“Teacher, is this a book about real things?”

Implementing an Intervention Designed to Teach Unconstrained Literacy Skills Using a Dialogic Reading Approach to Non-Fiction Texts

Thesis by
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I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Siobhán Cahillan-McGovern at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Eva O’Neill
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Abstract

This study set out to create an intervention for teaching language and comprehension with a group of Junior Infants. The research explored language and comprehension as components of unconstrained literacy skills and the place of non-fiction texts in a Junior Infant classroom. This involved implementing a dialogic reading approach to specifically themed non-fiction books and analysing how the children’s unconstrained literacy skills were impacted through observations, test, drawings and photographs. The research methodology was action research. The participants involved were the 18 five and six year old children from the researcher’s Junior Infant class, many of whom were learning English as an additional language. It took place over four weeks and involved two phases of an action research cycle. The study also required the researcher to examine and reflect on her own experiences of the study. The results found that the strategies used in dialogic reading did provide a framework of support for teaching unconstrained literacy skills, but the whole class reading sessions were not sufficient for all participants. However, the different ways in which the children demonstrated a development in their language and comprehension skills allowed the researcher to construct a checklist for formative assessment to target specific areas for improvement. The children also demonstrated increased awareness of the non-fiction genre after the intervention and their involvement in the choice of texts increased their motivation and engagement throughout the process.

Keywords: unconstrained literacy skills, dialogic reading, non-fiction texts
# Table of Contents

Declaration......................................................................................................................................................... 2

Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................................................. 3

Abstract............................................................................................................................................................... 4

Table of Contents.................................................................................................................................................. 5

List of Tables...................................................................................................................................................... 11

List of Figures...................................................................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 1 ......................................................................................................................................................... 13

  Background and Context................................................................................................................................ 13

  Study Objectives .............................................................................................................................................. 17

  Structure of the Dissertation............................................................................................................................ 17

Chapter 2 ......................................................................................................................................................... 19

  Introduction .................................................................................................................................................... 19

  Socio-Cultural Theory...................................................................................................................................... 19

    Agency in early childhood................................................................................................................................. 20

    Literacy as a social practice............................................................................................................................ 22

  Reading Instruction in Early Childhood........................................................................................................... 23

    Emergent literacy........................................................................................................................................... 23

  Constrained and Unconstrained Literacy Skills ............................................................................................... 25

    Constrained literacy skills. ............................................................................................................................. 26

    Unconstrained literacy skills. .......................................................................................................................... 27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral language and vocabulary knowledge</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical literacy</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic Reading</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Fiction Texts</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital versus paper-based texts.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem and Study Objectives</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Paradigms</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness of Design</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design and Procedure</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting and Participants</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher participant</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual media and textual documents</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher-designed tests</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity and Reliability</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflexivity.............................................................................................................59

Researcher positionality. .......................................................................................59

Ethical Considerations .........................................................................................60

Issues of power relations. .......................................................................................60

Informed consent and assent. ..................................................................................60

Anonymity, confidentiality and non-traceability .....................................................61

Dissemination of the research..............................................................................61

Data Processing and Analysis .............................................................................62

1. Becoming familiar with the data. .......................................................................63

2. Coding. ...............................................................................................................63

3. Creating themes ..................................................................................................63

4. Discussion. .........................................................................................................64

Limitations ...........................................................................................................64

Conclusion ...........................................................................................................64

Chapter 4 ..............................................................................................................66

Introduction .........................................................................................................66

Participants Profile ..............................................................................................66

Unconstrained Literacy Skills ............................................................................67

Vocabulary test results ..........................................................................................67

Oral language in reading sessions ........................................................................69

Comprehension in reading sessions ......................................................................71
Comprehension in drawings ..................................................................................................................72
Comprehension through critical responses .........................................................................................75
Dialogic Reading ..................................................................................................................................77
The use of prompts ...............................................................................................................................78
Evaluating children’s responses ...........................................................................................................79
Expanding on children’s responses .........................................................................................................80
Repetition in different formats .............................................................................................................82
Non-Fiction Texts ..................................................................................................................................84
Emergent reading of non-fiction ............................................................................................................84
Empathy and non-fiction .......................................................................................................................86
Non-fiction genre-related opportunities for learning ..............................................................................87
My Learning Journey ............................................................................................................................90
Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................91

Chapter 5 .............................................................................................................................................93
Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................93
Research Question One Findings .........................................................................................................93
Language and non-fiction dialogic reading ..........................................................................................93
Comprehension and non-fiction dialogic reading ................................................................................95
Research Question Two Findings .........................................................................................................97
Motivation and interest .........................................................................................................................97
Evidence of language development .....................................................................................................98
Evidence of comprehension development ........................................................... 99

Supporting Young Children’s Unconstrained Literacy Skills ............................... 100

Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 102

Chapter 6 ............................................................................................................ 103

The Findings ....................................................................................................... 103

Study Limitations .............................................................................................. 105

Recommendations ............................................................................................. 106

Areas for future study ....................................................................................... 106

Implications for policy and practice of schools and junior infant teachers ....... 107

Researcher’s Reflections .................................................................................... 108

References .......................................................................................................... 110

Appendix A Non-fiction books and target vocabulary ....................................... 129

Appendix B Critical questions ........................................................................... 130

Appendix C Drawing templates ......................................................................... 131

Appendix D Sample from vocabulary test ......................................................... 132

Appendix E Labelling activities ......................................................................... 134

Appendix F Parent’s letter of consent ................................................................. 135

Appendix G Children’s consent form ................................................................. 138

Appendix H Newsletter for parents ................................................................. 139

Appendix I Sample of codes for data analysis .................................................. 141

Appendix J Completion prompts to encourage participation ......................... 142
# List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Emergent literacy philosophy and practices</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Constraints on reading skills</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Principles of language learning</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>PEER reading technique</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>CROWD organisation of prompts</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Research paradigms</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Steps involved in the intervention</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Instruments used for data collection</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Validity and reliability in the data collection instruments</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Final numbers of data collected</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Participant’s profile for EAL and non-EAL data sets</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Vocabulary scores from EAL data set</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Vocabulary scores from non-EAL data set</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Children’s use of language during reading sessions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Number of oral contributions from EAL students during reading sessions</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Comprehension skills evident from oral contributions to the texts</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Critical questions based on the non-fiction topics</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Classification of teacher evaluations</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Classification of teacher expansions</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Research question one findings</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Research question two findings</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Action research cycle for this study.................................................................52
Figure 4.1 Zuzanna’s drawing based on plants and flowers..........................................73
Figure 4.2 Haley’s drawing based on plants and flowers..............................................74
Figure 4.3 Charlotte’s drawing based on plants and flowers........................................75
Figure 4.4 Charlotte’s progressive drawing of the ocean..............................................83
Figure 4.5 Examples of the children’s emergent reading of the non-fiction texts.........85
Figure 4.6 Labelling the parts of the plant.................................................................88
Figure 4.7 Derek’s non-fiction drawing of plants and flowers.....................................89
Figure 5.1 Assessment of language and comprehension resulting from the intervention…101
Chapter 1

Introduction

Early year’s education in Ireland has been experiencing somewhat of a revolution over the past decade with views on early childhood becoming more dynamic to include increased value being placed on agency and developmentally appropriate practice. Reflective of this, the perceived role of the teacher has also evolved. This research reflects one teacher’s journey as she undertakes the issue of bringing more balance to literacy instruction in her Junior Infant classroom in light of some key areas of research.

Background and Context

The education system in Ireland has been in a state of “constant and intense change” (Kennedy, 2013) since the introduction of the revised national Primary School Curriculum (NCCA/DES, 1999). Since then, key documents have been developed which have brought literacy policy and practice to the forefront of many discussions, such as the implementation of Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009), the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (DES, 2011) and the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015) which has now replaced the 1999 English Curriculum Document and has most recently been updated and republished (NCCA, 2019). Literacy within Irish policy documents is now described in a very broad and inclusive manner, for instance, “the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media” (DES, 2011, p. 8). Within this definition, certain skills are necessary for reading, while a different set of skills are essential for understanding and critically appreciating. With each emerging document, Kennedy (2013) identifies a move away from the debate between bottom up and top down models of literacy education and more of a drive towards a balanced literacy framework, which has been advocated by the National Educational Psychological
Service in A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years (NEPS, 2016). Considering the extent of information collected on reading instruction, it is unsurprising that there is often a clash of opinions about methods people consider most effective.

Models of reading are used to describe how meaning from print is constructed using language information and central to each model is a differing understanding of how comprehension may best be developed (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000). Bottom-up, or “inside-out” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) models of reading indicate that construction of meaning begins with print, starting with decoding symbols into sounds and building on this from sounds to words and sentences to paragraphs. It is described as being “data driven” and holds the belief that fluent decoding leads to comprehension (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000, p. 29). On the other end of the spectrum lie top-down, or “outside-in” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) models of reading which are “conceptually driven” and place more emphasis on using the readers’ prior knowledge to make educated guesses about the meaning of the print (p. 30). This clash between the skills-based perspective and the whole language approach has led to, what is described as, the “reading wars”, with advocates for each belief arguing that theirs is the right way to teach reading. However, Vacca, Vacca and Gove (2000) claim that these models are incomplete and that reading involves interaction between both skills and whole language approaches. Most educators now agree that teachers should strive for balance in reading instruction, integrating meaningful and authentic reading and writing experiences alongside scaffolded use of skills and strategies (Snow & Matthews, 2016; NEPS, 2016).

Shared book reading with young children is one such strategy that “has long been recognised as a crucial aid to their language and literacy development” (Strickland, 1990, p. 20). Justice and Pullen (2003) identify the importance of adult-children shared storybook reading as being “particularly powerful” because the situation allows for a context
that is interactive, responsive and meaningful (p.103). Shared book reading is also commonly associated with oral language development, which is a strong predictor of emergent literacy (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Dialogic reading, in particular, has been found to support children’s emergent literacy skills and vocabulary development (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Despite the evidence in favour of a balanced approach, research has discovered that traditional and “unbalanced” literacy instruction is still prevalent in primary classrooms in Ireland and internationally (Concannon-Gibney & Murphy, 2010; Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). When examining teachers’ beliefs about a balanced literacy framework in the United States, Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) found that, although the teachers sampled appeared to espouse a balanced approach in theory, it was not evident in their instructional routines with less time spent participating in vocabulary and comprehension instruction, which this research identify as being unconstrained literacy skills. Concannon-Gibney and Murphy (2010) also found a heavy emphasis placed on decoding, a constrained literacy skill, from Irish teachers of junior classes with provision of explicit teaching of comprehension strategies viewed as secondary. Results from Concannon-Gibney's and Murphy’s study may differ today since the implementation of the new Language Curriculum (2019) and further promotion of the balanced approach by NEPS (2016); however more up-to-date research is needed to establish this.

This issue related to unbalanced literacy instruction also extends to the genre of texts used in early primary classrooms. Although little Irish research has been conducted in this area, international studies have proven a distinct lack of non-fiction texts in use within early years’ settings with Duke (2000) discovering that, on average, only 3.6 minutes per day were spent engaging with non-fiction text, and 1.4 minutes per day in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This issue has been recognised in Ireland and efforts are being made to balance
literacy instruction between both fiction and non-fiction with recommendations from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS, 2016) and the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) encouraging the use of a variety on genres in literacy instruction.

Unbalanced use of text genres has also been linked to differences in literacy achievement among genders. Results established from a variety of international standardised tests indicate that boys consistently score lower than girls in the areas of reading and writing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). Studies have also discovered that boys more regularly describe themselves as non-readers and express less enthusiasm for reading than girls (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). Merisuo-Storm's (2006) research found that boys often did not enjoy typical school texts and presented as more reluctant writers. However, results from an Ontario survey proved that a large number of boys often read materials such as newspapers, comics and instruction manuals widely (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). This information is stated with great caution, acknowledging that there are wide variations among gender preferences. However, the research does appear to indicate that there is a distinct difference between the type of text that appeals to many boys and the fiction texts that have dominated early years’ classrooms for many years (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

The most recent Irish curriculum document, the Primary Language Curriculum (2019), also reflects “the significant changes in Irish society” with reference to the number of children in Irish classrooms for whom English is not their first language. In 2016, there were 96,497 students from over 200 countries attending schools and third level institutions in Ireland (CSO, 2016). Statistics like this clearly indicate the multi-cultural nature of Irish classrooms today. The Primary Language Curriculum states that “language learning enables children to understand the world around them and to communicate effectively with others” (NCCA, 2019, p. 6). This statement is relevant to all children but may be particularly significant for children who are growing up in a community where their own language is not
spoken among the majority. The need to develop skills such as vocabulary and oral language is essential for children for whom English is an additional language (EAL) in order for them to comprehend and communicate in their day to day lives as well as achieving success in testing and in further education.

**Study Objectives**

This study aims to explore a manner of teaching unconstrained literacy skills in a Junior Infant classroom with a classroom population that is dominated by boys and which has a large proportion of EAL students. Dialogic reading is the chosen teaching approach and non-fiction texts are the instrument through which the skills will be taught. The research questions that will guide this study are:

1. How does a dialogic reading approach to non-fiction texts impact the development of the unconstrained literacy skills of a group of junior infants in a primary classroom?
2. In what ways are the children's emerging unconstrained literacy skills evident?

**Structure of the Dissertation**

This chapter has outlined the context and rationale behind this study. It has also set out the objectives of the research framed in the form of two main research questions.

Chapter two presents and reviews the literature pertinent to this research, which will inform the methodology and findings of the study. It begins by introducing socio-cultural theory as the overarching concept underpinning the ideals of this study. Emergent literacy theory also forms a large section of this chapter, leading to a detailed discussion regarding constrained and unconstrained literacy skills, an examination of the dialogic reading approach and the use of non-fiction in early years’ settings.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology constructed to answer the research questions. This section opens with a statement of the problem and it is deduced that action research is the appropriate choice of method. The procedures, instruments and ethical
considerations are addressed, followed by delivery of the data analysis processes and some limitations of the methodology.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study under the themes of unconstrained literacy skills, dialogic reading and non-fiction texts using vocabulary test results, observations from reading sessions, drawings and photographs as evidence.

Chapter five discusses the findings of the study in relation to their relevance to the research questions. It concludes with a framework for tracking unconstrained literacy skills using the dialogic reading approach of non-fiction texts to inform further teaching of specific areas of language and comprehension.

The final chapter summarises the main findings of the research and sets forth further areas of research and recommendations based on the results from the study, concluding with the researcher’s reflections.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review examines critically areas of research within the topic of literacy development in early childhood relevant for this study, beginning with an exploration of socio-cultural theory as a concept and how this can be utilised in literacy learning. Within this discussion, sub-sections relating to agency in early childhood education and literacy as a social practice are also analysed. Following this, the next section of the review considers literature on approaches to reading instruction in the early years and emergent literacy theory leading to an examination of the literature on constrained and unconstrained literacy skills. Focus is then given to research on oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and critical literacy as components of unconstrained skills. The final sections examine the literature on dialogic reading as a teaching methodology and the use of non-fiction texts in early year’s literacy instruction. The conclusion draws the key findings together and considers their implications for the research questions. Throughout the review of literature, regular reference is made to the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA, 2019) and Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009), as these documents provide the policy framework for literacy teaching and learning in early years’ classrooms in Irish Primary schools.

Socio-Cultural Theory

Stetsenko and Vianna (2009) explain socio-cultural theory as the way in which psychological processes develop due to social interactions between individuals and their world. The work of Lev Vygotsky was central to the development of socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky brought attention to the interaction between children’s social and cultural worlds,
as well as the concept of the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which involves the idea of a more expert other interacting with a child in order to achieve a higher level of understanding (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017). Vygotsky was of the opinion that children’s thinking is transformed through language and interactions (Fisher, 2013):

> Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological)....All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57).

He believed that everything a child experiences contributes to his/her learning and development, including social, historical, cultural and biological influences (Attfield & Wood, 2005). Central to socio-cultural theory is the concept of “funds of knowledge”. Hedges and Cullen (2012, p. 932) explain children’s “funds of knowledge” as the knowledge that they bring to educational settings that has been gained through interactions within their family and community, that could be used to influence pedagogy. Socio-cultural theory allows for children’s funds of knowledge to be acknowledged and utilised in literacy learning and recognises that young children can and should have agency in their own education.

**Agency in early childhood.** Waller (2014) argues that there are multiple perspectives on childhood, which are influenced by society and culture, and these perspectives change over time. Ireland is witnessing this process of change as its view on what is considered developmentally appropriate early childhood education is evolving. This is evident in the introduction of the Síolta Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in 2006, Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009, and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) scheme in 2010. These changes are, in much part, due to the ratification of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992,
placing children’s rights as a central issue on political agendas (Gray and Ryan, 2016). The Aistear perspective celebrates childhood as a “meaningful life stage and as a time of being rather than becoming” (NCCA, 2009, p.5). This idea that childhood is a time in its own right, rather than preparation for adulthood, is a modern perspective (Waller, 2014).

The contemporary view of the child acknowledges that children have the ability to understand their world and this should give them the right to have agency in their learning (Waller, 2014). Agency can be described as “the ability to assert subjectivity and to exercise power” (MacFarlane & Cartmel, 2008, p. 44). Agency within early childhood education allows for multiple perspectives to be considered with both child and teacher recognised as equals in the learning environment. MacFarlane and Cartmel (2008) identify the following four key elements of practice that support the notion of agency in early years’ settings:

- The possibility of choice and negotiation,
- An understanding of rights and responsibilities,
- A sense of belongingness,
- A focus on quality interactions and relationships.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) appear to reflect these views relating to agency by encouraging practices such as emergent learning, co-construction of knowledge and language, dialogue, reciprocal interactions, and acknowledging prior knowledge. Practices such as these are informed by Relational Pedagogy (Boyd, MacNeill, & Silcox, 2006) and Participatory Learning Theories (Hedges & Cullen, 2012), both of which embrace dialogue, relationships and co-construction of learning, and are situated within the perspective of socio-cultural theory. Furthermore, practices that are inclusive of the child’s voice “broaden the scope of what counts as literacy” (Flewitt, 2008), and recognise that literacy can be understood as a social practice.
Literacy as a social practice. Street (1984) criticises the idea of “autonomous” literacy, which he describes as an approach to literacy in which all individuals are expected to acquire the same set of neutral skills without regard for their social or cultural position. This can lead to discontinuities between home and school literacies with little meaning made regarding the use of literacy in an authentic way (Flewitt, 2008; Pahl & Burnett, 2013) and is related to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “habitus” where there is a disconnect between the values of a community and a differing social or political agenda. An alternative outlook that Street poses is that of an “ideological” view of literacy as social practice. Rather than allowing certain privileged literacies dominate in education, the ideological model “offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices” (Street, 2003, p. 77).

This understanding of literacy as a social tool is reflected in the curriculum documents. The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) aims to; “enable children to build on prior knowledge” (p.12), embrace diversity, and support “their ability to use different languages, gestures and tools to communicate with people” (p.13). Similarly, included in Aistear’s (2009) principles of early learning and development are recognition of the child’s uniqueness, equality and diversity, and family and community (p.7). This appreciation for children as naturally social beings allows educators to create a learning environment where literacy is viewed as meaningful and language is understood as communication within a variety of social, cultural and personal contexts (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000).

Despite the principles of the curriculum documents, there is still concern regarding practices within schools. Pahl and Burnett (2013), however, worry that literacy practices favoured by schools are still constructed as a set of skills that reflect certain cultures and social contexts more than others. A disconnect between the curriculum rationales and literacy practices actually occurring in schools may be due to issues related to constrained and
unconstrained skills, which cannot be discussed without first examining reading instruction in early childhood and the concept of emergent literacy.

**Reading Instruction in Early Childhood**

Reading instruction is a much-debated topic, but it can be agreed that the main goal is to teach children to become independent readers (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000). In order to achieve this goal, numerous teaching methods and learning techniques have been explored for effectiveness. For many years, the concept of “reading readiness” was endorsed as best practice in early years reading instruction. This approach to literacy instruction is based upon maturation theory from the 1920s and Arnold Gesell’s argument that children’s development follows a predictable sequence dependent upon biological maturation (Saracho, 2017). Much like Street’s (1984) autonomous view of literacy, it takes an isolated, skills-based approach to reading instruction. However, reading readiness has come up against much criticism by those who express apprehension about the effects of skills-based approaches on children’s love of learning and their holistic development due to the lack of “experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts” (Giles & Tunks, 2014, p. 3). In light of this, the concept of emergent literacy began to grow in popularity.

**Emergent literacy.** The term emergent literacy was first coined by Marie Clay, a New Zealand researcher, in 1966 (Johnson, 1999). Justice and Pullen (2003) define emergent literacy as “the knowledge and skills in reading and writing that young children obtain prior to achieving conventional literacy [that] provide a foundation for higher-level literacy skills” (p.99). This challenged the previous notion of reading readiness with Clay believing that studies did not show any outcome that would suggest that “contact with printed language forms should be withheld from a five-year-old on the ground that he is immature” (Clay, 1975, p.24). She was of the opinion that children’s histories, knowledge and pre-school
experiences of literacy helped them to construct complex processing systems which allow for the development of formal literacy skills (Doyle, 2013).

Strong associations have been identified between children’s early literacy development and their success in literacy in later years (Justice & Pullen, 2003) which has led to realisation that “the early years are too precious to get it wrong” (Dickinson, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, Neuman, & Burchinal, 2009, p.4). It is imperative, therefore, that children’s developing literacy skills are built upon and strengthened through Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in order to provide them with a strong literacy foundation for the future (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Studies of emergent literacy learning have determined five insights into how young children learn to read and write (Strickland, 1990). This has had an impact on current teaching and learning in Ireland with the emergent literacy approach reflected in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the Primary Language Curriculum (2019), evident in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Emergent Literacy Philosophy and Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learning to read and write:</td>
<td>holistic learning and development; active learning; play and hands on experiences; relevant and meaningful experiences; communication and language; the learning environment.</td>
<td>“language knowledge and experiences that children bring to school...enables children to make and explore language meaning” (2019, p.4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>begins early in life and is ongoing;</td>
<td></td>
<td>“the Progression Continua reflect the reality that children come to school with different language experiences, are at different places in their language-learning journey and develop at different rates” (2015, p.12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are interrelated processes that develop simultaneously;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>requires active participation in activities that have meaning in the child’s daily life;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>involves interactions with responsive others;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is particularly enhanced by shared book experiences.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The impact of emergent literacy theory, has led to new and innovative approaches to literacy and language learning in the early years. It has also given rise to further recognition of the importance of holism in literacy instruction, bringing awareness to the necessity for balance between two different sets of skills known as constrained and unconstrained literacy skills.

**Constrained and Unconstrained Literacy Skills**

Paris (2005) categorised the skills associated with literacy learning as being constrained or unconstrained and proposed that research into reading should be reconsidered due to the differences he identified in the “developmental trajectory of reading skills” (p.184). These differences are concerned with the age at which the skill is begun to be taught or understood, the length of time it takes to acquire the skill, and levels of mastery of the skill. Paris argues that literacy policies based on the five essential skills for reading development, as identified in the National Reading Panel Report (NICHHD, 2000), has led to an increase in assessment and instruction of alphabetics, phonemic awareness, and fluency, while less time and attention is given to vocabulary and comprehension. This research is limited in that it was conducted within the United States, however, in an Irish context, a similar response to literacy instruction was provoked by the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) which has also been criticised for its “narrow conceptualisation of literacy” (Murphy, 2017, p.5). This is based on the links made between skills such as phonemic awareness and alphabetics as strong predictors of later reading achievement (NICHHD, 2000) however; Paris suggests that this research needs to be re-examined to allow for the variation in the acquisition of constrained and unconstrained skills.

Paris places reading skills on a continuum ranging from most constrained to least constrained and categorises these constraints on reading development and the analysis of the literacy skill as being conceptual, developmental and methodological in nature. Table 2.2
details these constraints, before literature related to constrained and unconstrained literacy skills is examined further.

Table 2.2

Constraints on Reading Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual</th>
<th>Developmental</th>
<th>Methodological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finite number of elements</td>
<td>Unequal learning of concepts</td>
<td>Methods used to collect data on the skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be acquired quickly</td>
<td>Mastery of the skill developing from non-existent to automatic</td>
<td>Co-dependency between skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent occurrence</td>
<td>Universality of the skill once mastered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited external influences</td>
<td>Co-dependence with other skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples | |
26 letters in the alphabet | Some letters learned more quickly than others | Assessment tasks with narrow ranges |
Alphabetic principle, phonics, print concepts | Learning the alphabet or phonemes | Correlations between reading fluency and comprehension |
Sight words | English speakers have the same print concepts | |
Doesn’t necessarily rely on background knowledge | Phonological awareness is a necessary pre-cursor to blending and segmenting phonemes | |


Constrained literacy skills. The Primary Language Curriculum states that constrained literacy skills are “fundamental to children’s subsequent learning and development...can be achieved over a particular period of time and...enable children to engage in the further development of their literacy” (NCCA, 2019, p. 18). Learning outcomes related to constrained literacy skills in this curriculum include conventions of print; phonics, word
recognition and word study; phonological and phonemic awareness; and fluency. Mastery of these skills allows children to engage in the practice of reading and writing and is necessary, but not sufficient for full literacy development (Paris, 2005). Stahl (2011, p.56) claims that constrained skills should be taught in an explicit and systematic way to ensure that “the largest portion of the literacy block can be allocated to the more complex unconstrained abilities”.

However, constrained skills are consistently being given priority in the early years with unconstrained skills such as vocabulary and comprehension receiving far less attention in early reading assessments than the constrained skills of phonemic awareness and concepts of print (Paris, 2005). Attempting to explain this, Snow and Matthews (2016) suggest that constrained skills are less complex to teach in a short period of time than unconstrained skills, as well as easier to measure and less influenced by social class. It may also be important to note that constrained skills show immediate, often positive, results for teachers in early years and infant classrooms, and these educators do not see the older students struggling when decoding is not enough.

Paris concedes that mastery of constrained skills is hugely important but argues that the advantages of this may only last for a limited time, in what he calls “temporary acceleration of mastered skills” (2005, p.199). He worries that when policies place an overemphasis on constrained skills in the early years this results the exclusion of unconstrained skills, despite research that has highlighted the importance of unconstrained skills, particularly in high poverty contexts (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2010). These unconstrained literacy skills will now be explored in further detail.

**Unconstrained literacy skills.** According to the Primary Language Curriculum, development of unconstrained literacy skills allows children to “engage with and create
increasingly-complex oral and written texts” (NCCA, 2019, p. 18). These skills span across all elements of the language curriculum, contributing to approximately 74% of the learning outcomes. This emphasises the importance of unconstrained skills within literacy education, but also highlights the disparity between the curriculum values based on current literacy research and the reality of classroom practices, with more time spent on constrained skills in the early years, as discussed in the last section. Snow and Matthews (2016) discuss the importance of unconstrained literacy skills and declare that these skills are particularly significant for children’s “long term literary success” (p. 57). They discuss the connection between vocabulary development and accurate decoding of words by second grade. Among older students, vocabulary and world knowledge are strong predictors of reading comprehension as the child must be able to “integrate new information encountered in the text with relevant background information” in order to create understanding (p. 59).

Furthermore, research from a study using the World of Words vocabulary intervention (Neuman, Newman, & Dwyer, 2011) found that when the teaching of the unconstrained skill of vocabulary is embedded within world knowledge, another unconstrained skill, learning in both domains is accelerated (Snow & Matthews, 2016).

Across the research, specific lists of unconstrained literacy skills differ. Snow and Matthews (2016) divide unconstrained skills into language-based and knowledge-based skills. The skills related to language are, according to them, vocabulary, grammar, story structure, telling narratives, giving descriptions and engaging in pretend play. In their second category, they include topic-specific knowledge, information seeking and requesting explanations. Stahl (2011), places literacy skills on a continuum with vocabulary and comprehension listed as the most unconstrained. For the purposes of this research, the skills chosen will be based in an Irish context, with oral language, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension classified as being unconstrained in the National Council for Curriculum and
AN UNCONSTRAINED LITERACY SKILLS INTERVENTION

Assessment (NCCA) research report on Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (Kennedy et al., 2012). The following sections will examine the centrality of these particular literacy skills in emergent reading development.

**Oral language and vocabulary knowledge.** “Oral language is the child’s first, most important, and most frequently used structured medium of communication” (Cregan, 1998, p.7). Each child arriving into Junior Infants comes to school with different experiences which will have shaped their language development. Hart and Risley (1995) found that children coming from disadvantaged homes often had significantly less vocabulary than their privileged counterparts who were provided with more opportunities to engage in conversations. In addition to this, children who speak English as a second language are at risk of falling behind their peers in academic tasks if their English vocabulary knowledge is limited (Graves, 2009). Such variations within the classroom present the need to teach specific and targeted oral language and vocabulary lessons.

Language plays an essential role in children’s intellectual, social, and emotional development (Wells, 2009). Vygotsky claimed that language can transform “not only intellectual development of the child, but also the formation of his character, emotions and personality as a whole depend directly on speech” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 259). Children need the opportunity to engage in shared conversations with adults and with their peers in order to practise and develop their oral and aural communication skills, which can then be enhanced by reading and writing skills over time (NCCA, 2009). Language and vocabulary knowledge are central to children’s comprehension of texts as, otherwise, decoding of the words in a sentence is “nothing beyond a string of seemingly disconnected sounds” (Dickinson, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010, p. 305). Furthermore, the long-term effects of language on reading skills have been found to be substantial, with connections made between language
experiences in infancy and early childhood relating to reading ability in later school years (Dickinson, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010).

Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2010) compiled a list of six key principles of language learning which are outlined in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Principles of Language Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>The frequency which a child hears new vocabulary has an impact on their language development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Based upon the “principle of relevance” (Bloom, 2000), this recognises the importance of interest in the enhancement of language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Effective language learning occurs within interactive and responsive contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful</td>
<td>Meaningful contexts are relevant in language learning, evident in the way in which children use language in their play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse examples</td>
<td>Children learn the meaning of words in different ways, such as quick explanations for new words in context (Weizman &amp; Snow, 2001) and explicit teaching of decontextualized language from storybooks (Biemiller, 2006; Elley, 1989; Penno, Wilkinson, &amp; Moore, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal development of vocabulary and grammar</td>
<td>Vocabulary and grammar occur in a reciprocal process and both are considered necessary in the development of proficient oral language (NICHD ECCRN, 2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) classify vocabulary into three tiers, which should be explicitly taught to children. Tier one vocabulary consists of the basic words which are commonly known to most children (chair, happy). Tier two words are those which appear regularly in texts but may not be used every day (lonely, fortunate). Tier three words are subject specific and related to a specialised topic (peninsula, staccato). Although vocabulary from all tiers are important, McKeown and Beck (2004) suggest that words in the second tier have the largest impact on verbal functioning, and therefore instruction in this area may be most worthwhile.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) place great emphasis on oral language and vocabulary in the infant classes. In Aistear’s theme of communicating, two aims are concerned with language: “children will use language” and “children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language” (NCCA, 2009, p. 35). The strand of oral language in the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) has 16 specific learning outcomes for stage 1 (Junior and Senior Infants). In order to achieve these aims and outcomes, it is recommended that the five components of effective oral language instruction are considered: develop listening and speaking skills; teach a variety of spoken texts; create a language learning environment; teach and extend vocabulary and conceptual knowledge; and promote auditory memory (PDST, n.d.). Furthermore, based on the research discussed previously (Snow & Matthews, 2016); it can also be recommended that vocabulary instruction should be taught within the domain of world knowledge, an aspect of comprehension relevant to this research.

**Comprehension.** Comprehension, as it relates to literacy, can be described as constructing meaning through the activation of prior knowledge in order to connect statements and ideas to create a mental representation of a text (NEPS, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2012; Kendeou et al.,
The texts can include traditional books and digital, screen-based print (Gambrell, Block & Pressley, 2002). Research has found that comprehension involves much more than just word identification skills and fluent reading. Effective comprehenders use a variety of strategies to help them interpret a text, such as determining the important ideas, asking questions, creating images of the text, drawing inferences from the text, synthesising what has been read, and using fix-up strategies to repair a breakdown in comprehension (Keene, 2002).

Good readers must also have a large, ever-growing, bank of prior knowledge in a wide variety of topics; which can be activated before, during and after reading, in order to assist in their reading comprehension. The more prior knowledge that they have acquired; the easier they will be able to access and interpret the text. This concept of expanding world knowledge is central to comprehension development (Pardo, 2004). It has been suggested that world knowledge can be advanced through the use of information texts (Duke, 2003) as they include domain-specific, tier three vocabulary, and are used to convey concepts related to a particular topic area (Kennedy et al., 2012), however, studies have shown a distinct lack of exposure to informational texts in early grade classrooms (Duke, 2000).

Many writers have raised questions about the place of motivation in reading comprehension (Guthrie et al., 1996; Morrow & Gambrell, 1998; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Malloy, Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Gambrell (2001) found that possessing the desire to read was a key factor in the development of comprehension skills. This is echoed by further research which provides evidence to demonstrate that reading motivation and reading skill influence each other (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). Furthermore, motivation to read means that an individual will read more; this leads to greater knowledge of the world and a wider vocabulary which, in turn, results in better comprehension (Guthrie et al., 1996; Morrow & Gambrell, 1998). Interesting and appropriate texts from both narrative and expository genres
can encourage motivation and engagement in reading tasks (Gambrell, Block & Pressley, 2002).

Sweet and Snow (2002) assert that comprehension consists of three elements; the reader, the text, and the activity. It is the interplay between these elements within a sociocultural context that allows for effective comprehension. Capacities within the reader include cognitive abilities, motivation, vocabulary and domain-specific knowledge, memory, inferencing and more. Fluency and appropriate instruction are also factors connected to the reader. The second element involves the features of the text, whether that be electronic or traditional print-based. The characteristics of the text, including vocabulary, linguistic style and genre, must match the reader’s knowledge for full comprehension to occur. Finally, the activity relates to the purpose behind the reading. Sweet and Snow (2002) give the example of a student failing to see the relevance of an assignment and therefore reading without purpose leading to incomplete comprehension.

Learning outcomes relating to comprehension can be found throughout all strands of the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019). Oral Language outcomes include demonstration of understanding; requests, questions and interactions; retelling and elaboration; and description, prediction and reflection. In the strand of reading, purpose, genre and voice; response and author’s intent; and comprehension are all examined under the element of exploring and using. Similarly, purpose, genre and voice, and response and author’s intent are explored through the strand of writing. Within the Aistear curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) comprehension is expressed through aims such as “children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language” (p. 35) and “children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning....and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers” (p. 44). The idea of
children as thinkers and agents in their own learning is central to the concept of critical literacy and can be viewed as a component of comprehension.

**Critical literacy.** Critical literacy is a socio-cultural orientation to literacy concerned with the interplay between language use and social practice and involves analysing and critiquing texts in order to uncover power relations and social justice issues (Farrar & Stone, 2019; Anwaruddin, 2016; Janks, 2017; Janks, 2014; Vasquez, Janks & Comber, 2019). Paulo Freire (1972) played a central role in establishing the idea that teachers were in a position to help people understand how the organisation of the world benefited the privileged (Comber, 2015). Australian sociologist R. W. Connell has also played a large part in bringing critical literacy into education, arguing that social justice is primarily concerned with working in “the interests of the least advantaged” (Connell, 1993, p. 43 in Comber, 2015) and therefore curricula needs to be interrogated in order to establish whose knowledge is being valued (Comber, 2015).

Today, it could be argued that critical literacy is more relevant than ever. Children must learn to interpret the world through a huge variety of multimodal literacies, particularly in the evaluation of online information (Mackey & Shane, 2013; Dwyer, 2013). Online readers are faced with “new complexities...as the Internet is an un-vetted open network where anyone can publish any information” (Dwyer, 2013, p. 348). In a world where fake news, media and digital technology play a central role in children’s lives, Stevens and Bean (2002) contend that critical literacy must become part of any basic definition of comprehension, rather than being regarded as a higher-order thinking skill that comes after decoding instruction.

Janks (2014) describes what the teacher can do to encourage the dispositions and practices necessary to view texts with a critical approach:

1. Find an issue relevant to the learners’ lives;
2. Consider what the learner needs to know and where they will find the information;
3. Explore how the problem is portrayed in texts;
4. Examine who is disadvantaged and who benefits from the issue; and
5. Conceive possibilities for making a change.

In addition to this, it is advised that to be critical in teaching, educators must: use and value learners’ own languages; use authentic texts as a stimulus for broader critical discussions; and develop learners’ abilities in formal, dominant language, while openly recognising the contexts and values associated with it (Scottish Executive, 2000).

Furthermore, Comber (2015) articulates that critical literacy pedagogy should: reconstruct students’ position to researchers for language; respect student resistance and explore minority culture literary content; and re-evaluate texts used in the classroom and public domains. A critical stance such as this, however, is a risky one for educators to take and for governments to endorse due to its inherently political nature and such may be the reason for its apparent undervalue within literacy curricula (Farrar and Stone, 2019).

This being said, it would appear that criticality within language and literacy is becoming a larger feature in recent curriculum documents. The rationale backing the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) includes teaching children to “understand, interpret, construct meaning and critically appreciate the communication of others” (p.6) and aims to “encourage children to engage personally with and think critically about a broad range of spoken, gesticulated, written and multimodal texts” (p.13). Specific learning outcomes target the ability to ask questions and consider the author’s intent. The importance of developing critical thinking skills from an early age, though not specifically literacy-related, is also endorsed in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) which includes learning goals including the development of “higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying”
(p.44). These documents recognise the need to equip young people with the skills necessary to help them navigate through an increasingly complex world.

The literature review, up to this point, has outlined the necessity for developmentally appropriate instruction of unconstrained literacy skills in the early years. The dialogic reading approach is one teaching method that appears to address this need.

**Dialogic Reading**

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children produced a joint position statement on developmentally appropriate practices in reading and writing, which specifies the importance of reading aloud to children as an activity that builds understandings and skills necessary for future reading success (IRA & NAEYC; 1998). Vacca, Vacca and Gove (2000) outline some of the benefits that interactive read alouds or shared reading provide, such as creating a love of books, development of story schema, learning about authors and illustrators, relating speech to print, print-related concepts and directionality. Dialogic reading goes further than this in that it encourages active participation in the read aloud by allowing for continuous dialogue between the child and the adult using a series of prompts and questions (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

Dialogic reading situates itself within socio-cultural and language-based theories of learning, such as those of Vygotsky and Halliday (as cited in Wells, 1999), who both are of the opinion that language is a “powerful semiotic tool” which allows learning to take place when users interact and share experiences and knowledge (Wells, 1999, p. 35). The learning theory of social constructivism is also relevant to dialogic reading; a theory which is based on the idea that learning is actively constructed by building on prior knowledge and is further based on importance of the environment and interactions, “while not underestimating the role of individual cognitive structures in learning” (Schcolnik, Kol & Abaranel, 2006, p. 13).
Dialogic reading is currently being endorsed by the National Educational Psychological Service as good practice in early years’ literacy instruction (NEPS, 2016). In addition to this, the Primary Language Curriculum (2019, p. 8) states that children learn language through interactions and is “co-constructed between the adult and the child” and Aistear (2015, p.35) specifies that children should use language to “interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation”. Although neither of these documents specifically mentions this reading strategy, it is clear that the values they espouse are harmonious with those of dialogic reading.

Hargrave and Senechal (2000) posit the three central principles of dialogic reading to be:

- children actively participating;
- an adult providing feedback; and
- scaffolding children’s responses by evaluating and expanding on what they say.

In doing this, the children practise their oral language skills and achieve higher levels of understanding during the discussion (Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998). The good practice guide for a balanced approach to literacy in the early years, compiled by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS, 2016), summarises the processes that are involved in dialogic reading, such as the PEER technique as seen in Table 2.4.
Table 2.4

PEER Reading Technique

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEER</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prompt</td>
<td>Prompt the child to say something about the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Evaluate the child’s response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand</td>
<td>Expand on the child’s response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>Repeat the prompt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Adapted from “A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years”, by the National Educational Psychological Service, 2016, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills Resources and Publications. Copyright 2016 by Department of Education and Skills.*

By using this technique, the adult should eventually read less and listen more while the child talks in more depth about the text and relates it to their own experiences. In this way, it could be proposed that dialogic reading is an “ideological literacy practice”, as it allows for a shift in the power relations between the child and adult (Street, 2003). The type of prompts that the adult employs are organised into the acronym CROWD, detailed in Table 2.5.
Table 2.5

*CROWD Organisation of Prompts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CROWD</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
<td>The adult starts a sentence and the child completes it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Recalling information about a previously read book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended</td>
<td>Questions or statements that cannot be answered with yes or no, prompting the child to think deeper or express an opinion with a more detailed response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wh-</td>
<td>Who, what, where, when, why questions based on the pictures in the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td>Prompting the child to compare the information or storyline in the book with their own life experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years”, by the National Educational Psychological Service, 2016, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills Resources and Publications. Copyright 2016 by Department of Education and Skills.

Dialogic reading, using the aforementioned techniques, has shown to produce a greater impact on oral language skills on children from middle- to upper-income families compared with standard read alouds (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1988); while studies conducted with children from low-income families produced even more substantial developments in language after a six-week dialogical reading intervention (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994). Brannon and Dauksas (2014) also reported increased expressive vocabulary scores in English language learners when the dialogic reading approach was used. Furthermore, the discussions that occur as a result of
repeated readings allow for direct instruction and incidental learning of contextually relevant vocabulary (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). In addition to this, McKeown and Beck (2003) discovered that children’s comprehension is affected by the questions asked of them. The structured questioning of dialogic reading provides adults with a framework from which they can make the text meaningful to the child and thereby increasing comprehension (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

There have been numerous studies related to the dialogic reading of narrative, fiction stories for children (Towson, Gallagher & Bingham, 2016; Lever & Senechal, 2011; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000), but there is significantly less research involving the use of non-fiction texts. Indeed, there has been some inquiry into standard read alouds using expository texts (Bingham, Venuto, Carey & Moore, 2018; Bortinem, 2008; Delo, 2008); however, Marra’s (2014) research differs as it is one of the few studies which specifically implements a dialogic reading approach to non-fiction and compares vocabulary gains with dialogic discussion centred around fiction texts. Marra’s six-week intervention resulted in some positive results in favour of non-fiction, but with a sample of only 40 children, more investigation is needed to support her findings. This brings to attention the necessity for this study and the inclusion of non-fiction reading in a balanced early years’ literacy framework.

**Non-Fiction Texts**

Mallett (2010, p. 219) defines non-fiction or information texts as literature that “informs or instructs about a subject, an event or a set of ideas” which can come in a variety of different formats. Aistear (2009, p. 43) states that “children have an innate drive to know their world” and the information contained in non-fiction texts can both fuel and satisfy this drive. The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) makes regular reference to the term “genre” and establishes that this includes all forms of written and oral texts, recognising the place for
the non-fiction language styles such as; explanation, information, instruction, and persuasion; within literacy instruction in primary education in Ireland. This is also in accordance with the balanced approach that is recommended for literacy practice (NEPS, 2016). The attention now being given to non-fiction may have arisen in light of research which has shown that young children often have little experience with non-fiction text with early childhood educators preferring the use of narrative stories for their read aloud sessions (Yopp and Yopp, 2012). Such limited exposure places children at a distinct disadvantage when they are required to read and comprehend information texts (NEPS, 2016), both in standardised testing and in real life situations.

Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2003, p. 2) have identified, what they refer to as, three “unsupported beliefs” that may account for the lack of attention given to non-fiction texts. The first claim they make is that information texts are often perceived to be too difficult for young children. They make this statement on the basis of the work of certain researchers and theorists (Egan, 1986; Moffett, 1968) as well as making the inference based on the choice of texts made by teachers and educational publishers. Their counter-arguments to this, however, lie in the lack of research to back up these allegations, as well as some contradictory evidence (Duke & Kays, 1998; Hicks, 1995).

The second belief is that children of this age do not like informational texts. Disproving this, Kletzein and Szabo’s (1998) study found that the participating children chose information books at least as often as fiction stories, with boys in particular opting for the non-fiction option.

Finally, the third unsupported belief is that young children should “first learn to read and then...read to learn” (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003, p. 2). The unconstrained skills theory that this study is based on opposes this, arguing that world knowledge is a vital part of the
reading process and should be taught alongside constrained skills such as alphabetics, phonemic awareness and fluency (Paris, 2005; Snow & Matthews, 2016).

Many researchers have noted the importance of the inclusion of non-fiction texts in the early years (Yopp & Yopp, 2000; Duke, 2003, Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). The new information gained from non-fiction provides background knowledge of the world that is essential for children’s comprehension of texts as it helps readers to make sense of word combinations, infer meaning and understand literary devices such as irony and metaphor (Hirsch, 2003). Furthermore, informational text contains specialised, domain-specific vocabulary and it has been suggested that vocabulary development can be greater using informational text as there may be more discussion and interaction with the content (Duke, 2003). This also suggests that dialogic reading is a particularly appropriate strategy to utilise with non-fiction themed texts.

Expository texts can provide children with high interest material that may be useful in encouraging reluctant readers, as they can “capitalise on children’s interests and curiosities, provide opportunities for children to apply and further develop areas of expertise, and provide valuable links to children’s home literacy experiences” (Duke, 2000, p. 202). Non-fiction builds on children’s natural curiosity (Duke, 2003) and this motivation factor also assists with comprehension, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

In a similar fashion, these texts can be a way to acknowledge children’s funds of knowledge in the classroom by reading about content familiar to them, such as farming, vehicles or cooking (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Additionally, non-fiction can be used to demonstrate value for children’s home literacies if a multi-modal perspective is taken (Pahl & Burnett, 2013). This can also be extended to include digital literacies, which is
particularly relevant in the case of informational text as much information is now found online (Dwyer, 2013).

Finally, the text features evident within the non-fiction genre differ greatly from the narrative style of fiction text, which usually contains characters, a setting and a plot. In contrast to this, information text makes use of graphs, table of contents and headings (Kennedy et al., 2012) and challenges young readers to rethink sentence structures and verb constructions (Yopp and Yopp, 2000).

It is evident that non-fiction should have a place within early years’ settings, but Mallett (2010) urges teachers to investigate the quality of the texts used. She mentions the design, topic, language and illustrations as some elements to consider when choosing information texts. In addition to this, Mallett believes that “a questioning, speculative approach” and enthusiasm for the subject are necessary for the effective use of non-fiction in the classroom (p. 247). Mallett also discusses the different ways in which texts types can be classified. She utilises Alison Littlefair’s (1991) idea of a register for each text, which includes “what is written about (field), who is being addressed (mode) and how the message is given” (Mallett, 2010, p. 244). The concept of genres of text are mentioned, but critics of genre theory argue that this is too rigid for a society that is constantly changing, particularly with the development of digital technology, advocating instead for more value to be placed on multimodal texts (Bearne, et al., 2004). Acknowledging this, an analysis of the place of digital versus traditional, paper-based, texts in early years reading education will be considered in the following section.

**Digital versus paper-based texts.** In recent years, there has been much research dedicated to the area of digital literacy and the use of ICT in literacy learning. Alvermann (2008, p. 9) describes online literacies as “socially mediated ways of generating meaningful
content through multiple modes of representation...to produce digital texts...for dissemination in cyberspace”. In a research report conducted by Ofcom (2019), the findings detailed the prevalence of digital media in young children’s lives with statistics in the 5-7 age range, such as:

- 42% have their own tablet
- 82% go online for approximately 9.5 hours per week
- 70% use YouTube.

These numbers increase with age, according to this report, and even the youngest age category (3-4 years) was found to spend significant amounts of time on digital and online formats. Nixon and Hateley (2013) also examined the modern phenomenon that links children’s play and early learning with digital media, citing Leapfrog and Little Golden Books as examples of digital literacy resources targeting the early years. There certainly appears to be a case for the use of digital media in the classroom in order to create a link between home and school cultures (Nixon & Hateley, 2013) and follow Street’s (1984) ideological model of literacy.

However, there are also viewpoints that question the value of digital literacies, the degree to which they should be included in schooling and express concern regarding the undermining of existing forms of literacy (Green & Beavis, 2013). There is also the argument that many children around the world still do not have internet access, with “clear divisions based on class, race, gender, age and geography” (Waller, 2008, p. 187). Furthermore, the reading skills necessary for screen-based texts, such as; differing screen layouts, font styles, following hyperlinks, and using a cursor and keyboard; are significantly more complex than the “conventional left to right, top to bottom, front to back sequence of traditional English books” Flewitt (2008, p. 131). This may suggest that, in order for children to be able to fully
engage with digital texts, they must first acquire the basic, fundamental skills necessary for reading a traditional text. In addition to this, other arguments opposing the use of digital texts include:

- the appropriateness of ICT in early childhood motor development (Haugland, 2000; Hohmann, 1998; Yelland, 1999);
- some evidence of increased comprehension pointing in favour of paper-based texts (Singer & Alexander, 2017); and
- preferences of paper-based texts among certain groups (Johnston & Salaz, 2018; Millar & Schrier, 2015).

The contrasting viewpoints in this area suggest that no one opinion is correct; but rather, educators should endeavour, when possible, to include both paper-based and digital-texts in their teaching; and provide effective reading instruction that addresses both constrained and unconstrained literacy skills.

**Conclusion**

This review of literature has critically examined the key components relevant to this study; socio-cultural theory, emergent literacy, unconstrained literacy skills theory, dialogic reading and the use of non-fiction texts in the early years. First, socio-cultural theory was discussed; the understanding that children enter school with varied backgrounds and experiences, and this should be acknowledged and utilised in their education. The literature review then considered the concept of the agentic child and discussed the notion of viewing literacy as a social practice, rather than an isolated set of skills relevant to one culture.

Next, emergent literacy theory was analysed. By taking an emergentist position on literacy and language acquisition, this study will allow for an inclusive theoretical framework for language learning within a classroom population of children with diverse cultural and
linguistic backgrounds and developmental differences (Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer, 2012).

The next section examined constrained and unconstrained literacy skills, finding that more time is spent on constrained skills, such as phonemic awareness and alphabeticics in the early years. Although these skills are necessary and important, research has found that they are not sufficient for long term literacy success and it may be beneficial to spend more time on unconstrained skills in the early years. The unconstrained skills of oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and critical literacy were then explored.

Following this, dialogic reading was found to be an appropriate strategy for developing vocabulary and comprehension. However, there was little research found using non-fiction texts with this style of reading with expository texts under-used in general in early years settings, despite advantages such as development of world knowledge, specialised vocabulary and capitalising on children’s interests and funds of knowledge. This study aims to address the need for more research regarding dialogic reading of non-fiction texts. A comparison of the literature on screen and print based texts was reviewed, arriving at the conclusion that a balanced approach to literacy would include both styles throughout schooling.

This critical review of literature has informed the development of the research questions guiding this study and the methodology that was implemented to answer these questions, which will be presented in chapter three.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify the research methodology used to answer the research questions. It begins with a statement of the problem and discusses the objectives of the study. This is followed by an examination of research paradigms and an explanation of the decision to utilise the action research approach. The chapter then describes the design, procedures, participants and instruments. It also discusses how the data was analysed and explains the ways in which ethics, validity, reliability and reflexivity were considered. It concludes with a statement of the limitations of the study and a brief summary of the chapter.

Statement of the Problem and Study Objectives

The new Primary Language Curriculum (2019) has brought the topic of language and literacy to the forefront of many discussions in Irish primary schools. This updated curriculum reflects the “significant changes in Irish society” (NCCA, 2019, p. 4). In infant classes, this curriculum is run in conjunction with Aistear: the early childhood curriculum framework (2009). Acknowledging these documents, the researcher considered questions regarding literacy practices in the infant classes in her school in light of her understanding of emergent literacy theory (Strickland, 1990) and unconstrained literacy skills theory (Paris, 2005). A strong emphasis is placed on constrained skills in Junior and Senior Infants in her school with significantly less time dedicated to unconstrained skills. Furthermore, many studies have shown the distinct lack of experience young children have with non-fiction texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2012). This justifies the need for more research in these areas. This researcher attempts to address both of these issues in her own Junior Infant setting by
targeting the unconstrained literacy skills of language and comprehension, using a dialogic reading approach to selected non-fiction texts under specific themed units. Dialogic reading has proven to have a positive impact on these skills when used with fiction texts (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Hargrave & Senechal, 2000), but there is less research regarding its effectiveness when used with non-fiction. Therefore, the research questions directing this study are:

1. How does a dialogic reading approach to non-fiction texts impact the development of unconstrained literacy skills of a group of junior infants in a primary classroom?

2. In what ways are the children's emerging unconstrained literacy skills evident?

In order to answer these questions and develop a suitable research methodology, the paradigm upon which this research is based must first be acknowledged.

**Research Paradigms**

A research paradigm is a way of researching phenomena based on a shared set of principles (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). Across the literature, lists of research paradigms vary (Creswell, 2013; Lukenchuk, 2013, Pring, 2015), however Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) suggest that most paradigms can be grouped into the four main categories of positivist, interpretivist, critical, and pragmatic paradigms. Each comprises four elements; epistemology, ontology, methodology and axiology; which refer to the “basic assumptions, beliefs, norms and values that each paradigm holds” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 27). Table 3.1 summarises the elements of the paradigms.
Table 3.1

*Research Paradigms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Axiology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivist</td>
<td>Objectivist</td>
<td>Naïve realism</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Beneficence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Subjectivist</td>
<td>Relativist</td>
<td>Naturalist</td>
<td>Balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Historical Realism</td>
<td>Dialogic</td>
<td>Respectful of Cultural Norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Non-Singular Reality</td>
<td>Mixed Methods</td>
<td>Value-Laden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Positivism emphasises observational evidence and the scientific method however, interpretivists argue the need for direct experiences with people in order to construct the social reality (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). Instead of constructing knowledge about the social world, critical theory seeks to shed light on inequality (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Pragmatists adopt a worldview that allows for the use of whichever approaches are best suited to the purpose of the study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The research paradigm for this study is both interpretivist and pragmatic, leading to the choice of action research as an appropriate method of research design.

*Appropriateness of Design*

Cohen, Mannion and Morrison describe research design as a “strategy that is drawn up for organising the research and making it practicable, so that research questions can be answered based on evidence and warrants” (2018, p. 173). Before settling on a research
design, the researcher considered questions, such as: “what is the purpose of this research?”,
“What are the constraints and timescales that may be limiting to the research?”,
“What ethical issues might be faced?”, and “who would be interested in this research?”.

The focus of the research involved the teaching of unconstrained literacy skills in the early years of primary school, having noticed a gap in this area of the researcher’s professional experience, and finding support for this within the literature. This could have led to varying research designs. Interviews could have examined how other teachers view and teach these skills; however, in this instance, it was felt that a more useful study would involve exploring how unconstrained literacy skills could be taught in a developmentally appropriate context. A quasi-experimental study was also an option as there was another Junior Infant class in the researcher’s school; however, variables, such as teacher characteristics and class demographics, may have impacted on the true picture of any results.

Finally, there was lengthy deliberation between action research and a case study, both of which would have been able to address the research questions in a practical way. Yin (2009) states that “case study research involves study in a real life context or setting” (p. 9) and uses detailed, in-depth evidence sources. A vital part missing from this, however, was practitioner-researcher reflections. This was hugely important, knowing that an intervention such as this would need to be evaluated and adjusted throughout the process. This missing piece of the puzzle led to action research as the final decision for the research design.

**Action Research**

Roberts-Holmes (2018, p. 91) describes action research as being “concerned with practically changing an issue within the working environment to improve a researcher’s and their colleagues’ knowledge and practice”. For this research, the issue was the perceived difficulty of teaching unconstrained literacy skills in the early years. To address this problem,
an intervention was designed to target these skills through the dialogic reading of non-fiction texts. Therefore, the research design is intended to be classroom-based empirical action research serving as “a matter of record-keeping and accumulating experiences in day-to-day work” (Marrow as cited in Adelman, 1993, p. 14).

In action research, there are certain agreed upon goals of practice, which are considered as standard, including:

- the generation of new knowledge;
- the achievement of action-oriented outcomes;
- the education of both research and participants;
- results that are relevant to the local setting; and
- a sound and appropriate research methodology.

(Herr & Anderson as cited in McNiff, 2014, p. 14)

These key considerations framed the design of this study, and the problem-centred and mean-making ideals are suited to the pragmatic and interpretative paradigms that underpin this research (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018).

**Research Design and Procedure**

Lewin classified the action research process into four main stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting; which operate in a cyclical manner with one four step cycle following another (as cited in Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). In the current study, two phases of the cycle were implanted. Figure 3.1 outlines how the staged cycle was conducted for this research during the intervention.
Stage 1 of the cycle involved planning the intervention. As agency and motivation are relevant aspects of this research, the children’s interests were considered important. The non-fiction topics chosen were based on a survey of the children’s favourite topics. Serious consideration was given to the inclusion of digital and online texts; however this did not have a place within the final framework that was designed as the researcher felt it was important that the children became familiar with non-fiction paper-based features such as the contents page and glossary, as well as allowing them to explore and handle the books in their free reading and play. Target vocabulary was chosen from the books that were intended to be used (see Appendix A) and some critical questions were identified (see Appendix B).

Stage 2 involved putting the intervention into action by reading two non-fiction texts based on the chosen topic over a number of days, first using a standard read aloud style,
before adopting the dialogic reading style. The steps involved in the intervention process are outlined in Table 3.2

**Table 3.2**

*Steps Involved in the Intervention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step Number</th>
<th>Description of Actions Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The children’s current understandings and vocabulary associated with the topic were assessed by: drawing a picture of what they know about the topic (see Appendix C); a class discussion to answer the critical questions for the particular unit; a vocabulary test (see sample in Appendix D).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In the following days: two non-fiction books based on the topic were read without implementing the PEER and CROWD strategies; the new vocabulary was introduced to the children as they appeared in the books and they were added to a word wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The children were re-assessed in all areas to gain an understanding of the comprehension and vocabulary development at this stage in the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The final days saw the dialogic reading approach to the same two books and more interactive discussion about the vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The assessments were conducted for a final time, including an additional labelling activity (see Appendix E).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The intervention was reviewed and reflected upon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stage 3 can be described as the “study” of action research, which “refers to how an observer observes, describes and explains what the people in those social situations do”
(McNiff, 2014, p. 15). This information was gathered using the data collection instruments, which are described in detail further in this chapter.

Stage 4 was the reflection point in the phase, where the researcher took time to adjust the intervention or aspects of her own practice and reflected on changes that she would make for the next phase. Phase 2 operated in the same staged cycle, ending with reflections for a possible third phase.

The final piece in any piece of action research, according to McNiff (2014), is communication. This involved, using the evidence gathered, considering whether the research questions were answered successfully and if the research could be developed further. The communication process, in this case, also involved dissemination of the results of the study to the parents and the children through a class newsletter.

**Setting and Participants**

This research was carried out in a Junior Infant class in a primary school, located on the outskirts a large town, with children from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds. The class consists of 18 children, 11 of whom are boys, and 7 are girls, all aged between five and six years old. Within this demographic, six of these pupils are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL), which makes up a third of the class. Within this set alone, the language differences are varied from a sufficient amount of English to understand and communicate effectively within the setting, to just a handful of single words used to identify basic needs.

Eight children from this class have been chosen as individual data sets for this study. The sampling strategy for the children chosen was purposive in order to get maximum variation within a small class group. Due to the huge language discrepancies within the class unit, there was a need to create two separate groups, EAL and non-EAL, for comparative purposes.
Within these groups, the oldest and youngest boy and the oldest and youngest girl were selected, leaving a total of four children in each group. However, on closer inspection of these groups, the researcher noticed that the youngest boys in both groups were often absent from school and therefore could not be relied upon to generate sufficient data. For this reason, the second youngest boys were chosen instead.

**Instrumentation**

As previously mentioned, this piece of qualitative action research can be described as fitting within the interpretivist paradigm with a naturalist methodology justifying the context of the classroom setting; while the pragmatic nature of action research allows for the data-collection instruments to be chosen for their “workability” and fitness for purpose (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.36). For this reason, the instruments chosen as relevant for this study were: observations, including a reflective journal; visual media; and researcher-designed tests. The ways in which these instruments were used during the research process are detailed in Table 3.3.
Table 3.3

*Instruments used for data collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>How the instrument was used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td><strong>Audio-recordings</strong>&lt;br&gt;To analyse the children’s language use and indicators of comprehension in discussions during the daily reading sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Researcher-participant</strong>&lt;br&gt;Daily in situ field notes, expanded upon and reflected on in the researcher’s journal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual-Media and Textual</td>
<td><strong>Drawings</strong>&lt;br&gt;Tracking the development of topic-knowledge through drawings before reading about the topic. Details added to it after the standard read alouds and after the dialogic readings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td><strong>Labelling tasks</strong>&lt;br&gt;Summative assessment task given at the end of the unit of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Photographs</strong>&lt;br&gt;Documenting how the children used the non-fiction texts during free reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Flipchart notes</strong>&lt;br&gt;Tracking the development of responses to specific critical questions before readings, after standard read alouds and after dialogic readings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher-designed tests</td>
<td>Tracking the development of targeted expressive and receptive vocabulary before readings, after standard read alouds and after dialogic readings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Observations.** Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2018, p. 542) express that the benefits of observation as a research process include: data generation from “naturally occurring social situations”, which is authentic, rich in detail and “strong on face validity”. The role of this researcher was “participant-as-observer” (Cohen, Mannion & Morisson, 2018, p. 543) and the observation style was semi-structured. The researcher used audio-recordings to assist with her observations, while also being a participant in the data collection process herself.
**Researcher participant.** The researcher kept a reflective journal charting her own personal feelings, experiences and challenges throughout the intervention period in the hope that the reflective journal would help to “clarify ideas and develop linkage between different parts of the research process” (Lamb, 2013, p. 85).

**Visual media and textual documents.** Knowledge can come in many formats and language alone is not always enough to illuminate comprehension. Visual media gives information and can be interpreted to explain something that words are cannot convey (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). For this reason, documents in the form of drawings, labelling tasks, photographs and flipchart notes were utilised a means of “tracking changes and developments” (Bowen, 2009, p.30) in the targeted unconstrained literacy skills.

**Researcher-designed tests.** To track vocabulary development, the researcher designed a non-parametric, criterion-referenced, classroom test meaning that it was tailored for individual circumstances to provide relevant feedback on student progress and achievement is measured against specific success criteria set out in advance (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). In constructing this classroom test, the researcher followed the classical test theory (CTT) which acknowledges that errors related to bias, culture and socio-economic can affect the “true score” of a test (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). The vocabulary test was adapted from the work of Marra (2014). The first five questions for each unit indicate expressive vocabulary while the second five questions demonstrate receptive vocabulary (see Appendix D). Most of the target vocabulary was tier 3, topic-specific, due to the nature of the themed units of study.

**Validity and Reliability**

McNiff (2014, p. 256), when writing about action research, claims that; demonstration of the validity of your knowledge is the aspect of the research that “can have the greatest
influence in the learning of others”. The issue of reliability in qualitative research is referred to as “a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched” (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 270). Table 3.4 describes the ways in which validity and reliability were addressed in the construction of and use of the data-collection instruments.

**Table 3.4**

*Validity and reliability in the data collection instruments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>How validity and reliability was addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Audio-recordings and notes as soon after the event as possible to avoid selective memory. Being aware of the possibility of selective attention and attention deficit by being reflexive. Rich descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual media and textual documents</td>
<td>Age appropriate tasks. The children’s own voice in the description of their drawings rather than sole reliance on researcher’s interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher-designed tests</td>
<td>Short enough for both the concentration span of the children and workability for the teacher-researcher. Scores measured as an improvement in each child’s own progress rather than against each other addresses the issue that each child will have a different starting point related to social or cultural differences. Teacher making note of possible distractions or ambiguities of test items and acknowledging as a limitation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The authenticity of the data and their subsequent analysis are key components of internal validity in qualitative research. Instrument triangulation, the use of more than one data-
collection instrument; helped to ensure credibility in the data gathered. The natural setting of
the children’s classroom in this research was the “principal source of data” (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 247), which allowed for rich, context-bound descriptions. Thick
descriptions can assist readers in determining whether the research is suitable for their setting.

Attempts at reliability during the data analysis stage were established by addressing
Kleven’s considerations on the stability of observations, parallel forms and inter-reliability
(as cited in Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 271).

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is central to action research because the researcher is a participant and a
practitioner. Reflexivity is concerned with the ability to develop a “self-conscious awareness
of the effects that the participants-as-practitioners-and-researchers are having on the research
process” and critical scrutiny on themselves is just as important as scrutinising others (Cohen,
Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 453). For this reason, admittance of the researcher’s
positionality in the context of the research is an essential aspect of reflexivity.

**Researcher positionality.** The researcher has been teaching for seven years and had
the advantage of working with many different types of schools, classes and children, before
getting her permanent position in her current school. This wide variety of experiences has had
a strong impact on her teaching style and her personal philosophy of learning.

The researcher has always had an interest in early childhood education, which led to
her decision to undertake this master’s degree. During this time, the topic of unconstrained
literacy skills immediately sparked the researcher’s interest. Since then, she has been placing
a strong emphasis on unconstrained literacy skills in her own practice as a Junior Infant
teacher. Considering the researcher’s particular interest in this area, combined with her
inexperience as a researcher, critical and reflective thinking during the research process was challenging and should be acknowledged as a limitation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics in all forms of research must take into account the effects that the research may have on the participants; however, when working with children, these issues must be viewed with particular sensitivity (Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p. 59). This research made every attempt to ensure that the children were at no risk of physical or psychological harm, and that the process was designed to be enjoyable and non-stressful by considering their interests and data was collected in a child-friendly, age appropriate manner with due respect given to their voices in data analysis.

**Issues of power relations.** Morrow and Richards claim that the “biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparities in power and status between adults and children (as cited in Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p. 68). The importance of listening to children and hearing their “voices” was a central aspect to this research, as evident in their contributions to the choice of non-fiction topics, suggestions for their own pseudonyms, and their descriptions of their drawings. Demonstrating this form of respect to children is key to an ethical research relationship and may help to alleviate some of the power differences between the teacher-researcher and the children (Roberts-Holmes, 2019).

**Informed consent and assent.** Consent was initially ensured from the school principal for this research to be conducted. Parental consent was then ascertained with each set of parents individually during the parent-teacher meetings. The research was explained and parents were given the detailed letter of consent (see appendix F). They had the option to return the consent form the next day to reduce pressure they may feel to sign in front of the researcher. However none of them wished to do this and agreed to consent during that
meeting. As two of the families do not speak any English at all, an interpreter attended these meetings.

In legal terms, consent from children in the early years is known as assent, as they are “deemed too young to provide informed consent” (Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p. 62). The research was explained in simple terms and the children were shown the recording device that would be used. They completed the child-friendly consent form (see appendix G); however the researcher was conscious that consent from young children needs to be “continuously negotiated” and that they were entitled to remove and reinstate their consent throughout the research process (Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p. 69). To ensure that the children who were learning English as a second language were fully informed; older children in the school, of the same nationality who had a good command of both languages, sat beside the younger children and translated for them.

**Anonymity, confidentiality and non-traceability.** Guarantees of anonymity were not possible in this research due to the researcher’s position in her own setting. Instead, assurances of confidentiality and non-traceability of the participants were given. This involves “not disclosing information from a participant in any way that might identify that individual or that might enable the individual to be traced” (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 130). The children suggested their own pseudonyms for the research so their identities were protected, while maintaining some of their personality and voice when reporting the findings. The data was also stored securely and will be destroyed 13 months after receiving results of the dissertation.

**Dissemination of the research.** Carefully considered feedback of what you have learnt from the research participants is ethically important as it; “demonstrates how their views have
been listened to and acknowledged by the researcher” (Roberts-Holmes, 2018, p. 75). It was decided to create a newsletter which could be accessed on the school blog (see appendix H).

**Data Processing and Analysis**

Data analysis involves interpreting, understanding and making sense of the data gathered (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Qualitative research should adopt both an emic and etic approach to data analysis (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). Emic refers to the subjective style of qualitative research, which can be achieved by catching the subtleties and deeper meanings in the data, including the use of the reflective journal and interpretations of children’s drawings. Etic approaches to research focuses on “objective analysis or external frameworks” (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 648); which is included in this research by the use of a vocabulary test, and providing an acknowledgement of reflexivity to account for a certain lack of objectivity. The scale of the data gathered in this research is outlined in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5**

*Final numbers of data collected*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal entries</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-recordings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary tests</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawings</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling activities</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flipchart entries</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>153</strong></td>
<td><strong>208</strong></td>
<td><strong>361</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The processes involved in the analysis of this data was informed by the practices suggested by Roberts-Holmes (2018, p. 175) and adapted to suit the needs of this research. The following series of steps was undertaken.

1. **Becoming familiar with the data.** Audio-recordings of the reading sessions were transcribed on the day that they occurred in order to retain as much of the non-verbal details as possible. The transcripts were then checked against the audio-recordings in order to ensure no details were omitted, and the researcher examined all other forms of data collected.

2. **Coding.** All forms of data were reduced through an inductive process of coding, following Strauss and Corbin’s sequence of open coding to axial coding to selective coding (as cited in Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018, p. 671). This involved assigning a label to each unit of data, grouping codes which are similar in meaning, and finally creating selective codes based on core categories (see sample codes in Appendix I).

3. **Creating themes.** The coding process led to the generation of themes which consisted of both pre-ordinate (a priori) and responsive (a posteriori) categories (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). The responsive categories emerged from the data itself, while the pre-ordinate categories were guided by the research questions and the literature review. There were also predetermined success criteria that had an influence on the pre-ordinate categories:
   - improvement in vocabulary scores,
   - use of target vocabulary in oral language,
   - increased topic-specific knowledge,
   - more developed responses to critical questions,
   - increased awareness of non-fiction as a genre.
4. **Discussion.** The themes arising from this process were defined and named before being presented and discussed with reference to the relevant literature in chapter four.

**Limitations**

As is the case with the majority of studies, this research is subject to limitations which may affect the quality of the findings or the strength of the researcher’s ability to answer the research questions:

- The small sample size and the context specific nature of action research affect the study’s capacity for generalisation.
- As a novice researcher, the measures used to collect data and subsequent analysis may be subject to error or inaccuracy.
- As previously mentioned, the position as a researcher and teacher lends itself to the potential of insider bias which may have impacted on the objectivity of the research.
- The researcher’s capacity to gather data from children with English as an additional language was limited and the data may not be reflective of what they could comprehend and communicate in their first language. Furthermore, in the case of some EAL children, their descriptive language was minimal and the researcher’s interpretation had to stand alone when analysing their drawings. Validity is limited in these instances.
- The time constraints of this research are also a limitation, as a longer period in the field would allow for more data generation.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research questions. The paradigms that unpin the research were deduced to be interpretivist and pragmatic with action research considered to be the most appropriate method of design.
The specifics of the design, participants and instruments were detailed; followed by a discussion regarding validity and reliability, including the matter of reflexivity. An explanation of the ethical considerations was presented in light of the nature of the teacher-researcher position and the issue of working with young children. Thematic coding was outlined as the method of data analysis and the limitations of this study were identified. The goal of the next chapter is to provide the results of the study and demonstrate that the methodology described here was followed.
Chapter 4

Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings that emerged from this research. The findings can be classified into three key themes: unconstrained literacy skills, dialogic reading and non-fiction texts. Firstly the findings related to the targeted unconstrained literacy skills are put forward. Following this, the impact of dialogic reading on these unconstrained literacy skills are presented. The final section focuses on the findings linked to the use of non-fiction texts with this group of emergent readers. Details of the specific children chosen for data collection are described in the following profile section.

Participants Profile

The participants involved in this study were all pupils from the researcher’s Junior Infant class, 18 children in total. All children participated in the intervention with a specific data set selected for comparative purposes. The details of this data set are illustrated in Table 4.1 under the children’s chosen pseudonyms.

Table 4.1

*Participant Profile for EAL and non-EAL Data Sets*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Non-EAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuzanna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6.1 Years</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.9 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.3 Years</td>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.6 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.4 Years</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6.1 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.3 Years</td>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5.3 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unconstrained Literacy Skills

The core unconstrained literacy skills examined in this intervention were language and comprehension. This study examined language in terms of achievement in target vocabulary scores and oral language use during readings sessions. Indicators of comprehension were connected to the types of contributions that the children made during reading sessions, the ways in which their drawings reflected their understanding of the topic and evidence of critical thinking.

Vocabulary test results. In order to determine the impact of the intervention on the children’s vocabulary, a test was administered with the children three times during each phase. It took place with each child individually at the teacher’s desk while the others participated in seatwork or Aistear activities. The test took less than 3 minutes per child. The expressive and receptive vocabulary scores of the children in the individual data sets are recorded in Tables 4.2 and 4.3.
Table 4.2

**Vocabulary Scores from EAL Data Set**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Stage of Reading</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuzanna</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>1/5</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td>4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td>1/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>1/5</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>1/5</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The marking “-” indicates absence from school on day of testing. After SRA = After Standard Read Aloud sessions; After DR = After Dialogic Reading sessions.*

Table 4.3

**Vocabulary Scores from Non-EAL Data Set**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Stage of Reading</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>2/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Before Reading</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After SRA</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After DR</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>5/5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The marking “-” indicates absence from school on day of testing. After SRA = After Standard Read Aloud sessions; After DR = After Dialogic Reading sessions.*
These results show that, during phase 1, all children in both groups improved their expressive vocabulary scores, either after the standard read aloud or after the dialogic reading. Receptive vocabulary scores improved or remained the same in all but one case during phase 1. Half of the EAL group improved their expressive scores during phase 2, while all of the non-EAL set improved or remained the same. All children from both groups improved their receptive vocabulary scores during phase 2, with one exception who was not present on the day of pre-reading testing so a reflection of the impact of the standard read aloud process was not possible.

**Oral language in reading sessions.** The oral contributions made by the children demonstrated their emerging ability to use language in a variety of ways. Table 4.4 categorises the children’s contributions in terms of how their oral language skills were utilised for different purposes during the reading sessions.
### Table 4.4

*Children’s Use of Language During Reading Sessions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of Language</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>Dallas: A long time ago when I was gone to holidays, I went up to the dolphins and I touched their nose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interests</td>
<td>Conor: The driver called Captain Smith fell to the bottom of the sea. Teacher: Oh really? What ship was he in? Conor: The Titanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Ryan: A dog lays an egg (laughing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Michael: Do they eat human beings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>Teacher: Would you prefer to live in a shallow habitat or a deep habitat? Ellie: A shallow habitat Teacher: Why? Ellie: Because then we won’t see the scary fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Darren: I see that she’s gone back to the land where she was born.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Conor: What’s that orange and purple blue thing and black?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>Teacher: What are these bits here at the top of the picture? Charlotte: Seeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>Conor: I sawed a crab. I think it was dead or asleep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Teacher: She goes off back to the ocean and leaves her babies. Jack: That’s mean!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Charlotte: We could dive in a take out all the little bits of rubbish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence</td>
<td>Teacher: Why do we need to save our seas? Jack: We needed all the soil. Teacher: Hmm, well there wouldn’t be soil in the water… Jack: Probably at the bottom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further examination of these oral contributions to the reading sessions indicated that the discussions were mostly dominated by the non-EAL class members. The EAL children rarely participated orally unless they were asked a specific question, unlike their English
speaking counterparts who willingly contributed regularly without provocation from the teacher. Table 4.5 provides a record of the number of times any EAL child made a contribution during a reading session. The contributions include single word utterances and use of sentences.

### Table 4.5

**Number of Oral Contributions from EAL Students During Reading Sessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Session</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>No. of contributions</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Reading Session</th>
<th>No. of contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SRA 1</td>
<td>DR 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>SRA 1</td>
<td>DR 2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRA 2</td>
<td>DR 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>SRA 2</td>
<td>DR 3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR 1</td>
<td>DR 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>SRA 3</td>
<td>DR 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR 2</td>
<td>SRA 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>DR 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SRA = Standard Read Aloud; DR = Dialogic Reading*

As evident from this table, during some sessions the EAL children spoke as little as one time, inferring that their opportunities to practise their English oral language skills were extremely limited. It is important to note however, that their contributions significantly increased during the dialogic reading sessions, suggesting that, although their expressive targeted vocabulary scores did not increase substantially, dialogic reading did have a positive impact on the expressive conversational language of the EAL group.

**Comprehension in reading sessions.** The language that the children used to discuss the texts also demonstrated their comprehension of the text. Table 4.6 displays the link between the children’s oral language use and their emerging comprehension skills in three main areas: connections, facts, and criticality.
Table 4.6

*Comprehension Skills Evident from Oral Contributions to the Texts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Oral Language</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Comprehension Skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>Conor: When it was a really sunny day, I went to the shop to get some ice-cream and when I came out there was wasps.</td>
<td>Making connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Interest</td>
<td>Derek: A train book (non-fiction at home)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Conor: I jumpeded on his belly (laughing when talking about a dream)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Dallas: Is there a blob (blurb) at the back?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>Jack: I like the dolphin one.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Charlotte: It showed off the petals</td>
<td>Factual understandings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Kevin: It’s the thing that holds the plant up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>Teacher: What part have I missed? Lily: The roots</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>Conor: They don’t like wind in case they blow away (butterflies)</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Dallas: We need water that’s why might be thirsty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Jackson: Or you can put them in the fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence</td>
<td>Conor: Teacher, we don’t need plant food!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comprehension in drawings.** The drawing task also gave insight into the children’s ability to interpret the text and produced a huge disparity in results. The drawings of the children from the EAL group generally contained little detail and didn’t demonstrate any major progression in comprehension, as evident in Zuzanna’s drawing in Figure 4.1. In
Zuzanna’s drawing it is apparent that she was aware of the general topic of discussion as she drew a series of flowers; however, as the reading sessions continued, she only added a sun and more flowers to her drawing, indicating that she realised that the sun played a role in the growth of flowers but demonstrated no other signs of topic knowledge. It is reasonable to suggest that Zuzanna’s English language deficits influenced both her comprehension of the text and discussion, and her comprehension of the task.

Figure 4.1

Zuzanna’s Drawing Based on Plants and Flowers

Results from the drawings of the other children in the EAL group indicated similar levels of comprehension. Haley’s drawing was the exception. Figure 4.2 shows her picture and the progression that she made by adding more relevant details in each drawing, most of
which also connected to the target vocabulary. This was unsurprising as she also achieved the highest vocabulary scores in her group.

Figure 4.2

_Haley’s Drawing Based on Plants and Flowers_

Charlotte demonstrated one of the highest levels of comprehension across both groups as her drawings were not created in isolation of each other, but rather showed an understanding of how the parts of the plants and flowers are connected to each other. Figure 4.3 displays her drawing, which includes details such as petals falling off a flower, apples growing on a tree, seeds on the ground and a flower pot containing soil. She also drew bees flying around a flower and said that it’s carrying “that thing on the flower that the bees collect”. Even though she couldn’t remember the word “nectar”, she was aware that is a part of the flower and understood its purpose.
Comprehension through critical responses. This research also examines the concept of critical literacy as a central component to effective comprehension. Chapter two put forward the argument that young children should be encouraged to think critically, both about the text itself and the issues it raises. Ellie’s emerging awareness of the purpose of reading a few books on the same topic is evident is her response to the teacher’s question:

Teacher: Why do you think we have been reading two different books about the ocean?

Ellie: Em cause one book doesn’t have many things.
Ellie is demonstrating an early understanding that one book cannot be relied upon to provide all the necessary information on a topic. The children’s critical literacy skills were further provoked when they were asked to compare the information contained in two books on the same topic:

Teacher: What do we think was different about this book than yesterday’s book?

Charlotte: It showed off the petals.

Teacher: The petals, yes. We didn’t see that in yesterday’s book. Was there anything else different, Dallas?

Dallas: Butterflies.

Teacher: Yes, we didn’t see a butterfly in yesterday’s one.

The children’s ability to distinguish differing information offered by the two authors provides evidence of first steps in critiquing texts.

The children were also asked to think critically about the contents of the texts by considering the three critical questions on each topic identified in Table 4.7.
**Table 4.7**

*Critical Questions Based on the Non-Fiction Topics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase and Topic</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Phase 1**     | • Do you think animals and humans need plants? Do plants need humans?  
| Plants and Flowers | • Do plants need the same things as humans to live?  
|                  | • What would happen if there weren’t any plants? |
| **Phase 2**     | • If you went diving to the bottom of the ocean, what do you think you would find?  
| The Ocean       | • If you lived in the ocean, what do you think you might be scared of?  
|                  | • Why is the ocean important? |

The children’s oral language contributions expressed their progressing critical thinking skills, such as in the following examples:

Teacher: Ryan, why do you think we need to save our seas?

Ryan: For them to stop eating rubbish

Charlotte: So we don’t kill them (sea creatures)

Teacher: If you were one of these fish, what would you be afraid of?

Ellie: Getting caught in a net.

**Dialogic Reading**

Analysis of the dialogic readings of the texts found that the PEER and CROWD techniques supported the development of the children’s unconstrained literacy skills in different ways.
The use of prompts. The first letter in PEER refers to the act of encouraging dialogue with a child by initiating conversation with a “prompt”. In dialogic reading, this generally arises from a CROWD question. Completion (C) prompts were used regularly throughout the reading sessions, generally for two different objectives: participation, and vocabulary reinforcement. A key tenet of dialogic reading is that the children are actively participating (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000). Completion prompts allowed for this participation in times that discussion or questioning would have interrupted the flow of reading (see Appendix J).

Completion prompts were also used to reinforce the target vocabulary.

Teacher (reading): “Bees like bright blooming flowers. Bees gather…”. What do they gather from the flowers, Kevin?

Kevin: Nectar

Furthermore, completion prompts provided the opportunity for the child to hear and use the vocabulary in context.

Teacher: There’s rubbish going into the water and that’s called p…

Group: Pollution

Finally, completion prompts allowed the teacher to model correct sentence structure and grammar, while the children finished the sentence using the target vocabulary.

Teacher (reading): “They can be deep, but some are…”

Children: Shallow

Both recall (R) and wh- (W) questions were often used as a prompt to assist children in remembering facts about the topic.
Teacher: Can anyone remember how many oceans there are?

Kevin: Five

_________________________

Teacher: I want you to tell me about the turtle? What protects its soft body?

Darren: Its shell

Teacher: Its shell, its HARD shell protects its soft body, and what does it use to swim through the water?

Ellie: Its flippers

Recall and wh- prompts such as this allowed for comprehension development in the form of expanding world knowledge (Pardo, 2004), as well as encouraging the use of both target and non-target vocabulary.

In addition to recalling factual information, effective comprehension requires readers to make inferences and think critically about what they are learning about. Open-ended (O) questions provided the opportunity for the teacher to provoke higher order and critical comprehension skills (see Appendix K). Distancing (D) questions further encouraged such skills, by prompting the children to place themselves in the situation being discussed (see Appendix L).

**Evaluating children’s responses.** The next step in the PEER sequence of interactions is to “Evaluate” the child’s answer. Table 4.8 classifies how the children’s contributions to the discussion were evaluated through different types of affirmation, amendments and scaffolding. These different types of teacher evaluations facilitated development of the children’s oral language by modelling language use, sentence structure
and grammar; while comprehension was strengthened by assisting the children in rethinking their inputs when misconceptions occurred.

**Table 4.8**

*Classification of Teacher Evaluations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirming</td>
<td>Acknowledging</td>
<td>Yes, you’re right about that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Repeating</td>
<td>They are the petals, yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praising</td>
<td>Excellent, it’s an angler fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>That sounds very interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amending</td>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>That’s dolphins that you’re thinking of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disputing</td>
<td>Do roses look like a bell?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>Recasting</td>
<td>Kamil: Eh, here, eh a fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing</td>
<td>Teacher: You can see a fish here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, we do have cold water, but when we’re looking at our water on the beach, does it have big lumps of ice floating on it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Expanding on children’s responses.** The third step in the PEER sequence of dialogic discussion is to “Expand” on the child’s response. Table 4.9 categorises these expansions into embellishments, connections and follow-up questions.
### Table 4.9

**Classification of Teacher Expansions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Embellishment     | Comprehension | Teacher: What would happen if there weren’t any flowers?  
Dallas: They would be super hungry.  
Teacher: They would be very hungry. **The hummingbirds, the bees and the butterflies would all be very hungry. They wouldn’t have any nectar for their food.**  
**Sentence**  
Teacher: “She lays her eggs in a hole, she covers the eggs with sand” and then what does she do?  
Group: She leaves them.  
Teacher: **She leaves them and she goes back to the sea.** |
| Connections       | Personal   | Teacher: Exactly, it’s called the glossary…**does anyone have a book at home that has a glossary at the back of it?** |
|                   | Comparison | Dallas: A cat (lays an egg)  
Teacher: A cat doesn’t lay an egg. A cat has a baby the same way that we do. **The way your mummy had her baby.** |
| Follow-up         | Same child | Teacher: Why do you think it’s called a lionfish?  
Darren: Because it looks like a lion.  
Teacher: Yes, **how does it look like a lion?** |
| questions         | Peer opinion | Darren: Em, its tentacles looks a bit like its legs.  
Teacher: Its spines. Yeah its spines look a bit like legs. **What do you think, Charlotte?** |

These expansions presented the opportunity for the teacher to advance the children’s unconstrained literacy skills in all targeted areas of language and comprehension. Embellishment expansions allowed the teacher to add extra information to the children’s answers to improve either their level of comprehension or the quality of the sentence. Expansions in the form of connections were an important tool in facilitating emerging critical
literacy skills as the children had to consider how the information was relevant to their own lives or how it compared with what they already know. Follow-up questions encouraged the children to think further about their responses, and prompted oral language skills such as description and explanation.

**Repetition in different formats.** The final stage in PEER is to “Repeat” the prompt. Repetition played a large role throughout the dialogic reading sessions; however it rarely occurred in the form of repetition of the prompt. The researcher was aware of this from an early stage in the research, and noted this in her reflective journal: “After listening back to the recorded reading sessions, I realised that I wasn’t repeating the initial prompt as often as I could”.

Following this realisation, the researcher made a more focused effort to alter her behaviour, however, she came to the conclusion that “repeating the prompt tends to interrupt the flow of conversation or the discussion has moved on due to the expansion so it doesn’t make sense to backtrack”.

Despite this, the act of “repeating” came into play in many other ways; however it was more fluid in nature, rather than sitting at the end of the PEER sequence. As previously described, during the “evaluate” step, repeating the child’s response was a form of affirmation. Additionally, when the teacher introduced new vocabulary, she repeated the words several times:

Teacher: Another word for home is habitat, habitat. We did that before, didn’t we? We said that a habitat for worms is underground and the habitat for birds is up in the…

Group: Trees
In this example, the teacher repeated the new word, “habitat”, four times when introducing it.

Finally, the process of rereading the same book is, in itself, an act of repetition. It was evident from many of the children’s drawings that the more they became familiar with the contents of the book, the more detailed and factual information they included, thereby demonstrating increased comprehension. This is clearly evident in Figure 4.4, Charlotte’s drawing of the ocean.

Prior to reading the books about the ocean, Charlotte already had a good level of basic knowledge about the ocean, including fish, sharks, rocks and seaweed in her picture. As time went on, she became more specific with her drawings, adding creatures such as jellyfish and a killer whale, as well as pollution, a diver and a sinking boat. In her final attempts, she demonstrated an awareness of overfishing and an understanding that fish that live at the bottom of the ocean must get their food by waiting for dead sea creatures to sink from above. Charlotte’s drawings show evidence that the repeated readings had an impact on her knowledge of ocean life and emerging critical awareness.

Figure 4.4

*Charlotte’s Progressive Drawing of the Ocean*
This analysis of the use of the dialogic reading approach demonstrates that it supported these children in their emerging unconstrained literacy skills, working effectively with the non-fiction texts.

Non-Fiction Texts

This research gave rise to a series of themes in relation to the use of non-fiction texts in the early years. This study found that non-fiction texts supported the children’s emergent reading skills, inspired feelings of empathy, and provided diverse opportunities for learning about the non-fiction genre. The findings do not make any claims regarding non-fiction as a superior genre to fiction, but rather they simply outline the observations made while using expository texts with Junior Infants.

**Emergent reading of non-fiction.** Recalling its definition from chapter two, emergent literacy can be described as the way in which children interact with reading and writing before they achieve conventional literacy skills (Justice & Pullen, 2003). During free reading and play periods, the teacher had the opportunity to observe the children’s emergent reading of non-fiction. The children were given access to a wide selection of books from the classroom library and from the teacher’s own collection. These contained both fiction and non-fiction texts. The teacher observed that many of the children were interested in “reading” the non-fiction books that she had been reading with them. Figure 4.5 displays three examples of how the children interacted with the non-fiction books.
Figure 4.5

Examples of the Children’s Emergent Reading of the Non-Fiction Texts

Ellie and Dallas reading about plants
Derek reading about the blue whale
Charlotte using non-fiction in socio-dramatic play

In the first image, Ellie was reading the book “Plants in Spring” to the others in the group by describing the pictures, using the information that she had learned through the dialogic reading of the book earlier in the week. Dallas, on the other hand, was reading the sentences in the book, nearly word perfect, influenced by her own familiar word recognition and her memory from the repeated readings. Both girls were demonstrating an emergent understanding of reading to convey information.

In addition to this, these girls chose to enter into role-play while reading this book as they wanted to act as the teacher. This was something that the researcher had not previously observed during free reading time, despite the regular use of fiction stories in her daily classroom schedule. This may tentatively suggest that these girls were demonstrating a growing understanding of the function of non-fiction and its intention to “teach” or inform about something. This is supported by Kevin’s responses in the following exchange:
Teacher: What do you think, Kevin? (asking about why we would learn about the ocean)

Kevin: We need to learn about the ocean because we mightn’t know much about the ocean.

Teacher: And why is that important?

Kevin: So you can teach other children about it.

Kevin recognises that they are learning new information by reading non-texts. The second image in Figure 4.5 suggests that Derek is also displaying signs of purposeful use of non-fiction by showing the child beside him the new sea creature that he found in an unfamiliar non-fiction text about the ocean.

The final photograph in Figure 4.5 displays a further incident indicating purposeful use of non-fiction, observed during socio-dramatic play. The garden centre play area was supplied with the non-fiction texts used to teach about plants and flowers and the image shows Charlotte using the book to giving instructions about planting to the boys in her group. Each of these examples presents evidence of the development in the children’s emergent reading of non-fiction texts, and support for the inclusion of non-fiction in the Junior Infant classroom.

**Empathy and non-fiction.** This research found that the children reacted with empathy on many occasions during the dialogic reading sessions and their critical responses were often fuelled by empathetic thoughts. When asking the children the question “what would happen if there weren’t any plants?”, their before reading answers included basic survival answers regarding flowers or people dying. However, after reading responses also included answers such as: “We might cry because plants weren’t there”; “People would be
sad because they would want flowers for the house to make it nice”; “Bees and butterflies would be hungry”.

Similar feelings of empathy were noted while reading about the ocean: “Well that’s not nice that he sting them”; “When one is crying the others help him”; “They probably miss their mummy and daddy”.

This is a very interesting and surprising finding, considering it is usually the fiction genre that is associated with promoting empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kucirkova, 2019; Pino & Mazza, 2016).

**Non-fiction genre-related opportunities for learning.** The use of non-fiction provided the space for the children to experience unfamiliar text features and vocabulary. They were introduced to the table of contents and the glossary on the first day of reading and these were regularly made reference to throughout the sessions. Evidence of the children’s emerging understanding of these features came across in different ways. The teacher observed Dallas opening “Plants in spring” during a free reading session and saying “this is the contents”, referring to the correct page. On other occasions, the teacher used the PEER technique to prompt discussion about the text features (see Appendix M).

The non-fiction writing and presentation style also differs from narrative stories. The labelling activity reflected one of the ways in which the information in the non-fiction texts was presented and allowed the children the opportunity to practise this themselves, demonstrated in Figure 4.6.
More notably, however, the drawing tasks challenged the children to forget about creating “a pretty picture” and to recall as much factual information as they could. This was something that did not come naturally to most of the children and the teacher reflected that “many of the children’s drawings are still including irrelevant information such as rainbows and snakes”.

This was most prominent in the drawings of the EAL children, such as Derek’s drawing in Figure 4.7. Derek’s first attempt saw trees of different sizes which he described as Daddy, Mummy and baby trees. He also referred to the “baby” tree as “me”. Derek’s confusion regarding fact and fiction appears to have led an anthropomorphic depiction of the

Figure 4.6

Labelling the Parts of a Plant
trees. His additions to the drawing on a later occasion led to more trees in a variety of unnatural colours and a green sun. When questioned about the choice of colour for the sun, he replied “because I like green suns”. It is evident that Derek is still developing his understanding of what non-fiction means. This may be in large part due to the language barrier impacting on his ability to understand the teacher’s explanation of non-fiction, and his comprehension of the information in the texts. This was a common factor among most of the drawings from the EAL children, as well as some of the non-EAL children who also demonstrated difficulties in other areas, such as vocabulary scores.

**Figure 4.7**

*Derek’s Non-Fiction Drawing about Plants and Flowers*

The use of non-fiction also allowed the children to experience the concept of life-long learning, as they discovered that the teacher did not have all the answers to their questions. When talking about a killer whale’s prey, Dallas asked if they ate starfish, to which the
teacher responded “Starfish, em I don’t know. Maybe they do eat starfish. That’s a question
that you might have to ask google because I don’t see the answer in this book”.

In this instance, the teacher made it clear that she could not provide Dallas with an
accurate answer but she also gave an example of how they might solve the problem. This also
underlines the value of the internet when exploring the non-fiction genre as a supplement to
the core paper-based texts. Although this was not an aspect of the methodology for these first
stages of the research, it is certainly a recommendation for future steps.

On another occasion, the teacher asked the children what they think they would find
at the bottom of the ocean and Charlotte’s answer of an octopus was one that the teacher had
not considered, responding with “An octopus, that’s a good one. I didn’t think of that!” This
provided the opportunity for the teacher to acknowledge that, not only does she not have all
the answers, but also that the child had more knowledge than the adult in this case. This
demonstrates the idea of agency in early childhood by viewing the child and teacher as equals
in the co-construction of learning (MacFarlane & Cartmel, 2008).

My Learning Journey

Action research is concerned with “a commitment towards improvement” (McNiff,
2014, p. 16) therefore my own personal learning as a teacher must be included in these
findings. Throughout the study, I kept a reflective journal to document my observations,
feelings and thoughts during both phases the intervention. During the first phase, I quickly
became aware that I was often entering into discussion with the same enthusiastic and
extroverted children, while others stayed quiet throughout the readings. I wrote: “After the
first reading, I realised that I was not directing questions at some of the target children”. The
act of choosing specific children to target drew my attention to the ones who were more
introverted or passive, ensuring that they also got a voice in the discussion.
I found that transcribing and analysing the reading sessions on the day on which they were conducted was a beneficial task because it shed light on areas where I could improve on as a teacher during the intervention itself. At the end of phase 1, I reflected: “When noting PEER interactions during dialogic reading, I realised that when I was “expanding” on a child’s response, I usually only asked a follow-on question, rather than providing any additional information”. This realisation led to a conscious effort to vary the ways in which I expanded on the children’s responses, which led to the construction of the classification of teacher evaluations.

Another enlightening exercise for me as a teacher occurred during phase 2 when I read the first book about the oceans. Afterwards, I noted that “The content in the first oceans book appears to be too difficult for the children to understand”. My worries about this however, were unfounded as the children ended up demonstrating a preference for this particular text when asked which their favourite book was towards the end of phase 2: “When I asked the children which book they preferred, I was surprised by the number who chose “Oceans and Seas”. This really reinforced, for me, the importance of hearing the children’s opinions rather than the teacher making assumptions.

Throughout the entire process, I also noted that the children’s interest and concentration levels were higher the dialogic reading sessions, as opposed to the standard read alouds: “Attention is much more evident when the children are more involved in reading the book”. I believe that this observation highlighted the success of the dialogic reading approach in achieving the motivation necessary for the comprehension of texts.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the results of the findings from this study. Among most children in the class, dialogic reading of non-fiction texts was found to have a generally
positive impact on language and comprehension; however evidence indicated that participants from the EAL group required further support in order to develop these skills sufficiently. In order to understand the relevance of these outcomes to the research questions and the literature review, chapter five will discuss the findings in more detail and consider how they could be used to inform the teaching of unconstrained literacy skills in early years’ settings.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents a critical discussion of the research findings of this study. The three key themes are unconstrained literacy skills, dialogic reading and the use of non-fiction texts in a junior infant classroom. The main findings relevant to each of the research questions are first examined. Based on these findings, a framework for tracking development and informing teaching of these skills is then constructed and discussed.

Research Question One Findings

In order to answer research question one regarding the impact of the intervention on the children’s unconstrained literacy skill, the findings related to language and comprehension are addressed in separate sections.

Language and non-fiction dialogic reading. Language was measured in terms of vocabulary scores and oral contributions during the dialogic reading sessions. The vocabulary scores achieved by the EAL group were significantly lower than those from the non-EAL group. This is not an unexpected result considering Graves’s (2009) observations regarding English language learners’ risk of falling behind their English speaking peers in academic tasks. There was, however, progression in receptive vocabulary within both groups. The evidence from the non-EAL group suggests that dialogic reading did not have a major impact on receptive vocabulary gains in comparison to the standard read aloud. In contrast to this, there was evidence of steady progression within the EAL group with greatest results on the final day of testing, after the dialogic reading. This may simply be a result of hearing the vocabulary for a longer period of time, which addresses the language learning principle of frequency (Harris, Golinkoff & Hirsch-Pasek, 2010). However, it is possible that there could
be a connection between this progress and the use of completion prompts during dialogic reading. The completion prompts integrated a number of Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek’s (2010) central principles of language learning in the ways in which they encouraged interaction and modelled vocabulary and grammar in use together.

Expressive vocabulary scores told a different story. The scores in this category for the EAL group remained very low, with some achieving none of the target expressive vocabulary. This contradicts the findings from Brannon and Dauksas (2014) which found that expressive vocabulary scores in English language learners increased with dialogic reading. Their study, however, involved parents engaging in dialogic reading one-to-one with their child and this may be a significant difference. The current study very strongly indicates that the whole class reading intervention on its own was not sufficient for these children. Contrastingly, there was an increase in the targeted expressive vocabulary in all of the non-EAL participants with some scores indicating that dialogic reading did have an impact on the increase, while others suggest that they didn’t need the additional scaffolding of the dialogic reading approach. This may be connected to Sweet and Snow’s (2002) research regarding the interplay between the characteristics of the text and the reader’s knowledge of the topic, with some children’s prior experiences having a stronger impact on the results than the intervention itself.

The shared reading experiences also provided the opportunity for the children to practise their oral language and communication skills with a responsive adult. The dialogic reading sessions gave the teacher the opportunity to scaffold the children’s language skills by using the different types of evaluations and expansions to model correct sentence structure and grammar, as well as prompting them to use their language in a variety of different ways. Furthermore, although their targeted vocabulary scores did not increase significantly, the findings demonstrated that the number of oral contributions made by the EAL children
increased greatly during the dialogic reading sessions, indicating increased conversational language. This may be a result of their gradual familiarity of the books and the opportunities for language development through the use of PEER and CROWD. This finding also resonates with Doyle and Bramwell’s (2006) observations regarding increased discussions occurring as a result of repeated readings.

**Comprehension and non-fiction dialogic reading.** The impact of the non-fiction dialogic reading on the children’s comprehension skills occurred in a variety of different ways. Firstly, their oral language inputs into the discussions about the books allowed their comprehension skills to emerge, as their ability to discuss the contents of the books were strengthened. Dickinson, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2010, p. 307) also recognise this interconnected relationship between language and comprehension, stating that “early childhood programs that build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge make lasting contributions to later language and comprehension abilities”.

Furthermore, dialogic reading of non-fiction topics allowed for knowledge to be shared between the child and adult, which not only facilitated comprehension but also assisted in breaking down the power dynamics that can restrict agency in education. The reciprocal interactions and the co-construction of learning that are central to dialogic reading support agentic learning practices such as relational pedagogy (Boyd, MacNeill, & Silcox, 2006) and participatory learning theories (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). This demonstrated respect for the children’s opinions as well as acknowledging that education is a life-long process and the teacher cannot be viewed as a transmitter of knowledge, but rather a facilitator of learning (Dwyer, 2013).

The concept of critical literacy is also central to effective comprehension. This is a skill that was once regarded as too complex to be addressed in the early years; however this has
been disputed (Stevens and Bean, 2002). Advice from the Scottish Executive (2000) suggests that the use of authentic texts stimulates broad critical discussions. Critical questions require children to consider an issue raised in the texts, contemplate who or what is disadvantaged and conceive ways to address the problem (Janks, 2014). The open-ended and distancing prompts used during dialogic reading facilitated these critical discussions, encouraging responses which classified their critical comprehension skills into inference, empathy, problem-solving and defence.

The notion of the non-fiction texts evoking empathetic responses from the children was particularly interesting as it disputes findings from other studies which found stronger links between fiction texts and empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kucirkova, 2019; Pino & Mazza, 2016). The children’s ability to comprehend the feelings or experiences of someone or something else are relevant to the social justice ideals which are central to critical literacy. It could be argued that this may be related to the real life aspect of the non-fiction genre and that some children of this age need this authenticity as opposed to the more abstract literary devices used in fiction texts.

Despite these clear demonstrations of understanding, Charlotte’s drawing, as seen in the previous chapter in Figure 4.1, was the only one that depicted any form of critical awareness. This may be reflective of the short time of the intervention, as well as the different developmental stages of such young children. It also, however, highlights the importance of dialogue with young children and providing them with the opportunity to express their understandings in multiple ways.

The dialogic reading of the non-fiction texts also impacted on the children’s comprehension of the non-fiction genre. Chapter two identified the appropriateness for the use of such texts with this age-group, but also described its common under-use or exclusion
for a variety of reasons. The findings provided instances where the children demonstrated their emerging understanding of the purpose of non-fiction and the features of this genre, such as the contents and glossary pages. They were also exposed to presentation and writing style that differs from the traditional daily news that Junior Infants usually write about. They even exhibited a growing understanding of critical awareness of expository texts when explaining the need for multiple books on the same topic and distinguishing differing information presented in the texts. This is a particularly relevant skill to develop as children are faced with huge amounts of conflicting information accessible when they interact with online texts and internet databases (Dwyer, 2013).

Although their drawings indicated that the children were at different stages in their understanding of the non-fiction genre, these skills would not have the opportunity to develop without exposure to expository texts. This supports NEPS (2016) claim that children are at a disadvantage when comprehending these texts later in life if they lack experience with these basic features in their early education, demonstrating the valuable role that non-fiction plays in the development of children’s unconstrained literacy skills.

**Research Question Two Findings**

The aim of research question two was to identify the different ways in which the children demonstrated development in their unconstrained literacy skills. Due to the nature of motivation in learning and achievement, indications of interest in the non-fiction topic are first discussed. This is followed by a review of the evidence of emerging language and comprehension skills.

**Motivation and interest.** The literature review discussed the importance of motivation and interest during reading tasks (Gambrell, Block & Pressley, 2002) and in language learning (Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2010). The non-fiction topics chosen were based on the children’s interests, demonstrating the notion of choice as an aspect of
agency (MacFarlane and Cartmel, 2008). This initial involvement may have had a positive impact on the children’s enthusiasm and attention during the reading sessions, epitomised by Ryan’s reaction to being told that it was reading time one morning: “Yay, the stories!” This supports Kletzein and Szabo’s (1998) study which disproved the belief that young children do not like informational texts. There may also be a connection between dialogic reading and motivation evidenced by the increased number of contributions from the EAL children during the dialogic reading sessions and the teacher’s observation that the children appeared to be more attentive and engaged during the dialogic reading sessions.

Emergent literacy practices such as free reading and play (Strickland, 1990) also demonstrated the children’s interest in the topics. The findings in the previous chapter presented evidence of the children using the non-fiction books to read to each other, “teach” each other and bringing the texts into their socio-dramatic play. In each case, these interactions were voluntary, demonstrating the children’s enthusiasm for the subjects and the reading process. On another occasion, the researcher observed a child playing in the junk art area during Aistear. He was constructing a river and told the researcher “I’m going to put a starfish in it”. Interestingly, there had been a discussion during that morning’s reading session based around starfish and he did not contribute anything to the conversation. His interest, however, was evident in the way in which he was bringing the starfish into his play.

**Evidence of language development.** Conclusions about the children’s language development were based on their personal improvement in target vocabulary scores and in their use of language for different purposes during the reading sessions. They also showed evidence of increased awareness of the target vocabulary on other occasions, such as during fine motor activities one morning when Kevin told the researcher “I heard prey on the radio this morning”. In another case, Michael told the researcher that the word “habitat” meant “home sweet home”, which was the name of the chapter in the book about ocean habitats,
indicating that he was making a connection between the word and the context of its meaning. Some children also demonstrated language development in their use of the target vocabulary to describe their drawings to the researcher, such as in Haley’s drawing, seen in chapter 4, Figure 4.2.

**Evidence of comprehension development.** As mentioned previously, there was a strong link between the children’s oral language contributions and evidence of their comprehension skills. Their oral contributions were classified into three main areas of comprehension categories: connections, facts and criticality; each of which exposes different comprehension skills. The relationship between language and comprehension was also apparent on occasions outside of the dialogic reading sessions. Evidence of Zuzanna’s understanding of a “shoot” was clear when she was looking at one of the non-fiction books about plants during free reading time. She pointed to a picture of a shoot and told the teacher that “it’s a baby flower”, demonstrating that she understood that a plant was a shoot before it was fully grown.

In addition to this, the drawing task also allowed them to create images of the text, determine the important ideas and synthesise what was read, all of which are skills that Keene (2002) sets forth as being necessary for effective comprehension. Evidence of comprehension from these drawings included factual information with relevant details and demonstrating an understanding of the relationship between different details about the topic, such as in Charlotte’s drawing of the ocean as seen in the previous chapter in Figure 4.4.

The next section will combine these different ways that the children’s emerging unconstrained literacy skills were evident, creating a general framework for assessment to inform further teaching in this area.
Supporting Young Children’s Unconstrained Literacy Skills

Chapter two highlighted the importance of teaching unconstrained literacy skills in the early years, but also provided evidence to show that the constrained skills are continuously being given priority for a number of different reasons. Among these explanations includes a perceived difficulty in teaching and assessing the unconstrained skills (Snow and Matthews, 2016). This research sought to explore dialogic reading of non-fiction texts as an approach to teach these skills. This also allowed the researcher to explore the ways in which the teacher could capture evidence of children’s development in language and comprehension. The findings discussed above have highlighted how this approach influenced these literacy skills. This information has been condensed into a succinct checklist that could be used to support the development of language and comprehension skills in Junior Infants, found in Figure 5.1 (see Appendix N for an enlarged version).
Figure 5.1

Assessment of language and comprehension in junior infants resulting from the intervention

Name of child: _______________________________

Is the child showing interest in the topic in any of the following ways?
Emergent reading ☐
Play ☐
Oral expression ☐
Other: _______________________________

Is the child participating orally in the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connections</th>
<th>Facts</th>
<th>Critical thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
<td>Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: _______________________________

Has the child’s vocabulary scores improved?
Receptive ☐ No ☐
Expressive ☐ No ☐

Words still unknown: __________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Does the child’s drawing indicate understanding of the topic in the following ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual</th>
<th>Use of new vocabulary</th>
<th>Showing relationship between different relevant details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes ☐</td>
<td>Yes ☐</td>
<td>Yes ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes ☑</td>
<td>Sometimes ☑</td>
<td>Sometimes ☑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ☐</td>
<td>No ☐</td>
<td>No ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: _______________________________

It is envisioned that this tracker could be utilised as a formative assessment tool based on the findings from this research. Airasian (2000) expresses that the goal of this form of assessment is for the improvement of learning and teaching. One of the results that emerged from this research was that this whole class dialogic reading intervention was not sufficient for adequate development of the unconstrained literacy skills in the EAL group. The assessment form is a combination of all the ways in which children in the class did show evidence of improvement or understanding in the targeted skills; therefore the teacher could
use the form to track what specific areas need to addressed, either through mini-lessons or as objectives to be achieved in conjunction with an EAL support teacher. This information may help to ensure that these children’s needs are met in a highly individualised and focused manner in the hope that their unconstrained literacy skills will develop and help them to achieve future literacy success.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the main findings that emerged from this study and illustrated their relevance for the research questions. The final chapter will provide a summary of the main findings and make recommendations based on the researcher’s reflections of the results of the study.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

This final chapter begins by summarising the main findings of the research, followed by an acknowledgement of the limitations of the study. This leads to some possible implications and recommendations arising from this research. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the researcher’s thoughts on the process.

The Findings

This study set out to examine the impact that the dialogic reading approach had on a group of Junior Infants’ unconstrained literacy skills using non-fiction texts. The in-field research period lasted for four weeks, during which time two phases of an action research cycle took place. Although the results of this study cannot be generalised, the methodology and findings may of interest to other Irish Junior Infant teachers as the research supports Irish curriculum recommendations and developmentally appropriate practice in emergent literacy theory. If literacy is viewed as more than an autonomous set of skills, it is vital that language and comprehension are not pushed aside in the early years. This research acknowledges that reading is broader than just decoding and fluency, and children need experience with unconstrained literacy skills from an early age in order to achieve future literacy success. The first research question of the current study examined the impact that the intervention had on these skills, the findings of which are summarised in Table 6.1.
Table 6.1

Research Question One Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased receptive vocabulary scores. Dialogic reading had a positive impact on the scores of the EAL group.</td>
<td>The ways in which the children used their oral language demonstrated the comprehension skills of making connections, understanding facts and critical thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no increase in expressive vocabulary scores of the EAL group. Increased scores in the non-EAL group with dialogic reading having an impact in some cases, but not others.</td>
<td>PEER and CROWD facilitated comprehension development by prompting responses and extending answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The children used oral language for a variety of different purposes during the reading sessions. PEER and CROWD allowed the researcher to scaffold the children’s language use.</td>
<td>Dialogic reading of non-fiction facilitated agency and reciprocity in learning as knowledge was shared between the children and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL children participated more orally during the dialogic reading sessions than during non-dialogic reading sessions.</td>
<td>Empathy is a form of critical thinking and the non-fiction texts appeared to evoke empathetic responses from the children in some cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging comprehension of the non-fiction genre was evident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question two was informed by the perceived difficulty in assessing unconstrained literacy skills, which was identified as a barrier to teaching these skills in the early year’s class. This study tracked the ways in which the children demonstrated development of the unconstrained literacy skills in order to understand how they might be measured. The findings related to research question two are presented in Table 6.2.
Table 6.2

*Research Question Two Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm to participate</td>
<td>Improvement in target vocabulary scores</td>
<td>Demonstrations of comprehension skills through oral language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary emergent reading of non-fiction texts</td>
<td>Use of target vocabulary in drawings</td>
<td>Details in drawings about the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing the non-fiction topic into their play</td>
<td>Using oral language for different purposes to discuss the texts</td>
<td>Evidence of comprehension of topic details during day-to-day interactions with the teacher or other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of understanding and use of new vocabulary during day-to-day interactions with the teacher or other children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these findings, an assessment for learning framework was developed that could be used by teachers of junior classes in Irish primary schools (see Appendix N).

**Study Limitations**

This study was constrained by a number of factors. Firstly, the small sample size and the contextual nature of action research limit its replicability. The issue of insider-bias is a further limit to the study as the researcher’s interpretations may have been influenced by her relationship with and prior knowledge about the children. In some cases the drawings may not be fully reflective of the children’s comprehension of the topic. Other issues may have influenced the end result of their pictures such as poor pencil control, missed days of school, misunderstanding the task and the characteristics of the chosen texts. Certain children’s vocabulary scores and contributions to the discussions may have also been influenced by
prior experience of the topic. The language barrier between the researcher and the EAL children was an additional limitation.

This piece of action research was also limited to two phases, however the findings would have been strengthened by a third phase and prolonged time in the setting. Furthermore, a third phase could help to address some of the limitations by including the following modifications:

- The use of google to model to search for answers to the children’s questions or misconceptions would be a beneficial addition.
- A differentiated vocabulary test and more free exploration of the books for specific children. The assessment form that was created could also be used to identify the areas in which these children need small group mini-lessons.
- Further agency could be included by allowing the children to describe the photographs of themselves in their own words. This would also help to achieve additional validity in the interpretations of the photographs.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following recommendations are made for future areas of research on this topic. These recommendations are divided into two separate categories; areas for further study and implications for policy and practice.

**Areas for future study.** A quasi-experimental approach to the impact on unconstrained literacy skills from non-fiction dialogic reading versus standard read alouds of the same genre may be of interest to explore in further studies. Similarly, a quasi-experimental approach to achievement in unconstrained literacy skills with fiction versus non-fiction would be another valid area of research. A mixed methods study of Junior Infant teachers’ perceptions of and
approaches to teaching unconstrained literacy skills could be conducted to provide more
generalisable Irish research in this area.

**Implications for policy and practice of schools and junior infant teachers.** Although
the findings from this study cannot be generalised, there are certain key areas from the
research that are worth recognising. Firstly, the difficulty in assessing unconstrained literacy
skills, as described by many teachers, was noted in this study. The framework for tracking
development in these skills that was created based on the findings from this research provides
the basis for a solution to this problem as an example of assessment in language and
comprehension.

This study found that dialogic reading of non-fiction texts produced mostly positive
results in advancement of language and comprehension. For a small number of children,
however, particularly the EAL group, dialogic reading as a whole class instructional method
was not as effective. This is something that language support teachers should consider
implementing, in conjunction with the class teacher, in small groups in order to maximise
learning potential with these children.

The current study found that the children presented many examples of emerging
critical awareness, which was facilitated by dialogic reading and by the non-fiction texts
themselves. These findings put forward evidence to suggest that critical literacy is an
accessible skill for Junior Infants and is one that should be nurtured in the early years.

Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. Actions should be taken to ensure greater awareness of unconstrained literacy skills
theory, both through Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional
Development (CPD) for teachers. CPD courses should include modules that provide
knowledge and skills for teachers in the teaching of unconstrained literacy skills in
early years’ classrooms. The CPD courses should be developed in partnership with local education centres. These modules should include resources that can be shared with parents so that they can support their child’s unconstrained literacy skills at home, as well as training in dialogic reading using both fiction and non-fiction texts.

2. School policy documents should reflect the importance of unconstrained literacy skills in the early years, along with a commitment of collaboration between mainstream class teachers and EAL support teachers in the teaching of these skills.

3. Schools should endeavour to ensure that their libraries are equally stocked with fiction and non-fiction books.

4. Interest surveys early in the school year, observations during play and opportunities during free reading should be used to inform teachers’ choice of books for their classes.

**Researcher’s Reflections**

When I started on this research journey I had very clear intentions about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it. I am highly organised and like to work in a very methodological manner. This, however, is not the way of action research, which is messy and constantly changing, never mind adding a group of Junior Infants to the mix! It seemed that my personality and action research were two clashing entities. Despite this, I grew to love the process, learning a lot about myself as a teacher and a researcher as time went on. The newsletter for the parents about the research reflects this learning in the way in which it is written (see Appendix H). It acknowledges that the teacher was on a learning journey and the children and parents were aware of that throughout the process. When asked in the early stages of the intervention why we were reading non-fiction books, one child responded “they help you to teach us” and she was right. Dialogic reading of the non-fiction texts did help me to teach language and comprehension, but they also helped me to learn about how this
process itself impacted the children’s learning and how their unconstrained literacy skills could be supported in the future through dialogic reading of “books about real things”.
References


doi: 10.1177/02711214030230030101


National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2009). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age*


## Appendix A

The Non-Fiction Books and Target Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of book</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Target vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All About</td>
<td>Claire Throp</td>
<td>Raintree publishers</td>
<td>Flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers (full book)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants in Spring</td>
<td>Martha E. H. Rustad</td>
<td>Capstone Press</td>
<td>Leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(full book)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Petal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under the Sea</td>
<td>Fiona Patchett</td>
<td>Usborne beginners</td>
<td>Deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chapters:</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shallow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living underwater</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tentacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolphins</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jellyfish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea turtles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near the bottom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceans and Seas</td>
<td>Steve Parker</td>
<td>Macmillan Publishers</td>
<td>Habitat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chapters:</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water world</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mammal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous five</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Settled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home sweet home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killer whales</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save our seas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coast</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix B

Critical Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Plants and Flowers</td>
<td>• Do you think animals and humans need plants? Do plants need humans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Do plants need the same things as humans to live?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What would happen if there weren’t any plants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>The Ocean</td>
<td>• If you went diving to the bottom of the ocean, what do you think you would find?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• If you lived in the ocean, what do you think you might be scared of?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Why is the ocean important?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Templates for Drawings

Everything I know about plants and flowers

Everything I know about the ocean
Appendix D

Sample from Vocabulary Tests

Plants and Flowers Expressive Vocabulary

1. What is this? (point to the petal on the leaf)

![petal](https://example.com/petal)

"petal" by tamaki is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Plants and Flowers Receptive Vocabulary

2. Which of these shows “nectar”? 

![fuzzy](https://example.com/fuzzy)

"fuzzy" by Kymberly Janisch is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

![leaf](https://example.com/leaf)

"Leaf" by yelsnia is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

![seeds](https://example.com/seeds)

"Seeds" by ICARDA - Science for Resilient Livelihoods in Dry is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

![nectar insect](https://example.com/nectar_insect)

"nectar extracting insect, id required" by pranavasagar is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Sample of Completed Vocabulary Score Sheet

**Vocabulary Tests Scoresheets**

Correct answer = Y (yes)
Wrong answer = N (no)
No Response = S (silent)
*I don’t know* = DK (don’t know)

**Plants and Flowers - Before**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.1</th>
<th>Q.2</th>
<th>Q.3</th>
<th>Q.4</th>
<th>Q.5</th>
<th>Q.6</th>
<th>Q.7</th>
<th>Q.8</th>
<th>Q.9</th>
<th>Q.10</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Y</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.K.</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

End of Unit Labelling Activities
Appendix F

Parent’s Letter of Consent

Date:

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you are aware, I am currently undergoing a Masters in Education Studies (Early Childhood Education). As part of my thesis for my final year, I will be conducting a short research project on specific literacy skills using non-fiction texts.

This research will be implemented during some English and SESE lessons and in certain Aistear stations over a period of 6 weeks. The aims and objectives of the English language curriculum and Aistear framework will be met and the children will not miss out on any subject areas during this time. The experience will be made fun and interesting for the children and will be non-stressful for all involved.

All children will be taking part in the lessons as they will be meeting the literacy objectives for junior infants. However, I am asking for your consent to analyse the children’s learning which takes place during these sessions for the purposes of the research. This will involve audio recordings of their responses and conversations, photographs of work samples and of the children engaged in different activities. The children’s identity will be kept confidential throughout the entire process. All data collected during this process will be kept in a secure location with no names attached. This data will be only be used for the current study and all recordings and photographs will be destroyed 13 months after examination of the thesis.
I hope you will be willing to allow your child to participate in all areas of this research as their contributions will be a valuable part of the study. If you agree to this, I will then discuss the research with the children and they will also be asked to give their consent. If they do not give their consent, their contributions or images will not included in the research, unless they change their mind. You and your child have the right to give or withdraw consent up to March 20th 2020.

You will be asked to sign the attached form indicating agreement to participate in the different parts of the study. Please return the consent form as soon as possible so that we can begin the process.

Should you have questions or seek clarification, please don't hesitate to contact me. You can speak to me at the school gate or you can arrange a meeting after school. Alternatively, you can send me an email at evaoneill@culleensballina.ie. You may also contact my advisor for the project, Siobhán Cahillane McGovern at siobhan.mcgovern@mie.ie.

This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact MERC@mie.ie

Thank you for your support.

Yours faithfully,
Eva O’Neill

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Statement of Consent:

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you would be willing to allow your child to participate in the study in the ways listed below. Please note, all voice recordings, photos and work samples will be confidential and destroyed 13 months after examination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you give consent for your child's voice to be recorded during the lessons?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you give consent for your child's photo to be taken during the lessons?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you give consent for samples of your child's work to be used in the research?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature of parent/guardian: ______________________________

Date: _________________________

Signature of Investigator: ______________________________

Date: _________________________
Appendix G

Children’s Consent Form

Name: ____________________________________________

I am happy to let Miss O’Neill record my voice.

I am happy to let Miss O’Neill take photos of me while I am working or playing.

I am happy to let Miss O’Neill take photos of my work.
Background: Literacy can be grouped into two categories – constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained literacy skills include learning the alphabet, phonics, and fluency. Unconstrained literacy skills are things like oral language and comprehension. Studies have shown that the majority of time in infant classes is spent on constrained skills, which are very important... BUT there have also been strong connections made between competent language and comprehension skills in the early years and increased literacy success in later schooling.

What does this mean?

It would be of benefit to schools to increase the time spent on unconstrained literacy skills in the infant classes. The problem is that unconstrained literacy skills can be tricky to teach because it is difficult to measure the children’s achievement in these areas.

So what did Miss O’Neill do about it?

A literacy intervention was created in order to teach language and comprehension using a reading technique called dialogic reading. This has proven to increase language and vocabulary when used with fiction texts so Miss O’Neill wanted to see if this was also true with non-fiction texts.
What did Miss O’Neill learn?

The techniques used in the dialogic reading approach facilitated the development of oral language, topic-specific vocabulary, comprehension and critical literacy skills.

Some children might benefit from a smaller group setting rather than the whole class dialogic reading approach.

The children demonstrated an increased understanding of the non-fiction genre, which is important because under-exposure to the features of this genre leads to a disadvantage when comprehending these texts later in life.

The children were involved in choosing the non-fiction topics which increased their motivation to learn.

The different ways in which the children presented development in their unconstrained literacy skills allowed Miss O’Neill to create a framework for tracking these skills in the future.

I would like to say a HUGE thank you to the wonderful children in my class who helped with this research, as well as extending my gratitude to their parents who allowed them to participate.
Appendix I

Sample of Codes used for Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prais</td>
<td>Teacher praised a child’s response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add</td>
<td>Teacher added more information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-fic</td>
<td>Child demonstrated an awareness of the non-fiction genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or-voc</td>
<td>The child used the target vocabulary in their oral language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>The child included factual information in their drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crit</td>
<td>The child demonstrated an awareness of critical literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mis-con</td>
<td>There was a misconception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>The child made a connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaff</td>
<td>The teacher scaffolded the child’s learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep</td>
<td>Use of repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-ques</td>
<td>A child asked a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>A child gave their opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>An EAL child participated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthus</td>
<td>There was a demonstration of enthusiasm for the topic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J

Completion Prompts to Encourage Participation

Teacher: Now, we’ve read this before so I want to help me to try with these bits. So, the Arctic ocean is the sm…

Teacher and group: Smallest

Teacher: The shal…

Teacher and group: Shallowest

Teacher: And the (mimes shivering)

Teacher and group: Coldest

Teacher: And there are lots of lumps of…

Group: Ice
Appendix K

Provoking Critical Comprehension Skills with Open-Ended Prompts

**Teacher:** Why do you think that we see bees and butterflies in spring and summer time but we don’t see them in winter? [Conor]?

**Conor:** Because they don’t like, they don’t like wind in case they blow away.

**Teacher:** That might be one reason, yeah, [Charlotte]?

**Charlotte:** It’s gonna be too cold for them.

**Teacher:** It’s going to be too cold for them and it’s also going to be too cold for the…

**Group:** Flowers

**Teacher:** So they won’t be able to get any…

**Jack:** Honey

**Teacher:** Any food, any nectar from the flowers.
Appendix L

Provoking Critical Comprehension Skills with Distancing Prompts

**Teacher:** Has anyone ever seen any pollution? (hands go up). Have you [Kevin]?

**Kevin:** Yeah

**Teacher:** Where have you seen pollution before?

**Kevin:** Em, down in the *** river

**Teacher:** In the *** river, ok, that was pollution in the water. What sort of pollution did you see?

**Kevin:** Em plastic bags

**Teacher:** Plastic bags, I see. [Darren] where have you seen pollution before?

**Darren:** Innnnnn….I forget

**Teacher:** That’s ok. [Conor]?

**Conor:** When I was parking my car here I sawed some.

**Teacher:** You saw some? Whereabouts?

**Conor:** In a little tiny pipe.

**Teacher:** In a little pipe. Ok so it wasn’t in the water, it was on the ground, was it?

(Conor nods)

Yes, Conor’s right, pollution isn’t just happening in the water. Pollution is when we throw rubbish anywhere that it shouldn’t be.
Appendix M

Using the PEER Technique to Discuss Text Features

Teacher: Can anyone remember the name of this page? Can you remember Lily?

Lily: The glossary

Teacher: Excellent, well done, the glossary. Can you tell me what the glossary does Lily?

Lily: It tells you more about them

Teacher: About what?

Lily: About the animals.

Teacher: Some of them are about the animals. It’s about the hard words in the book. If you come across a hard word in the book, you can go to the glossary so you can see what it means.
Appendix N

Assessment Framework for Language and Comprehension in Junior Infants through Dialogic Reading of Non-Fiction Texts

Name of child: _______________________________

Is the child showing interest in the topic in any of the following ways?
Emergent reading ☐
Play ☐
Oral expression ☐
Other: ________________________________

Is the child participating orally in the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connections</th>
<th>Facts</th>
<th>Critical thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Naming</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
<td>Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: ________________________________

Has the child’s vocabulary scores improved?
Receptive Yes ☐ No ☐
Expressive Yes ☐ No ☐

Words still unknown:
___________________________________________________________________________

Does the child’s drawing indicate understanding of the topic in the following ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factual</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of new vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including specific relevant details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing relationship between different relevant details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: ________________________________