

Reading Aloud as a Recreational Educational Measure: A Case Study on the Implementation of a Picture Book App in institutionalized extended education

Noémie Gfeller*

Abstract: This case study examines the integration of a picture book app in an after-school program in Switzerland, focusing on challenges, benefits and chances of promoting reading as part of the after-school program through the perspectives of caregivers. The study explores the potential of digital media, particularly picture book apps, to enhance children's language skills within institutionalized extended education settings. Through semi-structured interviews with the caregivers, key themes emerged regarding the challenges, strategies, and benefits of using digital tools in educational environments. The findings suggest that while picture book apps can support autonomy and language development, effective implementation requires careful consideration of timing, environment, and the specific needs of children. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of media literacy among caregivers and parents to maximize the educational benefits of digital tools.

Keywords: Digital media, Picture book app, Language development, After-school programs, Media literacy, Extended education

Introduction

An increasing number of children are spending more time in institutionalized forms of extended education (i.e. after-school programs) which are continually expanding in Switzerland and are expected to play an even more significant role in the future (Baader, 2016). An increase in full-day education and care offerings is also being observed internationally (Bae et al., 2019; Klerfelt & Stecher, 2018; Kunze & Reh, 2020). A question that must be asked is whether and to what extent children can be supported in developing their language skills in extended education and how digital media can be used for achieving this goal. Based on existing research, it can be assumed that reading books enhances children's vocabulary and can have positive effects on their development. This case-study examines the extent to which a picture book app can support reading aloud in extended education to promote children's vocabulary and what perceived challenges and benefits are identified by the caregivers in the particular institution of the after-school program in integrating a picture book app in extended education.

* University of Vienna, Department for Teacher Education

Theoretical Framework

Language competence is considered a crucial factor for educational success in educational research (Barrett et al., 2012; Kempert et al., 2016; Prevoo et al., 2016) — and thereby indirectly also for later economic success (Becker & Hadjar, 2009; Koopmans, 2017). A key finding of international school performance studies has shown that academic success and the acquisition of competencies, even in mathematical and scientific subjects, are significantly related to mastery of the language of education (Czepl, 2019; Schlager, 2019). Linguistic deficits frequently occur in children with a migration background, but they can also appear in children who have no migration experience themselves. This affects both children from second and third-generation migrant families as well as indigenous children from educationally disadvantaged and socioeconomically deprived families (Kreuzer, 2004). An effective tool to support children's language development is reading books. Preschool children who cannot yet read themselves benefit when a caregiver reads to them (Raikes et al., 2006); (Bus et al., 1995; Mol et al., 2009; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Early reading abilities contribute significantly to children's overall development, including language, cognitive, emotional, and imaginative growth (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Proficiency in reading picture books is particularly important for children's future learning and development (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Dodici et al., 2003). A picture book format aligns with the multimedia learning principle that people learn better from words and pictures than words alone (Mayer & Pilegard, 2005). When eBooks are designed well, preschool-aged children can learn just as effectively, if not more so, than from print books. Reich et al.'s (2016) findings support this, showing that children are equally emotionally engaged with a story whether it is presented in print or digital format, and they comprehend similar amounts of the story regardless of whether it is read by an adult or a voice-over. However, it is important to note that enhanced eBooks, which include features like sounds, animations, and games, can distract children and reduce their learning by drawing attention away from the narrative itself. The studies by Caserta-Henry (1996), Flint (2010), Mathes et al. (1998), Sáenz et al. (2005), Vaughn et al. (2001) and Shamir (2009) collectively highlight the educational benefits of children reading picture books together. These studies generally conclude that shared reading activities, especially when involving peers or a more knowledgeable partner, can significantly enhance children's language development, comprehension, and overall reading strategies. In particular, the interactions during shared reading—such as discussing the content, asking questions, and jointly negotiating meaning—are critical for promoting deeper understanding and engagement with the text. This leads to the conclusion, that children in extended education can benefit from reading together with other children there.

Current State of Research

The importance of extracurricular activities, including the use of libraries and reading promotion programs during extended education, has been highlighted in previous studies, which have demonstrated a significant correlation between these activities and the development of children's vocabulary (Pedro et al., 2021). The impact of extended education offerings on