exactly those effects are. Considering research within psychology, sociology and linguistics the primal assumption is that home literacy activities, such as storybook reading and exposure to literature and other print material, are generally claimed to have a vital effect on children's language development.

This essay will consider research and discussions on home literacy activities and their effects on child language development. It will first look at common theories and perspectives within the field of language acquisition and then turn to a discussion of home literacy and the effects storybook exposure may have on children's language skills. Finally, attention will be drawn upon some characteristics of children's literature which relate to theories of language development.

2. Theories of Child Language Development

2.1 Acquiring your native language - Different perspectives

“The acquisition of our mother-tongue is the most significant act of learning in our early life, perhaps of our whole life” linguist David Crystal observes (1986, p. 12). In any given society and/or culture, children are undoubtedly marked by the influence of the language behaviors projected and reflected in their closest surroundings. From birth the child is involved in the environment of the home where language is, generally, the main form of communication. Even though infants only possess minimal

capacities for interaction with those around them (producing sounds, facial expressions, etc.) they are constantly being exposed to language performances in their everyday life. Very young children engage in some type of interaction despite not using actual words or utterances. Eventually the child must acquire language abilities in order to take part in interaction and communication where actual speech is required.

As Crystal (1986) clearly observes children acquire and develop language at varying speed and therefore language acquisition itself has become a broad field of research. There is no 'formula' to language acquisition so the ways in which language is acquired and developed is widely disputed among scholars. If language is a phenomenon that comes naturally to all humans one must wonder where exactly that innate intellect comes from. Many scholars and researchers have questioned this perspective on language acquisition and offered an antithesis in which it is argued that language is a learned behavior (see e.g. Trevarthen, 2010). This, however, is an ongoing debate, mainly for moral reasons, because it will never be possible to examine this by deliberate means of 'depriving' children of language and experiences to see how that would affect their speech.

Psychology has perhaps been the main field in which child development and cognition has been researched. However, linguistic perspectives have been implicated in the discourse and developed theories of how language may be acquired and developed. Due to this 'blend' of linguistics and psychology in the discourse, the various theories and principles of child language acquisition, behind what seems to the layman as a "natural" and simple process, are surprisingly complex. There are, however, some interesting trends within the field in which the emphasis is on both interior and exterior factors of language development, especially that of the socialization perspective, e.g. the social interactionist approach, and of sociocultural perspectives, such as Lev Vygotsky's theories on learning.

2.2 Socialization and Lev Vygotsky's theories on language and thought

Socialization is one theoretical perspective in which it is viewed that children adopt the immediate behaviors of their culture (Ely & Gleason, 1996). This perspective branches out into various, more explicit theories on children's development of language. Linguistic socialization, from a social interactionist perspective, which sees language acquisition as both biological and social, emphasizes the individual development through interaction, between adults and children, as well as the importance of the "ability to use language appropriately in the community" (p. 253). Traditional socialization theories, behaviorist and psychodynamic, which argue that language learning is encouraged with imitation and reinforcement (Crystal, 1976), have been challenged in sociocultural theories by highlighting "social, cultural and historical forces and their varying effects on individual development" (Ely & Gleason, 1996, p. 252). A prominent name within sociocultural theories is unquestionably Lev Vygotsky, whose main emphasis in language studies was the relevant correlation between thought and language.

Vygotsky was a Russian scholar whose works in developmental psychology, education, and psychopathology came to be highly influential. Especially significant are his ideas on the relation between thought and language, which were not translated into English until the 1960s, ultimately emerging as a theory of intellectual development (Bruner 1962). Vygotsky discusses two previous theories of child language development, their strengths and defects, and combines them with his own arguments. His discourse revolves around Jean Piaget, and his contribution to psychological approaches on child language. Vygotsky criticizes Piaget for relying on "pure empiricism" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 10), i.e. experimental facts, and for his attempts to refrain from theory which is, to Vygotsky, an unrealistic approach. For Piaget, "language must be viewed within the context of the child's cognitive development as a

whole” (Crystal, 1976, p. 37) which is bound by the “egocentrism of the child’s thinking” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 11). Children’s thoughts are initially governed by their egocentric nature, to serve immediate satisfaction, until logical thought and social attitudes develop from social pressure. Piaget argues that this cognitive development follows certain periods of age and that social thought begins to emerge only after age seven or eight. Vygotsky praises Piaget’s work but disagrees with his view that egocentric speech has no distinct influence on the child’s behavior. According to Vygotsky, child egocentric speech “early assumes a very definite and important role in the activity of the child” in that it “becomes an instrument of thought” (p. 16). Furthermore, Vygotsky stresses that Piaget’s discourse lacks inclusion of social environment. Although approaching philosophical discourse, Vygotsky also raises highly insightful questions about the child’s mental process in language development.

Vygotsky’s (1962) own studies emphasize the process of concept formation. He argues that at an early age the child develops cognitive abilities to form concepts in which the *word* is the main factor, first in the process of forming the concept and later the word becomes the actual symbol for the concept. This process, however, takes place in numerous stages of specific phases ranging from childhood until puberty, when the process is fully developed. “Thought and word are not connected by a primary bond. A connection originates, changes, and grows in the course of the evolution of thinking and speech” (p. 119). Hence, thought and language gradually intertwine. In short, Vygotsky’s ideas of language development, or “verbal thought”, consist of the process starting with some type of motive triggering a thought, “first in inner speech, then in meaning of words, and finally in words” (p. 152). These arguments produce further questions about this developmental process and especially on what exactly the specific motives are for triggering it and where they come from. Perhaps language input is one such motive, an aspect of language development which

many, if not all, language acquisition theories acknowledge (see e.g. Ely & Gleason, 1996).

2.3. Sociolinguistics and language input – Bruner v. Chomsky

Language input can be viewed both from a linguistics perspective and from the actual language environment the child thrives within, that is in the process of socialization. Acquiring language is in part realizing the language of the community in which the infant is born into. Children gradually gain social knowledge through communication with their main caregivers, generally their parents, who influence socialization of language in two ways according to Richard Ely and Jean Gleason (1996). Primarily, parents direct the child's behavior by praising or prohibiting their activity. Secondly, parents both use and encourage "decontextualized language", i.e. "the use of abstract and metaphorical language, and parental involvement in children's emergent literacy" (p.257). This type of socialization begins in infancy when the mother and father direct specifically modeled speech towards their child. This language input may be viewed as one important social factor of a child's language acquisition, an essential aspect of sociolinguistics, which is "the study of the way language varies in relation to social situations" (Crystal, 1976, p. 28). Nevertheless, language input, such as the specific speech directed to the infant, has distinct emphasis within the literature on language development.

According to the nativist perspective humans are genetically endowed with the ability to acquire knowledge (Crain & Pietroski, 2002). Noam Chomsky is a noted scholar devoted to this perspective. His hypothesis of language acquisition maintains that every child has an innate capacity for first language acquisition, a pre-structured ability automatically enabling language development (Crystal, 1976). This is what Chomsky calls the Language Acquisition Device, LAD, "which provides children with

a genetically transmitted algorithm (i.e. set of procedures) for developing grammar, on the basis of their linguistic experience (i.e. on the basis of the speech input they receive)” (Radford, 2004, p. 6). The child experiences performances of the first language, which serves as input to the inherent LAD, which enables the output of the process, which is the grammar of the language, i.e. the child’s speech. The theory emphasizes that language acquisition is a subconscious process and a largely unguided activity (p.8). Jerome Bruner suggested an opposing argument, in which it is claimed that in order to encourage language acquisition, all children need a socially provided support network, a phenomena termed Language Acquisition Support System, LASS. This support system, however, is associated with innate, biologically acquired abilities (Morris, 2009). Bruner claims that LAD only works due to the presence of LASS “provided by the social world, that is matched to LAD in some regular way” (Bruner, 1986, p. 77). The LASS consists of the social environment in which children thrive from day to day, where their caregivers construct their own behavior around the child’s needs.

As early as children’s first years they are exposed to language used and constructed by their parents which is, in effect, highly altered from their conventional language. This self-developed speech is extremely simplified in vocabulary, grammar, sentence length and sound of voice. This specific type of speech is generally called ‘motherese’ (Crystal, 1986) as main caregiver is generally the mother. ‘Motherese’ takes place in the form of communication, even though it may be very one-sided, but the child may respond to the mother’s talk with sounds and noises. Crystal describes this as an ideal learning environment as children “find themselves in contact with native speakers of the language who are on hand 24 hours a day, who respond to their every noise, and continually talk to them in short, simple, repetitive sentences” (p. 53). This phenomenon is likewise called child directed speech, or CDS, (Snow, 1996)

which has proven to differ between fathers, mothers and siblings. During activities in which pre-linguistic children engage with their parents, social interaction takes place, which has been argued to influence early lexical development.

Numerous studies have shown that early lexical development is influenced by the social experiences of the child because the child's first words are usually uttered in social-interactive routines where the role of the adult and the child are clearly structured, e.g. in picture-book reading, games, and caregiving activities such as feeding and bathing. Barrett (1996) further explains:

“Particular linguistic forms tend to be produced by the adult at predictable points in the sequences of actions which make up these interactive formats. Such a consistent experience of individual lexical forms embedded at specific points in regularly occurring and ritualized events clearly provides the child with an optimal situation for acquiring not only event representations but also context-bound and social-pragmatic words” (p. 390).

However, the extent to which caregivers ‘fine-tune’ (i.e. model their linguistic input) their speech may not correlate to the pace of the child's lexical development. While linguistic input may have a crucial role in establishing initial use of words, further development may rely on both internal and external cognitive processes (Barrett, 1996, p. 391). Nevertheless, results from a variety of studies explicitly foreground that frequency of ‘motherese’ and repetitive exposure to words are interconnected factors of the language acquisition process. Furthermore, the first words children utter are usually words they have frequently been exposed to (Snow, 1996). Language input such as CDS may have a greater effect on lexical learning than on grammatical development (Fletcher & MacWhinney, 1996). Language socialization research has not specifically touched upon grammatical development, however, Ochs & Schieffelin (1996) offered a discourse, from a language socialization perspective, in which the

model for grammatical development “takes an informed look at ideology and social order as forces that organize children’s use and comprehension of grammatical forms” (p.73). Thus, a child’s grammatical development can be viewed as a result of sociocultural contexts where the child is an active *participant* in social events, where language is held highly and language learning is encouraged.

2.4 The social environment and language activities

The social environment is perhaps the most important factor in a child’s language development. Even in theories which claim that language is only acquired due to an innate quality, there is always the need for some type of language input which the child ‘must’ be exposed to in order to develop speech, in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary extension, etc. Communication between the child and caregivers is a recurrent issue within the various debates on language development, and there are no objections to the necessities of language input. Even though ‘nature’ may provide the child with essential competence of language acquisition, ‘nurture’ can never be excluded from the discussion. In light of the recurring emphasis on social aspects of language acquisition in the broad academic discourse, the actual environment in which the language exposure occurs must be taken into serious consideration. During the first years of the child’s development, the home is the environment in which language encouragement takes place. Language input is directed towards the child, in a manner of both the adult’s behavior and speech, as constructed to fit the child’s needs. Children immediately become active participants in interactions with their caregivers. Language activities in the home environment seem to take various forms and specific activity patterns may be detected. Such patterns arise in a variety of what can be considered as home literacy activities which have been widely studied in parallel to the varied theoretical approaches to children’s language

acquisition and development. The next chapter will discuss the importance of home literacy in more detail.

3. Home Literacy

3.1 What is home literacy?

When thinking about home literacy many things may come to mind; newspapers, magazines, books, shopping lists and even simple information on milk cartons may be included in print material found in people's homes. The most important aspect of what scholars refer to when talking about home literacy is the actual activity of reading. Whether it refers to reading in silence or aloud to an audience, the essence of home literacy is bound in the active involvement of reading, from books, newspapers or other print material.

Reading activities in the home are exposed to children at one point or another. Literacy, in some measures, becomes a part of children's experience in their everyday life, commonly in Western cultures. Before reaching their school years, children are constantly acquiring and developing language skills and home literacy experiences are viewed to have a great influence on every developmental level. As soon as children begin to listen to the variety of sounds and noises resonating in their closest environment, their attention is increasingly extended to language.

All children are exposed to some form of home literacy and most children experience such in the form of being read to, by an adult or older sibling. At a very young age such experiences may involve the parent singing or reciting a nursery rhyme to their child before bedtime or as a soothing remedy. Older children may have their parents and/or other adults read them a bedtime story and, of course, as children grow older they become increasingly more involved with the parents' everyday activities, such as organization activities and routines involved in maintaining the home. They

may even take interest in other activities, such as reading the newspaper in imitating their parents' behaviors.

Language influence is not only implemented in the child's interaction with adults or other siblings. With the increase of modern technology children are exposed to immeasurable material that may serve as additional input to their language development, such as television- and radio programs, or more commonly, computer use.

3.1.1 Types of home literacy – Formal v. informal literacy experiences

Reflecting on home literacy and the effects such activities may or may not have on children one generally comes to the conclusion that within the scientific studies of language acquisition, the positive effects of literary experiences are emphasized. However, to further explore home literacy there is a need to define the different types of home literacy experiences. According to Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas and Daley (1998) there are two main kinds of experiences which children are exposed to at home; informal and formal (as cited in Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Storybook reading would apply to informal experiences while more instructed activities, such as teaching about literacy, alphabet letters etc., applies to formal experiences (Sénéchal et al., 1998). Informal activities seem to be those of enjoyment, with the intention of entertainment rather than structured, 'implemented' education. The act of shared book reading may therefore be categorized as a leisure activity for the child. However, the more formal instruction does not have to be labeled as being 'forced' because on some occasions the child may initiate the activity in accordance with their interest, e.g. learning to write their name, and therefore learning about the alphabet.

When considering very young children and their early language skills an emphasis must be on the home environment, which can be categorized as informal, as

opposed to formal environment which the child is exposed to when reaching school years. The prevailing distinction between informal and formal literacy experiences involves what can be called parent teaching. There may be no consensus in the academic discourse on how to expound or define terms and phrases such as parent teaching, but in general terms, the phrase refers to the “parents’ attempts to impart knowledge about reading and writing” (Sénéchal et al., 1998, p.99).

3.2 Benefits of Home Literacy

3.2.1 Vygotsky’s ZPD – Relationship between learning and development

Vygotsky contributions to the field are extensive, specifically his discourse on the fundamental relationship between children’s development and learning. Despite Vygotsky’s (1997) focus on school-aged children, he acknowledges the fact that children all have a history of learning before reaching school years, thus, early learning must be a starting point of discussion, because, “Learning and development are interrelated from the child’s very first day of life” (p. 32). Through Vygotsky’s investigation of the traditional views on this relationship, he developed a new idea essential to understanding children’s potential to learn. He termed this idea the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD hereafter), which is “the distance between the actual developmental level ... and the level of potential development ... under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 33). The ZPD “defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (ibid.). Thus, Vygotsky claimed that children have two developmental levels, that of actual development, i.e. of mental abilities, and that of ZPD. In his view, learning precedes and triggers development, which results in zones of proximal development.

Language acquisition, being a learning process, depicts a clear example of this relationship between learning and development. The process generates as a medium for the child to communicate with others around him and through their interactions, the child's behavior is further developed (Vygotsky, 1997). By learning through interaction the child internalizes "developmental processes" (p. 35) which eventually become apart of his "independent developmental achievement" (ibid.). In other words, children learn, i.e. internalize, the language used by other, more able people in their environment. For toddlers in process of language development, this interaction is considered social as it takes place within the home environment, where literacy activities involve the parent, encouraging language acquisition and early literacy skills.

3.2.2 Early learning – Social learning

"Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them", Vygotsky (1997, p. 34) emphasizes in his ZPD discourse. The home is the social context in which the child thrives and develops. Home literacy activities are therefore the main source for very young children's early learning. As such endeavors take place through the interaction between the adult and the child they can therefore be considered as socially constructed. Language itself is a social construct and "its meaning is constituted relationally between speaker and hearer" (Hicks, 1995, p. 52). The young child gradually becomes an active participant in a variety of routine social events. In other words, the child becomes progressively familiar with day-to-day activities in which he or she takes part, learning the associated discourse, i.e. the socially situated communication, through interaction (Hicks, 1995). Within the home context the child experiences the native language through language input, specifically directed to the child. Storybook reading is one such activity in which the child is exposed to socially

constructed language, which may have an extensive impact on the child's language development.

3.2.3 *Storybook reading*

Research has shown that exposure to books may be the main factor in children's early home literacy experiences, which shape early language skills necessary for further language development in later years/school years. Sénéchal & LeFerve (2002) conducted a longitudinal study on the ways in which children go from early knowledge of language to fluent literacy with a focus on how *parental involvement* can influence this course of development. They predicted that exposure to literature and shared book reading, in which the parent read to the child, would influence the child's literacy skills in later years. To examine this, various indicators of home literacy were tested, such as frequency of shared book reading, parents' own exposure to popular adult literature and the children's knowledge of popular children's books, just to name a few. Their results proved that storybook exposure, an informal literacy experience, predicted children's receptive language (i.e. speech and comprehension), although, it did not predict emergent literacy or phonological awareness, i.e. the measurement of a child's knowledge of sounds within words (Carroll et al. 2003). Those types of language skills were predicted by more formal experiences, such as parent instruction on reading (Sénéchal & LeFerve, 2002). However, both receptive language and emergent literacy were linked to phonological awareness. The findings proved that "continued exposure to print is an important component of the development of skilled reading" (ibid. p. 455).

There have been various claims by researchers on the actual benefits storybook reading may have on children's developing language skills. Supposedly, storybook reading may enhance oral and written language skills, listening

comprehension, vocabulary awareness, increased familiarity with the syntax of written letters and words (Sénéchal et al., 1998). Research on storybook exposure has focused on frequency of reading and emphasized inquiry of the importance of such home literacy experiences for young children. Sénéchal et al. (1998) point out that shared book reading directly influences the child's general language learning skills and even reading abilities in later years, because informal literacy experiences are related to the more formal instructions regarding literacy. However, their own research results showed that frequent storybook reading reported by parents correlated to the children's oral language skills, while the frequency of parents' reports of direct instruction correlates to children's written-language skills. Therefore, storybook reading, on its own, may not be a sufficient tool for language skill encouragement, but must be intertwined with more formal instruction. Regarding pre-literate children, storybook reading appears to generate both formal and informal experiences. As the parent reads to the child, he or she could be simultaneously pointing to the relevant pictures and/or words, therefore both directing the child's attention to the written language as well exposing oral language input. While exploring literature specifically designed for pre-literate children one can definitely detect how they combine the oral- and written language, in terms of illustrations, emphasis on individual letters, repetition of words and sentences, and rhyme and alliteration, a few of the main characteristics to be explored. The frequency of such structured characteristics in children's literature exhibits the possibilities, and perhaps the intentionality, of interactional storybook reading. Such home literacy activities usually involve the caregivers, at least until children themselves become literate which can be assumed to take place only when the child enters school. Commonly, however, some children become literate before reaching school years, possibly because of frequent parent instruction on storybook reading and/or the child's enthusiasm to learn. An important predictor of reading

ability is claimed to be awareness of phonological facts of language (as cited in Carroll et al. 2003).

3.2.4 Beginnings of phonological awareness

Children go through several stages of developing phonologic awareness, from becoming familiar with syllables, to onsets and rimes, to phoneme awareness, initially occurring in preschool years and further developing from then on. These claims were contested in a study by Carroll et al. (2003) in which the results showed that “a better way of characterizing [phonologic awareness] development might simply be as a progression from awareness of large units (syllables and rimes) to awareness of small units (phonemes)” (p. 920). Hence, the suggestion is that early phonological awareness in preschool children, around age four, pertains to “an early implicit *sensitivity* to sound similarity” (my own emphasis, p. 922), which further evolves to conscious phoneme awareness. These findings support the arguments of a lexical restructuring theory; that children’s increased phonological awareness is correlated to their “increasingly segmentalized lexical phonological representations” (p. 914).

3.3 Phonological awareness

The definition of phonological awareness is a widely disputed matter among scholars, according to Anthony & Lonigan (2004). They proposed comparing four distinct definitions to realize whether all phonological skills belong to the same construct or whether they are distinguishable abilities, in order to grasp the relation of phonological skills with literacy acquisition. In doing so, they were able to show that “phonological sensitivity is a single ability that can be measured by a variety of tasks [...] that differ in linguistic complexity (e.g., syllables, rimes, onsets, and phonemes)” (p. 51). Notably, their research showed that rhyme sensitivity and phonemic sensitivity are

both significant predictors of reading and spelling abilities. However, in their view, the child's general sensitivity to the sounds of the language is the most important factor. In addition, poor phonological awareness in children has been found to be a possible indicator of dyslexia (Lundberg, 1994).

In light of previous discussions on storybook reading, which may or may not 'require' parent instruction, exploring the variety of popular children's literature, nursery rhymes, picture books, etc., is the appropriate field for investigation, in order to realize whether such home literacy material may be used as a tool to encourage children's language development.

4. Young Children's Literature and Language Development

To further depict the importance of home literacy, and that of shared book reading, some specified children's literature must be considered. For learners of English as a first language there are classical books and rhymes which have remained among popular literature for children. "Children's books are important educationally, socially, and commercially" (Hunt, 1994, p. 1). Accordingly, Peter Hunt emphasizes the power of literature and its educational influence. Children's books are, generally, written by adults therefore reflect certain life experiences and knowledge, and are "transmitting cultural values, rather than 'simply' telling a story" (p. 3). It is necessary to keep in mind that children are developing readers, from the crib to the classroom. As the nursery rhyme may in fact be the child's first literacy experience that genre is a good place to begin when exploring varying home literacy material and effects on children's language development.

4.1 Nursery rhymes, rhyme- and emergent phonologic awareness

The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (Opie, 1994) contains a collection of over 500 rhymes, songs, and riddles, originated in both England and America, many of them having survived from the sixteenth century. Nursery rhymes, or Mother Goose songs as they are termed in America, are traditional verses to be either sung or spoken, generally by the main caregiver, as to sooth or, more importantly, amuse the child (ibid.). The history of nursery rhymes is extensive and interestingly the majority of them were perhaps not intended for children. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century when a book specifically designed for young children including traditional nursery rhymes appeared in England (ibid.). When people sing to children they generally sing the songs they remember having been sung to them as children. The rhymes “enter the nursery through the pre-disposition of the adults in charge of it” (ibid. p. 5). Through such a progression in history, old, or even ancient nursery rhymes have survived. Their relevance to children’s language acquisition and development is perhaps most important from the perspective of developing phonologic awareness.

The caregiver’s most important possession is the sound of his/her voice, and therefore, the actual words may have a limited affect on the language development of the infant child. However, as soon as the child has begun to develop some language skills, although still in need of the caregiver’s soothing voice, the nursery rhyme the caregiver is accustomed to singing to the child may be initiated as some type of language stimulus or input. “The ear is attuned to hearing melody from birth, whether the melody is that of the mother’s lullaby or the tune of languages spoken” (Angelou, 2005, p. xi. as cited in Heald, 2008, p. 227). In rhymes the sounds of the words are carefully articulated and children are therefore repeatedly introduced to the sounds of their native language. This can be explored, e.g., by looking at two well-known nursery rhymes:

Hush-a-bye, baby, on the tree top,
 When the wind blows the cradle will rock;
 When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,
 Down will come baby, cradle, and all. (Opie, 1994, p. 70)

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
 How I wonder what you are!
 Up above the world so high,
 Like a diamond in the sky. (Opie, 1994, p. 474)

These rhymes differ in various ways; the first one has longer lines and half-rhyme, but interestingly, even though each line of both rhymes has four stresses, the lines of ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’ have fewer syllables than ‘Hush-a-bye-baby’. Both possess characteristics which may serve as a stimulus to child language development. One such is the rhyme which should therefore be subject of observation as it closely relates to vocabulary acquisition, emergent phonological awareness, and subsequent literacy.

It has been argued that syllable and rhyme skills emerge earlier than phoneme awareness skills as a consequence of those skills relating to different language and reading measures (Carroll et al., 2003). Syllable and rhyme recognition has proved to relate to speech perception and memory measures while phoneme awareness has proved to be related to reading and letter knowledge (ibid.). Accordingly, children seem to perceive language before they gain the abilities to produce it themselves. They can understand speech directed to them even though they may not have the competence to respond with more than babbling or a physical reaction, such as nodding or pointing. This corresponds to Vygotsky’s views on the relationship between thought and language, which gradually intertwine, as discussed previously in chapter 2.2. First, the child acquires the cognitive ability to form concepts for which the word eventually

becomes a symbol. Children acquire increased sensitivity to sounds gradually, i.e. begin to detect differing syllables of the language. Syllabic sensitivity emerges early in the child's development. Typically, in the first year, the child is capable of uttering a high proportion of consonant-vowel syllables (Menn & Stoel-Gammon, 1996). Even so, the child will not fully develop phonological awareness until s/he is able to master subsyllabic skills, such as onset and rime, i.e. syllabic rime, and not poetic rhyme (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004). However, in light of previous discussions on phonological awareness, which claim that young children are more sensitive to large linguistic units and as they mature they become more sensitive to smaller units, there seems to be a systematic way in which children master language skills in accordance to their complexity, from word-level skills, to syllables, to onset-rime, to phoneme skills (as cited in Anthony & Lonigan, 2004).

Rhyme awareness, although debatable, relates to emergent phonological awareness in that it is partly a consequence of growing vocabulary knowledge. According to De Cara & Goswami (2003) a child's mental lexicon increases extensively between ages one and six. One critical source of phonological awareness is in the acquisition of vocabulary, because with growing vocabulary awareness, the child's recognition of words with similar sound structure increases. "This could create developmental pressure to develop awareness of sub-units within words such as syllables, rhymes and phonemes" (p. 695). Vocabulary growth seems to emerge simultaneously to developing metalinguistic abilities, i.e. the ability to realize the concept of language and word development (Menn & Stoel-Gammon, 1996). At some point in children's development they become driven to inquire about the meaning of words which they have not encountered before. When children are presented with a nursery rhyme or poem containing a story, which they may not fully understand because they lack the vocabulary knowledge, they are driven to seek answers, in order

to reach full comprehension. One definition of phonologic awareness claims it to be a metalinguistic ability that develops parallel to metacognitive ability, i.e. “higher order thinking which involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning” (Livingston, 1997). Furthermore, phonological awareness is claimed to be directly linked to emergent literacy (e.g. De Cara & Goswami, 2003). To study children’s emergent literacy one must scrutinize children’s books which are specifically aimed at developing readers.

4.2 Poetry and emergent literacy

The author and poet Dr. Seuss is renowned for his variety of noted children’s poetry books, the most famous one is probably *The Cat in The Hat*, which has been praised for its witty, musical language and captivating illustrations. Though *The Cat in The Hat* may be one of Dr. Seuss’s books suited for older children, he also wrote books for beginning readers. One such, *Hop on Pop*, is a poetry book where rhyming words have the predominant emphasis.

HOP

POP

We like to hop.

We like to hop

on top of Pop.

STOP

You must not

hop on Pop. (Seuss, 1963, p.40-41)

The example (see also in Appendix A) depicts the book’s basic consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words with their meaning displayed by illustrations. What is remarkable about *Hop on Pop* is that it begins with very simple yet instructive words

and sentences which gradually become more complex. The first page shows the reader and/or observer three words, first in large, bold letters “UP / PUP / Pup is up” (Seuss, 1963, p. 3), and the illustration showing a puppy, or “pup”, hovering above the ground. The illustrations are colorful and bright, drawing the reader’s attention to the words, not only with bold, large print, but also coloring. More words introduced in the book are: tall/small, play/day, see/bee/three, pat/sat/cat, sad/dad/bad/had, and irregular spelling such as night/fight, just to name a few. Interestingly, all the rhyming words presented on each page have identical rimes, but varying onsets, which is a factor of increasing syllabic sensitivity. In that way, and as it says on the book’s back page, when children have learnt one word they will be able to read the others. Furthermore, the book depicts actual reading activity, and how young children can read little simple words, while parents are able to read longer, more difficult words.

My brothers read

a little bit.

Little

words

like

If and it.

My father

can read

big words, too

like.....

CONSTANTINOPLE

and

TIMBUKTU (Seuss, 1963, pp. 60-32)

Not only emphasizing rhyme and therefore sounds of language, the book also stresses the act of reading and how it is a process of gradual learning.

Once a child becomes familiar with reading material such as *Hop on Pop*, the parent or adult will be able to construct the shared book reading activity by leaving gaps in the uttered text for the child to fill in. Such active routines, initially a very simple social discourse pattern, eventually become a part of a much more complex system, e.g. the “repertoire of language knowledge and practices” (Hicks, 1995, p. 63). Not only does children’s poetry invite the child to participate in the language game that poetry can be, but also contributes to the child’s awareness of the ‘wonder’ that is language. In addition to rhyme, poetry and nursery rhymes share specific features which are claimed to be especially appealing to children, therefore becoming a part of their language experience, such as rhythm, musicality and repetition.

Poetry can be viewed as a “separate language” (Sloan, 2001, p. 48) in which musicality is equally important to syntax and meaning. Children react positively to this musicality which is created and constructed by both alliteration and rhythm. Children have been found to prefer rhyme and rhythm rather than free verse (*ibid.*), which is not surprising when the ‘playfulness’ of poetry is taken into consideration. Certainly anything ‘playful’ will be very appealing to the young child’s ears and eyes and poetry is in fact a ‘wordgame’, in which the poet can manipulate word order, sentence structures, invent new words, etc. (Crystal, 2006). In fact, learning literacy through play within the home has been claimed to establish a good foundation for the child’s metacognitive awareness, “to make explicit their own learning strategies and approaches to learning to read and write” (Williams & Rask, 2003, p. 529). Relevant play activities include structured games, such as rhyming and phonetic games, including interactive citing of nursery rhymes, alphabet games, as well as more informal games which may be a part of the family’s ritual, e.g. card games, such as recognizing familiar signs which appear on the journey (Williams & Rask, 2003).

Children's preference for poetry correlates to the fact that, as research has shown, some children, even in their first year, can recognize and remember melodies to which they have been previously exposed. "We organize the world of sound, be it music or language, based on what we have already heard" (Heald, 2008, p. 228). So, being able to *predict* the outcome of a story, poem or rhyme is apparently a factor in the child's eagerness to participate in storybook reading, as well as in their overall development as speakers and, later, as readers of language. "Children who have stored memories for the sound and rhythm of language are better able to make predictions about words and phrases, as they emerge as readers" (ibid. p. 230). Their prediction abilities are established with frequent storybook reading and therefore repetition, another characteristic found within children's poetry and literature.

4.3 Eric Carle and Roald Dahl – The significance of repetition

Repetition is an important factor within the social interactionist perspective of language development. Children are prone to repetition, especially in activities they find enjoyable. They are prone to repetition in their speech, despite being given constant feedback from their caregiver, in activities of play, and in storybook reading. Anyone who has ever been a caretaker of children knows that they generally have a favorite storybook which they prefer to have read to them. The significance of repeated storybook reading lies in the interaction between the adult and child, where imitation is a frequent occurrence. Children learn through imitation, which is a component of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development:

Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 34).

However, of interest is the repetition which seems to reoccur in children's literature. Poetry often includes repetition of words or sentences, but seems to hold a special emphasis in poems for children, as was noted in Dr. Seuss's *Hop on Pop*. Children's storybooks by no means lack the characteristic of repetition, as can be noted in Eric Carle's children's books or Roald Dahl's stories.

Eric Carle wrote, illustrated and designed *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, first published in 1969. Despite the book's age it has withheld its popularity through the decades. Not only does the book demonstrate a lovely story with a happy ending, but Carle manages to "integrate a concept (days of the week), scientific information (the life cycle of a caterpillar), and an appealing story. (Ages 3-6)" (Rovenger, 1994). Furthermore the story portrays the popular idea of something plain changing into something very beautiful. The caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, when he has learnt a valuable lesson of nutrition, i.e. that eating too much food is not good.

On Monday he ate through one apple.

but he was still hungry.

On Tuesday he ate through two pears.

but he was still hungry.

On Wednesday he ate through three plums.

but he was still hungry.

On Thursday he ate through four strawberries

but he was still hungry.

On Friday he ate through five oranges

but he was still hungry. (Carle, 1969)

As illustrated above a part of the story is in form of repeated sentences, with only minimal interchanging of the weekdays, count numbers, and subjects. Similarly to

children's poetry, the child is invited to 'fill in the gaps' created by the form of the story which s/he learns when having become familiar with the story.

Roald Dahl wrote countless books through the ages and remains one of the most popular children's books author. His stories are magical and wittily illustrated, inviting children into worlds of chocolate factories, animal kingdoms and other imaginative settings. There really is no wonder children of all ages are captivated by Dahl's books, not only because of the prevailing emphasis on children but because how aware Dahl's seems to have been about poetry appropriate for children. *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, published in 1985, is one of his shorter books, intended for younger children, presumably in their preschool years. The appeal of the book is Dahl's use of both prose and poetry in narrating his story. Firstly, the reader is introduced to a young boy who observes what appears to be an empty house. The young boy recognizes the house as having been some kind of a shop, as he can read "the faded lettering across the front which says THE GRUBBER" (Dahl, 1985, p. 2), which he then asked his mother to explain the meaning of, and therefore learnt that the word means 'candy store'. The young boy also recognizes that the house is for sale, as it says "FOR SAIL" (ibid.) on the front window. Although young readers and preliterate children will not recognize the misspelling of the word 'sale', it will not make a difference. Young age children will benefit solely from being introduced to a main character, who is able to read some words and is questioning new words he does not understand, in order to gain a better understanding of the peculiar house. In the following day, a new word appears on the window, first "SOLED", and then the next day a whole sequence of words has been written on the window. "[The young boy] stood there reading it and reading it and trying to figure out what on earth it all meant" (ibid. p. 4). As the story evolves, the young boy is introduced to the inhabitants of the

house, the Pelican, Monkey and a Giraffe who occasionally recite poems to express themselves:

And let me tell you why.
 I have a very special beak!
 A special beak have I!
 You'll never see a beak so fine,
 I don't care where you go.
 There's magic in this beak of mine!
 Hop in and don't say NO! (Dahl, 1985, p. 7)

The poems are enriched with rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, i.e. the frequent characteristics of children's poetry, in addition to the quirky storyline. One can only imagine that the activity between the adult and child of reading *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, which itself is an encouragement of literacy, will be an even further stimulation to the child's knowledge of not only literacy, but the power of language and wonders of literature. The books' final page depicts the farewell poem, encouraging frequent visits to the book:

We have tears in our eyes
 As we wave our goodbyes,
 We loved being with you, we three.
 So do please now and then
 Come and see us again,
 The Giraffe and the Pelly and me.

All you do is to look
 At a page in this book
 Because that's where we always will be.
 No book ever ends

When it's full of your friends

The Giraffe and the Pelly and me. (Dahl, 1985, p. 31)

Dahl masterfully combines poetry with a message implying the importance of poetry. The poem and the message could, therefore, encourage children's interest in literature simultaneously implicating the characteristics of poetry which stimulate the child's language development.

5. Conclusion

Children do certainly not acquire language overnight. As has been discussed language acquisition is a process of differing developmental levels, which rely on internal and external factors, in terms of both language and thought. Vygotsky viewed language as a form of verbal thought which is triggered by some form of motive, first in inner speech and later in spoken words. Therefore, there is a need to explore what motives, or language input, are present in the child's life, 'triggering' thoughts that are ultimately extended to language.

Language input is a form of socialization, engendered by the child's caregivers, who direct the child's behavior and encourage abstract/metaphorical language and emergent literacy. This type of language input varies in different social situations, i.e. child directed speech (CDS), which has been depicted as having varying emphasis within differing language acquisition theories. Bruner, e.g. acknowledged the presence of an innate ability for language acquisition, which Chomsky distinguished in his theories, but Bruner emphasizes that such a quality only works due to the presence of a socially provided LASS. Certainly this phenomenon would be impossible to investigate specifically, that is, by depriving children of a social environment but it goes without saying that the environment in which children thrive has an essential effect on their development, probably on every psychological level.

Language acquisition and development is a process of learning through communication and interaction between the child and adult, or in Vygotsky's terms, learning within zones of proximal development, with the guidance or assistance of an adult or a more capable peer. For most children this process takes place within the home. The debate on language development has, therefore, emphasized whether or not the social environment is an essential factor of language development, one which is difficult to object. The socialization perspective has emphasized that the individual needs to acquire language for communication and therefore needs to learn the appropriate language.

Interaction with other people is an essential part of our maturation. Storybook reading is the major interactional activity in which the child participates, which has proven to influence a variety of the child's developing language skills. Being a routine event, frequent storybook reading creates an optimal learning situation for early lexical development as it creates predictable linguistic forms. E.g. as children become familiar with specific reading material, such as Dr. Seuss's *Hop on Pop*, they will gradually gain the ability to predict the words on the book's page. Caregivers have the possibility of constructing the reading activity by leaving gaps in the text for the child to fill in.

Research has shown that frequent storybook exposure can predict the child's receptive language, enhance both oral and written language skills, increase vocabulary awareness and familiarity of written letters and words. However, the most important aspect of early literacy experiences seems to rely on the combination of formal and informal literacy experiences, i.e. both storybook reading and more instructive experiences, such as teaching about literacy. This is because formal instruction can predict phonological awareness and is therefore a predictor of emergent literacy. Accordingly, home literacy activities, which include both forms of literacy experiences, are essential to language skill development.

Children's literature, nursery rhymes and poetry contain numerous characteristics which are claimed to enhance children's language skills. Syllable- and rhyme awareness emerges early in children's development, which will come to 'guide' them towards increased phonological awareness. So, rhyme, rhythm and melody of poetry and literature are very important language stimuli for emerging phonological awareness. Although shared book reading is considered as an informal home literacy activity it invites the caregivers to construct the reading as a more formal instruction on literacy. In addition, numerous classical children's books in English emphasize the importance of literature by intertwining their stories with characters who themselves engage in reading and are thereby learning and/or invited to an imaginative world to which they can return at any time. Children's authors such as Roald Dahl, Eric Carle and Dr. Seuss, have shown that there is a specific language to which children are appealed to, thereby encouraging literary engagement and further language development. Although 'nature' may seem to provide children with their basic abilities, 'nurture' is a definite constituent in their primary development.

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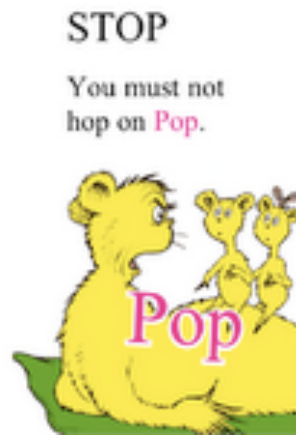
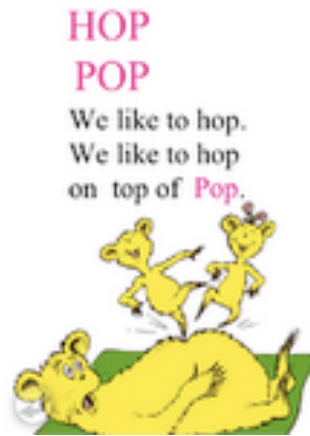
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Appendix A

(Seuss, 1963, p 40-41)