Laura Delaney Thesis

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How can I use picture books to motivate my Junior Infant class to learn vocabulary?

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in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Date: 12/09/2025

Supervised by: Dr. Patricia Kennon

Declaration

I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I acknowledge that the use of Generative artificial intelligence tools is prohibited on the MEd (Research in Practice) programme and has not been used in this body of work.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how picturebooks can be used as a tool for motivating children's vocabulary learning in the Junior Infant classroom.

While picture books are used regularly in many Junior Infant classrooms around Ireland to explore topics and to support the learning of vocabulary, they are often underutilised, and there is often be a "one-and-done" approach towards picturebooks. This approach limits opportunities for children to engage deeply and have repeated exposures to the vocabulary present within picturebooks.

Many studies in this area seek to address how to successfully perform effective read-alouds for children and suggest supportive strategies. This study, however, seeks to investigate how picturebooks can be used as a basis to enhance children's motivation to learn vocabulary in the Junior Infant classroom, combined with more varied teaching strategies and repeated read-alouds.

Drawing on classroom-based observations, teacher reflections, pupil emoji-surveys and inputs from my critical friend and validation group members, the findings from this study suggest that engaging children in purposeful activities based on the vocabulary within picturebooks and repeated read-alouds increases children's motivation to learn new vocabulary and to use the vocabulary independently.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Action Research
ARP	Action Research Project
CET	Cognitive Evaluation Theory
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ELD	Expressive Language Difficulties
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SSAR	Self-Study Action Research
UK	United Kingdom
ZPD	Zone Of Proximal Development

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This thesis will present the research project I undertook as part of the Master's of Education (Research in Practice) programme in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education within Maynooth University.

In this Chapter, I will outline my research question and provide reasons for its selection. I will clarify the aim of this research project. I will explain my professional background and describe some of my core educational values, and link them to theoretical perspectives. The Chapter will conclude with a brief outline of the four chapters that will follow within this thesis.

1.1 Research Question

This research will take the form of self-study action research (SSAR). This type of research was selected as it focuses on self-development and easily aligns with educational settings (McNiff, 2013). Before selecting the research question, I reflected on areas of my practice that I felt required improvement. This led me to the area of vocabulary teaching and how I was using picture books to support this in the classroom. Through engaging in this reflection, I then formulated my research question:

"How can I use picture books to motivate my Junior Infant class to learn vocabulary?"

1.2 Research Aims

The primary aim of this research is to explore whether picturebooks can be used as an effective tool to motivate children to learn vocabulary in the Junior Infant classroom. My research draws significant inspiration from the work of Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown and focuses

specifically on children learning tier-two vocabulary, these are words that are less common than everyday words but are not nuanced or subject-specific (Beck et al., 2013). In the context of this research, motivation will be understood as the children's desire to do, their interest or drive (Collins Dictionary, n.d.).

1.2.1 Using Picturebooks to Support Vocabulary Learning

Picturebooks are widely recognised as a valuable resource for teaching and learning. Picturebooks are not only valuable for literacy learning, but they are also deeply important in the lives of young children as they are both aesthetically appealing and developmentally engaging, offering a wide scope across children's interests and ability levels (Crawford et al., 2024). While the benefits of engaging children with picturebooks are significant, this research project aims to investigate whether picturebooks can boost children's motivation to learn tier-two vocabulary. It also aims to identify if repeated readings of the same picturebooks can deepen understanding and motivate children to engage and use the vocabulary more.

1.2.2 Varied and Motivating Teaching Strategies

This thesis will also explore whether employing more varied teaching strategies based on the vocabulary could motivate students to learn the vocabulary. This thesis is grounded in the belief that motivation to learn is a crucial and key factor in the learning process. It will also explore if more varied teaching strategies can support children's motivation to learn vocabulary further, using displays, games and flashcards, and through a more dialogical and student-centred approach.

1.2.3 Reflective Teaching

As this thesis takes the form of a SSAR, critical reflection will underpin the entire research process. Engagement in reflective cycles of planning, implementing, observing and reflecting play a crucial role in children's learning experiences, but are also crucial for teacher's professional learning.

Through engagement with this SSAR, I aim to bring an improvement to my practice and also develop strategies to build children's motivation for vocabulary learning within the junior infant classroom. Critical reflection throughout the process will help me examine the effectiveness of my practice and help me focus on any adjustments that may need to occur.

1.3 Professional and Personal Background

As a teacher-researcher engaging in SSAR, my professional and personal background plays a crucial, yet often understated role, in the process. The iterative cycles associated with action-research were deeply connected to my background, both professionally and personally.

According to Mommers, Schellings and Beijard (2021) "teacher's professional identity pertains to personal characteristics, own learning history, previously developed beliefs about teaching and learning, and norms and values with regard to education" (p. 158). Alsup (2006) further emphasises how these personal aspects of a teacher bear a huge influence on their teaching practice and also how teaching identities can be fluid.

Reflecting on my own journey to this point, I attended primary and secondary school in rural Ireland, near the border of Northern Ireland. From an early age, I was drawn to teaching, inspired by some wonderful teachers who had taught me in school. After completing my Leaving Certificate, I completed my Bachelor of Education at St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, graduating in 2021, having completed nearly two years of the course online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This shift to remote learning undoubtedly shaped my professional identity and highlighted the importance of resilience and adaptation across education settings. It emphasised first-hand the importance of digital learning, which is something I prioritise in my classroom today.

After graduation, I taught in the same primary school in an urban area in the East of the country. I worked at the senior end of the school before moving down to junior infants. I discovered

through this transition that I possessed a deep passion for teaching infants, and I truly recognise the importance of early childhood learning for children's overall development. I enjoy incorporating play and playful approaches into my teaching and focus on creating a student-centred classroom where children grow holistically.

I have a deep passion for literacy. On a personal level, reading has always been a central part of my life. Growing up, I always had my head stuck in a book of some description. I viewed reading as an outlet for my imagination, a way to escape and a source of comfort to me in times when I needed it most. This love for reading ignited a deep love for language that prompted my teenage self to become involved in debating, writing competitions and drama; these are things that I still enjoy and partake in to this day. Similarly, my interest in vocabulary began at an early age. I also enjoyed learning new words and using them in my writing or orally, not only as a means of expression but also as a means of impression too.

On the whole, these personal and professional experiences have hugely influenced my teacher identity. It was from these experiences that my concern for the area of children's motivation to learn vocabulary emerged, especially in an increasingly technological age. While I embrace digital technologies, I possess a deep love for picture books and vocabulary which I hope to positively instil in the children I teach. Hence, this led me to develop a SSAR that focuses on the exploration of these areas to motivate young children in their vocabulary learning journey.

1.4 Values

According to McDonagh et al. (2019) values play a crucial role in how you conduct your research and it is imperative you take time to divulge and identify your values. My core values are those of care, respect and agency. It should be noted that care and respect are values that underpin the 'Code of Professional Practice' (Teaching Council, 2016). These values are mainly ontological in nature, meaning that I view them through myself amongst others. However, they

also guide me epistemologically, hence they influence how I view knowledge and the learning occurring within my classroom.

1.4.1 Care

I believe care is central to the creation of a classroom environment where children feel comfortable, safe and supported. I do my utmost daily to ensure I show the children that I care for them, going beyond showing kindness to develop caring relationships with the children, their families and the broader school community. In my classroom, we discuss and model how to care for one another and ourselves. This is especially important in a junior infant class as it is a huge component of social learning. Care not only underpins my interactions within the class, but it also informs me epistemologically by guiding the learning that occurs within my class and trying to make it as optimal and engaging for the children as possible.

1.4.2 Respect

Respect is a core value that underpins my teaching philosophy and personal values. I believe that every child and adult I encounter, I should treat with respect, regardless of differences. In my school, respect is something that is actively encouraged and is the key component of our code of behaviour. In my classroom, respect is modelled and nurtured from the beginning of the year. I strive to create an environment where children feel respected amongst their peers and, indeed their teachers, and vice versa. I also take time to build empathy as part of this. In junior infants, I create this environment through stories, circle time, discussions, group work and routine creation.

1.4.3 Agency

Agency is a value that became prominent through engaging in reflection throughout this course. Agency, both teacher and pupil, is prominent in the Primary Curriculum Framework by The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023). I believe all children should be active participants in their own learning and that their voices should be heard and acted upon

in an appropriate way, regardless of their age. My view of agency is closely connected to how I view myself as a teacher. I see myself as an approachable, caring and respectful facilitator in the learning process for the children, not an authoritarian, direct teacher. I promote agency in my class by offering pupils choices, encouraging them to be active agents in the learning process and creating an environment where they want to explore and question. This value is supported by care and respect as they all intertwine to create a classroom culture where each child has agency as a result of the care and respect they treat others with, and that they were treated with also.

1.5 Theoretical Perspectives Informing this Thesis

This research is grounded in developmental theories of Lev Vygotsky, Friedrich Froebel and Jerome Bruner. Their theories influenced not only this SSAR, but also hugely influence my everyday role as a teacher.

Lev Vygotsky's theories are foundational to this study and concern play-based learning and early childhood education (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2020). His theories emphasised the role of social communication and verbal interactions. He emphasised the shift from social speech to inner speech as a significant milestone for children, particularly for their self-regulation and mental functioning skills (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2020). He also theorised how initially, children's thinking and speech are separate entities in infancy, but they converge in early childhood. He likened this converging to how hydrogen and oxygen combine to form water (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2020). This is foundational in vocabulary learning for this project.

Central to Vygotsky's theory of childhood development was the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD depicts the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with guidance from a more knowledgeable other (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2020). Scaffolding, which is built on Vygotsky's idea of the ZPD involves the adult guiding the learning

through this gap through intersubjectivity. The use of picture books, dialogue and questioning within this SSAR is designed to be situated within the children's ZPD.

Froebel played a pivotal role in encouraging early childhood education. He emphasised that play is an essential aspect of childhood development and that learning should be play-centred. Froebel believed the whole child should be active in play, that play presents several social benefits, and that block play was essential for children (Tovey, 2012). He emphasised how play helps children make sense of the world, and he also stressed the importance of nature and the outdoors to further support this. He encouraged a child-centred approach, building on the emerging interests of the children but guided by the adult (Tovey, 2012). He also viewed the teacher as a guide in the learning process, not a mere transmitter of knowledge. Frobel's views align closely with my values of learning in the junior infant classroom, hence they too are foundational in this study.

Another theorist who influences my practice and this thesis is that of Jerome Bruner. Bruner's perspectives on language acquisition hugely shaped how we understand children's language learning. Bruner did not begin the study of language acquisition until later in his career when he arrived in Oxford in the 1970s (Tomasello, 2001, as cited in Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001). During his time in Oxford, he dedicated considerable time to exploring children's language and communication. Bruner critiqued Chomsky's view on language as underestimating the importance of interaction and relations with others within the process (Smidt, 2011). His research highlighted the important aspect of using interactional partners to support communication. A central idea in his research focuses on the idea of 'formats', these are routine experiences or familiar settings that children encounter that scaffold and support their language development (Smidt, 2011). Echoing Vygotsky, he highlighted the importance of scaffolding in the language learning process for children (Smidt, 2011). He also underscored the importance of joint and shared attention within the language acquisition process for children. Of particular

relevance to this thesis is how he emphasised that narrative allows children to make sense of experiences and the world that surrounds them (Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001). For Bruner narrative was much deeper than merely storytelling. To him, it enabled children to express emotions, make sense of social and cultural norms that surround them and supported them in understanding their lived experiences (Smidt, 2011). Additionally, he emphasised the importance of cultural significance and cultural learning in this process, something which I view as integral within my classroom.

To conclude, according to the NCCA (2018) it is important to encompass various aspects of theoretical perspectives on childhood development. There is no "universal theory that encompasses all of the dimensions of children's learning and development" (NCCA, 2018, p. 56), and they encourage a mosaic approach that integrates many theoretical perspectives. In summary, the theories of Bruner, Vygotsky and Froebel have influenced my daily practice as a teacher and are closely aligned to my values. These theorists and their principles will be interwoven into my thesis, and indeed my daily practice, to ascertain how best to motivate children in their vocabulary learning process.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This section will outline the structure of my thesis. There are five sections within this thesis.

1.6.1 Chapter One- Introduction

Chapter One details the research question and the proposed aims of this SSAR. It also describes my professional and personal background that has led me to undertake this research and select this specific research question. This Chapter also outlines my core values and outlines the theoretical perspectives of Bruner, Vygotsky and Froebel that underpin my practice and research. To conclude, it provides a summary of all the chapters within this thesis.

1.6.2 Chapter Two- Literature

Chapter Two outlines the literature that underpins my research question. It discusses how children develop the English language and vocabulary. It then discusses motivation theory and applies it to language learning. Information will then be presented on picturebooks as a tool for vocabulary acquisition and repeated readings of picture books. Following this, a discussion of play and teaching strategies will be presented.

1.6.3 Chapter Three-Methodology

This Chapter will outline AR and provide a rationale for its selection. It will differentiate between qualitative and quantitative research and then describe the research design. Ethical considerations will be discussed, and the data collection tools used in the project will be presented. The method of data analysis will be presented, along with the measures to ensure validity and credibility.

1.6.4 Chapter Four- Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Chapter Four will clarify the data that was collected and the data analysis method used. Three findings will be presented in light of the data analysis. Relevant literature will be cited throughout the section to validate the findings.

1.6.5 Chapter Five- Conclusion

Chapter Five will be the concluding chapter and will act as a summary of the entire thesis. It will describe the limitations of the study and will present any modifications I would implement if I were undertaking this SSAR again. Recommendations for future practice and future research will be provided within this section. It will conclude with my final thoughts on the research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the reader with a background to my research project. It has detailed the research aims and my research question. It has provided the reader with an overview of my personal and professional background. It has described my core values as being of care, respect

and agency. It has then presented theorists that influence my practice and research, those being Vygotsky, Froebel and Bruner. To conclude, it provided a brief synopsis of the upcoming chapters that form this thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The early years of children's life are crucial for children's language development. Research has emphasised the importance of motivation, vocabulary and language development and theorists have contested how children's early language development can set a prerequisite for children's academic development. In this literature review, I will clarify how children learn the English language and vocabulary. I will then discuss expressive language and its importance in children's language development. Following this, I will discern theories of motivation and apply them to the context of English language learning. I will then divulge how picture books can be employed as a tool for teaching vocabulary, and I will then present information regarding the repeated readings of picturebooks. Finally, my literature review will conclude with a discussion of play and teaching strategies to help support young children's vocabulary learning.

2.1 Children's English Language Development

Language development is a crucial element of children's development. It allows children to express ideas, describe concepts, and engage with others in many ways. However, language development is complex and multifaceted (Clark, 2009). In this section, I will analyse how children acquire language and some factors that influence it.

Michaela Tomasello (2009) outlines a usage-based approach to children's language acquisition. Through this approach, he believes children learn language through the necessity of social interactions with people around them. He encourages the creation of deeply rooted linguistic classrooms, rich in social interactions, to facilitate this (Tomasello, 2009).

Rvachew (2018) suggests specific milestones in children's language development. In the first stage, at seven to eleven months, children begin to babble. At approximately three to four years, children may have mostly intelligible speech. From the years of four to six children develop an awareness of rhyme and sounds in words. Following this, from seven to nine years of age, children should have mostly accurate speech (Rvachew, 2018). This view of language development focuses primarily on milestones. Clark (2003) takes a broader view of development milestones, focusing more on the social and functional use of language as children acquire it. She describes that from infancy to age two, children begin language learning and begin to babble and use simple words. She describes, from ages two to six, how children's language abilities increase in complexity and their conversational skills develop. Language development can also be described through the lenses of phonological development, lexical development and morpho-syntactic development (Hoff, 2009). Hoff builds on this, stating that grammatical development is an area that is widely debated in child language development. This is evident through Tomasello's (2009) critique of Chomsky's 'Poverty of Stimulus' and innate universal grammar.

A further aspect of children's language development is their environment. Tommasello (2009) consistently emphasises the importance of a rich linguistic environment that encourages social interactions and language use. Carter et al. (2009) build on this, highlighting the significant role a child's family play in children's language development. This is further supported by the research by Combs and Higgins (2023), which is closely connected to Vygotsky's idea of the ZPD. Their research underscores how parent and child interactions, particularly during picture book reading, result in greater language outcomes. Research has shown a clear link between children's language and literacy skills at the start of school and their experience of language and literacy interaction in their family home (Carter et al., 2009). According to Hansen and Broekhuizan (2021, as cited in Combs & Higgins, 2023) a two-year-old's vocabulary is a strong indicator of their language ability at the

age of eight. It is even suggested that the support a child receives at home for their language development may prevail over the instruction they receive in school (Al Otabia & Fuchs, 2006, cited in Carter et al., 2009). Moreover, children diagnosed with language disorders, including delayed language acquisition, by the age of four are a high risk of academic underachievement and mental health problems in adulthood. (Johnston, 2010). This underscores the critical importance of early vocabulary intervention.

It is also important to consider children who are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) or are bilingual. Research by Dixon, Thomson and Fricke (2020) in the United Kingdom (UK) underlines the importance of early identification of EAL children and intervention in vocabulary to support them. In Northern Ireland, a pilot programme called 'Language Made Fun' aimed to bridge the gap for EAL learners using linguistic teachers to support their language development (Kane et al., 2020). However, it is evident that there are gaps in the research regarding children's language acquisition; more research on EAL and bilingual language development, particularly in the Irish context, would benefit this area further.

2.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is critically important for children's cognitive development and directly correlates with children's reading comprehension and word reading skills (Loftus & Coyne, 2013). According to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), classrooms have a pivotal role to play in building children's vocabulary (2022). In this section, I will discuss the importance of vocabulary teaching, the tiered approach and methods of instruction to support vocabulary learning.

Vocabulary knowledge is often associated with academic performance in schools (Madsen et al., 2023). Children's vocabulary levels in the early years play a crucial role in shaping their progress

throughout school. Many children from lower socio-economic backgrounds may enter school with limited vocabulary. If children begin school with a limited vocabulary, there is an increased probability of them developing language and reading difficulties (Catts et al., 2006, cited in Madsen et al., 2023). According to Loftus and Coyne (2013) a vocabulary gap exists between students from different backgrounds and children who fall behind often struggle to catch up to their peers as they progress through school. It is important to note that children with speech, language, or communication needs may struggle to acquire new vocabulary, often due to difficulties with word learning skills and reading comprehension, or limited opportunities to hear or use vocabulary (NCSE, 2022). Previous research has recognised that many preschool curricula dedicate little time to vocabulary learning and very few teachers provide vocabulary learning opportunities during instructional time (Madsen et al., 2023), hence the importance of focusing on vocabulary in the early years of primary school. It must be emphasised that relying on incidental vocabulary learning is insufficient for students (NCSE, 2022). Further research has recommended a multi-tier framework for teaching vocabulary (Cuticelli et al., 2014) or effective vocabulary instructions based on quality and quantity (NCSE, 2022).

The approach of tiered vocabulary was first coined by Beck and her colleagues in the late 1980s (Beck et al., 2013). This approach involved grouping vocabulary into three tiers. Tier-one vocabulary consists of basic everyday words. Tier-two words are high-frequency words that appear across contexts but are less common than everyday words. Tier-three words are topic-specific or subject-specific words. It should be stated that tiers may differ depending on the students and on the setting. Beck et al. (2013) advocate for robust vocabulary instruction where children are taught tiered words explicitly and have multiple exposures to new words. They recommend the use of stories, class discussions and teacher-designed extended interactive activities to develop a deep

understanding of the vocabulary. This tiered vocabulary approach is supported by the UK's Department of Education (2023).

Building on the approach of Beck et al, Loftus and Coyne (2013) also recommend an approach based on direct instruction. They state that direct instruction is most effective for students if student-friendly definitions and explanations are provided. Their research states that children of kindergarten age can learn complex vocabulary through both whole-class and small group settings. However, their research suggests that vocabulary instruction is more worthwhile for students with an existing high vocabulary proficiency. To counter this, they recommend that students who fall within the vocabulary gap may require direct instruction in the classroom and supplementary support (Loftus & Coyne, 2014). Similarly, Vadasy et al. (2011) discuss the importance of additional vocabulary intervention for students who are EAL learners. They state that vocabulary interventions focusing on tier-two words have long-term benefits for students.

On a national level, the NCSE recommend a select, teach, activate and review (STAR) approach to teach vocabulary under the broader approach of 'Talk Time'. They recommend that tier-two vocabulary is taught in a structured manner, the words are activated through contextual use, and a review is carried out to ascertain retention of previously learned vocabulary (NCSE, 2022). They also recommend that teachers assess pupils' understanding of the word through self-assessment, discuss meaning, and create a child-friendly definition with visual supports and multisensory approaches. They then state that the word should be applied to new contexts. The NCCA encourage explicit targeted instruction, based on tier-two or tier-three words, scaffolding and multiple encounters with vocabulary, ensuring breadth and depth of word knowledge (NCCA, 2019). The importance of vocabulary teaching is further emphasised in the Primary Language Curriculum, in which children's vocabulary skills are identified as critical to their literacy development and they

encourage a broad approach stating that “no one instructional method is sufficient for optimal vocabulary learning” (NCCA, 2023, p1).

2.3 Expressive Language

Expressive language is an important aspect of children’s language development. As educators, it is important to understand and encourage the development of children’s expressive language skills, and conversely, to be able to identify and support children experiencing expressive language difficulties (ELD). In this section, I will discuss expressive language, how to support expressive language development and the importance of supporting children who may experience challenges in this area.

Before discussing expressive language, it is important to differentiate between expressive and receptive language and emphasise that they are differing concepts. According to Gamez et al. (2019) expressive language relates to the ability to communicate our thoughts and needs verbally, whereas receptive language refers to the ability to comprehend the language of others. Yuniari and Sudarmawan (2022) extend expressive language to include gestures and writing to communicate with others, however they state that the written aspect of expressive language may not become apparent until children engage in writing in school.

Ribot et al. (2018) emphasise that language use and language output contribute to children’s expressive language skills, they state that children whose output exceeds their language input will develop expressive language skills at a greater pace. They also emphasise that in school, expressive language plays an important role in daily activities, for example, during circle time and when children are called to answer questions. To improve children’s expressive language skills, it is recommended that parents, and teachers, engage children in a range of activities. These include

modelling correct language, expanding children's answers or questions, giving children choices during conversations or games, giving children wait time, encouraging imitation activities, participating in parallel talk activities, using pictures as a stimulus and paraphrasing complex instructions with simpler language (Yuniari and Sudarmawan, 2022).

Some children may also have difficulties with expressive language or may be diagnosed with ELD. This disorder generally only lasts in childhood. If a child is experiencing ELD they may find it challenging to communicate their thoughts, needs and emotions through language. They may understand the language being spoken to them, but they may struggle to respond through words, writing or gesturally in a coherent way (Yuniari and Sudarmawan, 2022). Guidelines from National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (2015) recommend that children may need support re-telling stories, require prompting to predict, adapted speech and benefit from puppets to build confidence in language use. They also suggest the use of known books or topics as a basis to speak from and that story plans or passing messages within the school setting be employed as a strategy to support children with ELD. Using books, through interactive book reading, is also recommended for EAL children to support their expressive language development (Vanyparys et al., 2024). NEPS (2015) further recommend that younger children with ELD should be encouraged to expand communication, give forced alternatives, engage in repetitive talking, perform role reversals, engage in sentence closure games and answer 'WH' questions and open questions to expand answers beyond yes or no. They also stress that teachers should model language to pupils, encouraging the assimilation of it.

Research by Ribot et al. (2018) emphasises the need to create environments that allow children and bilingual children to foster expressive language skills. Their findings demonstrated that bilingual children who have increased use of both languages will ultimately build their expressive language skills. They advocate for teachers and parents to create environments where diversity in language is

celebrated, building children's expressive language skills as a result. Yuniari and Sudarmawan (2022) support this, emphasising the importance of inclusive environments rich in language for all. They underscore how expressive language disorder and broader speech and language difficulties flourish in non-child-centred environments. This underscores the importance of teachers' interventions and an inclusive classroom environment to support children's development of expressive language skills.

2.4 Motivation

Motivation is a critical component of children's language development and for their desire to learn and attain new vocabulary (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation theory helps to clarify the reasoning behind human behaviours and actions. McInerney et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of understanding the influence of motivation to help ensure engagement and the creation of more effective educational practices. Before analysing motivation theories, it is important to clarify that motivation and engagement are differing concepts. Engagement occurs in cooperation with motivation and engagement is not a direct result of an individual's motivation (McInerney et al., 2011). It is also important to differentiate between intrinsic motivation, which is driven by innate influences and internal pleasure, whereas extrinsic motivation is driven by external influences and often, external rewards (Deci et al., 2001).

While there are many motivational theories, including Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, I will focus on Self- Determination Theory (SDT) within this research, as it closely aligns with my values. SDT suggests that motivation is affected by three fundamental needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (O'Brien, 2018). Autonomy relates to how responsible one feels over their actions and decisions. If a student has more autonomy, they are

more likely to have high levels of motivation and engagement. (O'Brien, 2018). Competence relates to how capable one feels in their ability to complete a given task. Competence can affect beliefs in completing a task, hence impacting their willingness to undertake tasks (O'Brien, 2018). Relatedness underscores how students want to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. It emphasises the need for positive relationships to enhance intrinsic motivation and pupil engagement (O'Brien, 2018). SDT focuses on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation also.

Another relevant and related educational motivation theory to SDT is Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). CET focuses on how extrinsic rewards impact intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001). Deci et al. (2001) underscore how extrinsic rewards can undermine learner autonomy and could worryingly decrease long-term motivation once the reward is removed. In some cases, verbal rewards can enhance intrinsic motivation for some children, but it does not apply to all children, especially if it is seen as controlling (Deci et al., 2001). Another important aspect of motivational theory is that of the classroom environment. SDT highlights how teachers should engage in reflection to create an inclusive environment where practices are differentiated for students' individual needs (Nolen et al., 2011).

It is clear that student beliefs correlate with student motivation. Wigfield and Gladstone (2019, cited in Gonida & Serra 2019) underscore how student belief is the largest predictor of performance and that, as students progress in school, these beliefs often strengthen. They state that if students find an area difficult, it may lead to a belief of an inability to complete tasks in that area. It is also suggested within this article that parental perceptions have a direct influence on children's values and beliefs in the area and that parental beliefs can often follow stereotypes that may be gender-based.

To conclude, it is evident that motivation is closely linked to engagement and that they are both key factors in the language learning process. It is also important for education to consider how intrinsic and extrinsic factors greatly influence learning outcomes.

2.5 Picture Books as a Tool for Vocabulary Learning

Picturebooks are integral for young children's language-fostering, reading, and writing skills. Picturebooks provide an excellent context through which teachers can scaffold and support children's learning in several ways (Snell et al., 2015). Wolfenbarger and Snipe (2007) state that the words, picture, and book have been compounded to form picturebook, to highlight the dual role of image and text within them. In this section, I will discuss the importance of picturebooks, how they act as a tool for children to learn vocabulary and how read-alouds support this.

Picturebooks have long been identified as a valuable tool for supporting children's vocabulary growth. Picturebooks act as a meaningful, engaging context for children to become introduced to new vocabulary and the illustrations throughout further support vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). Picturebooks allow children to develop their comprehension competencies for understanding, these include their microprocesses, integrative, metacognitive, elaborative and macroprocess competencies (NCCA, 2024). They are also powerful tools for EAL children (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). While undoubtedly, picturebooks are important for children's vocabulary development, it should be noted that with our world becoming increasingly visual, it is crucial to build good illustrative habits within children (NCCA, 2024), and picture books provide an appropriate context for this. Beck et al. (2013) recommended picturebooks and stories as a key strategy of instruction for children's vocabulary learning. According to Bruner (2021) on average, a picture book will contain approximately eleven new words for children to encounter. It should be noted that not all picturebooks are equally effective for vocabulary learning and that teachers must intentionally select the most effective books (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018).

The NCCA (2024), highlights the importance of selecting high-quality picturebooks, which are picturebooks with high-quality illustrations and high-quality text throughout. High-quality picturebooks provide an extensive source of novel words that are not commonly used in everyday language (Dickinson et al., 2018). When selecting books, teachers should, where possible, use larger themes connected to curricular learning and explore a variety of books within this range. This gives children access to explore intertextuality within themes (NCCA, 2024). The NCCA (2024) also emphasises the importance of considering the range of picturebooks provided to children in the classroom and that they should be diverse in type and genre. This is supported by Crawford et al. (2024) who further stress that picturebooks should reflect diversity in genders, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences to ensure inclusivity. Hiebert (2017, cited in Bruner 2021) highlights how a varied-text picture book diet, comparable to a varied food diet, is important for children's literacy and vocabulary development. The NCCA (2024) encourages classroom picturebooks should include narrative picture books, informational picture books, wordless picturebooks, contemporary picture books, dual-language picture books, picture books by Irish authors and picture books connected to children's interests (NCCA, 2024, p. 8).

Read-alouds are important components of using picturebooks as a tool for vocabulary acquisition. Read-alouds provide a myriad of opportunities for fostering children's vocabulary development, developing children's language and literacy, and modelling correct reading structure (Bruner, 2021). Interactive or dialogical read-alouds involve children asking and answering questions and not passively listening (McGee and Schickedanz, 2007). Linking to motivation, Fisher et al. (2004) highlights how teachers perform read-alouds to motivate their students and to build specific knowledge and vocabulary in an area. As part of the San Diego City Schools Programme, teachers in the region are encouraged to read-aloud every day, emphasising the importance of picturebooks for vocabulary learning (Bruner, 2021). Read-alouds consist of different strategies and techniques

teachers use to guide the children through the story in an engaging way. Fisher et al. (2004) identified seven components of effective read-alouds following a large analysis of teacher read-alouds. The first component was matching the book to children's interests, the second component involved teachers practising and pre-viewing selected texts. They then specified how teachers in an effective read-aloud modelled fluent reading while also focusing on the purpose. The fourth component involved teachers using animation and expression while reading. The fifth component was how teachers asked thoughtful questions, often using sticky notes to remind them of the questions. He then connected this to how the teachers encouraged the making of connections to the text. The final component was teachers creating wall charts or posters of selected vocabulary and referring back to them (Fisher et al., 2004). Linking this to the NCCA (2024), they encourage using picture books as objects and reading both the pictures as well as the illustrations. They also advocate for talk, discussion, and dialogue throughout, with a focus on sharing and relating knowledge and connecting to the story. A key point from the NCCA (2024) and Bruner (2021) is the importance of re-reading picturebooks with children. This will be discussed further in the following section.

2.6 Repeated Reading of Picture Books

Repeated reading, repeated read-alouds or re-reading of picturebooks is a recommended practice by the NCCA (2024), who strongly discourage the 'one-and-done' approach. In this segment of my literature review, I will analyse and identify reasons for repeated reading of picturebooks and discuss reasons against it.

Samuels (1979) is often associated with the term 'repeated reading'. However, in the context of this research, it is important to differentiate between repeated reading of passages and picturebooks. Samuels associated the term with reading a short passage several times to improve fluency, often,

this was a timed exercise for children. While he was applying the term to passages of text, I will be analysing this term in relation to repeated reading of picture books through an interactive read-aloud approach.

Repeated readings of picturebooks have many benefits. Children need multiple exposures to books to remember them. Snell et al. (2015) recommend that each repeated reading should act as a scaffold for children's leading to the acquisition of more complex language, which connects closely to Vygotsky's theory of ZPD. It should also be noted that the interactions that occur are an important part of the scaffolding process (Combs & Higgins, 2023). The NCCA advocates for multiple reads of picture books, novels, and poetry to allow children to engage with the text and the vocabulary at a deeper level. They also state it encourages the building of children's confidence in reading. Shanahan (2017, cited in NCCA 2024) states that repeated reading leads to improvements in children's word and oral reading, fluency, and comprehension skills.

The NCCA state that due to the brief nature of picturebooks, teachers can easily facilitate repeated readings of them. Through repeated readings, children become more familiar with the vocabulary, the sequence and gain a greater understanding of the story (NCCA, 2024). They also suggest having multiple copies of the text so that children themselves can engage in repeated reading independently. They further recommend an approach to repeated reading in which extension skills, questions and talking points vary on each day of the repeated reading. Bruner (2021) also advocates for the importance of repeated readings of picturebooks. She suggests that children need many encounters with new words prior to learning them, and often these words may not organically be spoken in everyday conversations. Hence, repeated readings will increase the chances of children acquiring new vocabulary from picture books.

McGee and Schickedanz (2007) encourage repeated read-alouds through a structured approach. They identify repeated read-aloud as a powerful tool for extending children's vocabulary, building

comprehension strategies and a valuable method for children engaging with literature. They recommend that teachers pick five to ten words to teach. In the first read-aloud, they recommend teachers do a book introduction and introduce the main characters. They also recommend that teachers introduce the vocabulary words and ask mainly analytical questions. In the second read-aloud, a day or two after the first read-aloud, the teacher should focus on building comprehension, adding child-friendly definitions, and encouraging children to engage in analytical talk and questions. In this read-aloud, children should participate more actively. In the third read-aloud, it should be a guided reconstruction approach, it should be a shared construct with the teacher, and the teacher should ask questions tactfully. Repeated reading is also a particularly useful strategy for children who are EAL learners (Monobe et al., 2017). This approach encourages children who are EAL learners to feel comfortable and builds greater confidence within them, as it also allows them to learn phrases and encourages them to develop a motivation to read.

Some theorists have suggested that there may be disadvantages to repeated readings of books. Frey and Fisher (2018) suggest that young children love repeated readings of books, but this can often diminish as they mature in school. They suggest that reasons for this may include teachers failing to make references to the print of the book during repeated readings, they also often repeat reading for narrow purposes such as warm-ups or time fillers, and teachers may also avoid repeated readings as they privilege independent reading more (Frey & Fisher, 2018). This can cause a reluctance for children to engage in repeated readings. To avoid this, Frey and Fisher encourage that when re-reading, to vary the purpose, ask broader questions and encourage children to look deeper in the text for evidence. It is also suggested by the NCCA (2024) that teachers avoid repeated readings as they fear the children will be bored and lack enthusiasm. Furthermore, teachers often only read a book once as they try to rush through curriculum content and read more books (Snell et al., 2015). However, it is clear from the evidence presented here that repeated readings of picture books offer

a myriad of benefits, but the teacher's approach to repeated readings can shape or hinder their success.

2.7 Teaching Strategies and Play for Vocabulary Learning

Play has many benefits for children, including developing social skills, cognitive skills, and language skills (NCCA, 2023). It also has an extensive impact on children's language development and symbolic and imaginative play present excellent opportunities for children to practice expressive language and build their vocabulary (Whitebread et al., 2017).

Last year, Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to six years of age in Ireland, was revised and redrafted following extensive consultation. It should be noted that Aistear is a framework to underpin teaching and learning and is not a curricular area or time of the school day. Instead, Aistear should be viewed as a scaffold for educators to support and enrich the learning and development of the children in their care (NCCA, 2024). The new framework for Aistear still encompasses the four key themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking, but places a renewed emphasis on play-based learning across all areas, including but not limited to child-led play, shared play and play-based intentional experiences (NCCA, 2024). To reflect the cultural diversity of Ireland, the new framework places an emphasis on inclusion and diversity, emphasising that all children should have equal access to learning opportunities that are culturally diverse and responsive (NCCA, 2024). Furthermore, the updated framework emphasises language and vocabulary and how this is supported through practices under Aistear. The theme of communicating underscores that children should partake in extensive activities for communicating, including storytelling. The renewed framework sheds a new light on

the importance of the educator for the children being agentic and responsive to the needs of the children within their care.

Aistear's idea of play as a framework relates closely to a theory by Toub et al. (2018) that play is a learning context. They suggest that play is a crucial context, particularly for language development and they support the idea of 'Read-Play-Learn.' 'Read-Play-Learn' advocates for a shared book reading experience focusing on learning vocabulary, followed by play. This approach stresses the importance of incorporating play-based activities related to vocabulary from books for children to develop a deeper understanding of the vocabulary. Their findings suggest that children acquire new vocabulary in an easier manner when they participate in play activities using the vocabulary and identify a link between storybook, vocabulary, and play. Their research also demonstrated gains in children's receptive and expressive language following this approach. They advocate for a play-based approach to reading and vocabulary learning, highlighting that this approach supports children's language development in the most effective way.

Other strategies to support children's vocabulary learning in the classroom are word displays of the vocabulary from the picturebooks. According to Fisher et al. (2004) this is a key step during shared reading, and teachers should refer to it to reinforce learning. Guidelines from the NCCA (2023) also promote the idea of using visuals of vocabulary to support pupil learning. Zucker et al. (2021) recommend that teachers focus on teaching tier-two or tier-three words using strategies such as child-friendly definitions and picture cards or visual flashcards of the vocabulary and revising before, during and after reading. Additionally, this is an effective way to support pupil learning of vocabulary from picture books for children who are EAL learners (Riyadi et al., 2024). Research from Hassinger-Das et al. (2016) demonstrates that combining vocabulary with learning games based on the vocabulary enhances children's expressive language of the target words, highlighting the importance of post-reading activities that approach word learning in a motivating and playful

manner. These approaches suggest that a variety of visual and interactive strategies are important in supporting children's vocabulary learning experiences using picturebooks within the classroom.

2.8 Conclusion

In this Chapter, I presented relevant research and background information that relates to my research question. I presented an insight into how children acquire the English language and learn vocabulary. I then explained expressive language and discussed motivational theory. I then presented research on how picture books can be employed as a tool for vocabulary acquisition and then shared perspectives on repeated reading of picture books. To conclude my literature review, I discussed play and teaching strategies to assist in vocabulary learning. The methodology for this research project will be outlined in the following Chapter.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology of the Study

3.0 Introduction

In the previous Chapter, I explored the literature concerning my research question. In this Chapter, I will describe the research methodology of this study. I will clarify the purpose of this self-study action research project (ARP) and provide reasons for selecting this methodology. I will discuss the nature of qualitative and quantitative research and distinguish it from other types of research. I will then elaborate on my research design and examine my research's ethical considerations. I will then present my data collection tools and justify the reasoning behind their selection. Following this, I will address data analysis and present my data analysis method. To conclude, I will examine the concepts of validity and credibility and how I will relate them to my research.

3.1 Introduction to Action Research (AR)

Research paradigms are beliefs, perspectives, or assumptions that guide research. It is common for researchers to bring personal beliefs to their research; these inherent beliefs often inform the theories guiding their research and the research methodology they choose (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Common research paradigms include positivist and interpretivist (Glenn et al., 2023). While it is important to be aware of other research paradigms based on my beliefs and what I would like to accomplish from this study, I have chosen AR as the research methodology. Bassey (1990, as cited in Glenn et al., 2023) referred to AR as the third research paradigm. This type of research appealed to me as it would allow me to engage with self-study. AR also aligns closely with my values, theoretical perspectives that inform my practice and supports teacher development through cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors (Shabani, 2016).

AR was a term first coined in the mid-twentieth century by Kurt Lewin. It is a prevalent research methodology in the realm of education due to its collaborative and participatory nature, which aligns easily with education settings (McNiff, 2013). While there is no one specified manner to engage in AR it is based on engaging with a spiralled inquiry cycle where self-reflection is a critical (McNiff, 2013). It generally follows a cyclical pattern of reflection, planning, action, observation, and data collection that can occur over several cycles (Johnson, 2020). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) formulated a model that involved four steps: plan, act, observe and reflect. It should be noted that AR usually consists of multiple cycles, and cycles can even occur simultaneously.

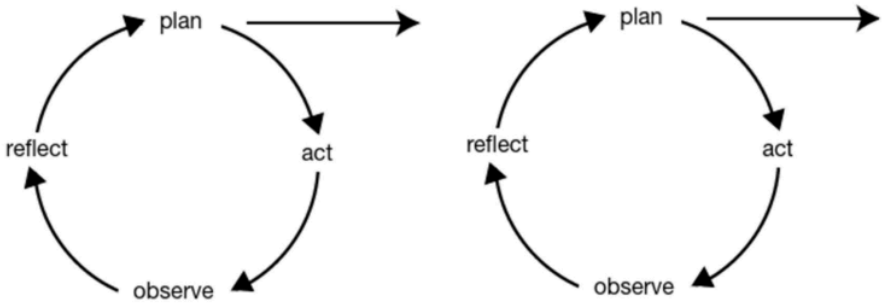

Figure 3.1 McNiff (2013) Sequences of action-reflection cycles

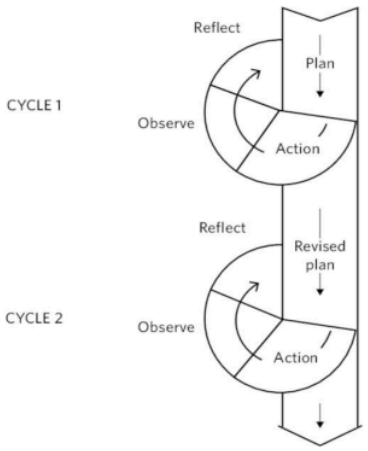

Figure 3.2 Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) action research model

According to McNiff (2013), AR is not a solitary activity but a product of learning and interaction within a specific context, in which people seek improvement or change. Hence, it is associated with practice-based research. Reason and Bradbury (2008, as cited in McNiff 2013) state that AR may also be first-person, second-person, or third-person depending on who it involves. These varying perspectives allow AR to be approached in numerous ways, increasing its flexibility further. This heightened its appeal to me as a research methodology.

3.2 Rationale for Selecting AR

Most forms of AR are based on values. As this research is taking place in a school, it will also take the form of educational AR, which is deeply rooted in values and will hopefully lead to the development of an educational theory (Glenn et al., 2023). This methodology resonated with me as I place a great emphasis on my values, both ontological and epistemological. I believe that as a teacher, I must try to understand my students and their view of the world with an emphasis on building relationships with them. My overarching values of care, respect and agency enable me to do this. My research will take the form of self-study action research (SSAR) as I endeavour to improve my practice through ongoing self-analysis and self-reflection (Whitehead, 2018).

Researcher positionality refers to the researcher's viewpoint and position within the research (Holmes, 2020). Holmes (2020) stresses the importance of engaging in reflexivity to examine the researcher's position throughout the research. He also stresses the importance of social connections to the group being studied by the researcher. This is particularly pertinent in my role as a teacher-researcher, as this overlap could lead to power imbalances and a misalignment of my values (Ladkin, 2017). This is supported by Whitehead's (1989, as cited in Whitehead 2018) idea of a living contradiction, in which actions during the research process contradict personal values. In Chapter

Two, I cited how children's vocabulary knowledge in the early years of school can predict their vocabulary knowledge in later years. Through this research, I endeavour to decipher if I can motivate children to learn a greater amount of vocabulary using picture books as the basis. Hence, I aspire to live closer to my values as I wish to support and engage all children's learning within my class (Whitehead, 2018).

Through engagement with AR, I will have opportunities to critically reflect on my practice, leading to improvement of my practice and the generation of practical knowledge in this area. AR also supports the mixed methods approach for gathering data, which I used in this AR study. As AR is strongly correlated with social justice, I endeavour to contribute to positive change through the generation of educational theory that leads to the flourishing of children's education in this area (Kindon et al., 2008, Whitehead, 2018).

3.3 Mixed Methods Approach

The selection of a data research type is a personal choice. Data collection helps us track our improvements and should align with our values (Glenn et al., 2023). Generally, data collected during research projects tends to be either qualitative or quantitative data. Quantitative data can be measured and substantiated numerically or scientifically (Glenn et al., 2023). While AR can include quantitative data, the structure of AR also easily lends itself to the collection of qualitative data. Qualitative data is non-numerical and describes meaning, descriptions and perspectives (Taylor et al., 2016). According to Clark et al. (2020, as cited in Glenn et al., 2023), qualitative data focuses more deeply on the meaning and the context and is more descriptive.

Qualitative data also allows the researchers to view research participants and the research setting more holistically, considering more personal and experiential factors (Taylor et al., 2016). It also allows the researchers to emphasise the meaningfulness of their study (Taylor et al., 2016).

By combining both data types through a mixed methods approach, it ensured a comprehensive understanding of my research question. The quantitative data from the emoji-surveys helped highlight patterns, whereas the qualitative data from the dialogue with my critical friends and validation group, reflective journal and observations provided depth and context. This mixed approach resonated with me as it underscores the importance of using multiple data collections to improve my teaching practices and the learning experiences of the children whom I teach, while also aligning with my values.

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Research Site

This research took the form of SSAR. The focus of this study was on critical reflection and personal improvement with the view of improving my teaching practices and the learning experiences of the children whom I teach. As my research took place within my classroom, it was also educational AR (Glenn et al., 2023). Educational AR encourages a focus on self-study and Living Education Theory (Glenn et al., 2023).

The project was conducted in a Junior Infant classroom, where I was the class teacher. The school is an all-boys school in an urban, predominantly middle-class area. Two hundred and twenty children are currently in attendance at the school, and the school employs thirteen teachers and nine special needs assistants.

3.4.2 Research Participants and Gatekeepers

Prior to starting the research in a classroom, consent must be received from numerous parties. Gatekeepers were identified from the outset, including the school's board of management and the principal. Gatekeepers control access in the setting, in this case, the school, and are there to protect the interests of the children (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Hence, it was imperative that I acquired consent from the board of management and principal, as they were the main gatekeepers in the setting. The board of management and the principal were provided with an information letter, an information sheet, and a consent form (See Appendices A-C). Following a meeting, they granted me approval to conduct this research project.

While Emmel (2013) argues that sampling is not a suitable term in qualitative research, convenience sampling was used in this AR as I applied my intervention in my Junior Infant classroom, where my students were participants in my research. Consent forms, information sheets and information letters were distributed to parents before the research commenced (See Appendices D-F). Assent forms and child-friendly information letters were also distributed to the children (See Appendices G-H), which they completed with their parents. Only the children from whom I received consent forms and assent forms were allowed to participate. In total, seventeen pupils were permitted to partake in the study. I also provided a consent form to my critical friend and the three members of my validation group. My supervisor also played a crucial role in my AR, providing me with invaluable feedback throughout. Letters of permission, information letters and consent and assent forms are attached in my appendices below. (See Appendices A-J).

3.4.3 Research Implementation

The research took place over nine weeks from February 2025 to May 2025. This took into account school holidays, of which there were three weeks of holiday time during this time. My critical friend

supported me throughout this process through regular meetings and correspondence, offering advice and support from the start to the completion of this thesis project. I met with the members of my validation group once a week, usually for ten or fifteen minutes, to discuss the progress of my research with my class. I completed post-reflective notes based on these discussions.

My research consisted of three AR cycles. I selected three AR cycles as I felt they aligned well with my values and intentions for this research project. I believed three cycles would allow for depth and reflection over time, and allow for progression with themes of vocabulary in line with my classroom planning. Each cycle lasted approximately three weeks in length. I intentionally left a one-week gap between cycles to allow for adequate time to reflect and make adjustments. At the beginning of each cycle, children received a child-friendly emoji survey and were invited to complete it anonymously. Through this survey, I endeavoured to gather information on their motivation to learn new vocabulary and use the new vocabulary. This survey was based on the emoji-survey Massey (2022) used to measure children of a similar ages attitudes towards maths.

During each cycle, the children engaged with repeated read-alouds of picture books. They also engaged with displays, flashcards, follow-up activities and discussion and dialogue based on the vocabulary within the picturebooks. At the end of each cycle, they completed a post-cycle emoji survey.

Overview of Research Cycles		
Cycle 1	**Cycle 2**	**Cycle 3**
February 2025	March 2025	April/May2025 (Due to Easter Holidays)
Theme: The Vets	Theme: The Garden Centre	Theme: Inventors

Figure 3.3 Overview of Research Cycles

Overview of the Picturebooks		
Cycle 1	**Cycle 2**	**Cycle 3**
The Hospital Dog	The Tiny Seed	Audrey the Amazing Inventor
Superhero Like You	The Enormous Morning	Rosie Revere Engineer
MOG the Vet	The Extraordinary Gardiner	Jabari Tries

Figure 3.4 Overview of the Picturebooks

Each week of the research, three lessons took place using one selected picture book. The picture books changed weekly, and the weekly book was linked to our theme for that month. This was linked to school planning in the Infant classes, as we teach thematically, with each theme lasting for approximately four weeks or a month. Consequently, the read-alouds and associated activities were integrated into regular classroom teaching. While not all children had parental consent or assent for the data collection methods, such as the child-friendly emoji surveys, observations, or reflections, they were still able to fully engage in the read-alouds and activities, as they formed part of our curriculum learning for that theme.

I spent a considerable amount of time selecting high-quality picturebooks that aligned with the themes. The NCCA encourages teachers to analyse picturebooks before read-alouds to ensure they engage children, model rich language and are inclusive (NCCA, 2024). I then selected tier-two vocabulary from each of the picture books (Beck et al., 2013). It is also recommended in Irish policy that teachers pre-select key vocabulary to focus on during picturebook reading (NCCA, 2023). As tier-two vocabulary may differ depending on your setting and the children, I spent much time deciphering which tier the vocabulary was likely situated in for the majority of pupils within my class. Once the pre-selected tier-two vocabulary was decided upon, I then typed the key vocabulary

into a list, reading through it before read-alouds and having it close to hand during the read-alouds also (See Appendix L). Prior to the read-alouds, I also created visual flashcards of these words (See Appendix M), with appropriate and understandable visuals of the vocabulary for the children (Zucker et al., 2021). Pre-selection of the words in advance made it easier for me to track children's motivation to use the targeted words during lessons, and additionally, outside of the lessons. I also created a display within the classroom of the picturebooks and the tier-two vocabulary I had pre-selected to revisit and reference (Fisher et al., 2004) (See Figure 3.3). Children had access to the books in the library outside of the lessons, should they have wanted to read and engage with them further. To re-enforce the vocabulary, following the read-alouds, the children played teacher-made games based on the vocabulary. Some of these games were digital games that I created using Wordwall online (See Figure 3.4) and some games were concrete games that the children completed in pairs or small groups (See Figure 3.5). The games primarily focused on helping the children learn the vocabulary through matching pictures together, saying the vocabulary or identifying the images. In Figure 3.5 the children took turns turning the pictures and saying the tier-two words aloud. Each concrete vocabulary game in this ARP had two sets, so the children could adapt the games to play snap, matching games, or turn-and-say games. By giving the children choice in how to use the games, it developed their agency in the process, which aligns with my values. According to Hassinger-Das et al. (2016), combining vocabulary with learning games based on the vocabulary enhances children's expressive language and motivation to learn the vocabulary.

Each picture book was re-read three times throughout the week. Three repeated reads are the number generally recommended to be effective to acquire targeted vocabulary (Beck and McKeown, 2007). According to the NCCA (2023) repeated read-alouds help ensure that children have an adequate opportunity to deepen text comprehension and support their vocabulary development. During and indeed prior to the read-alouds I followed Fisher et al.'s (2004) seven components for effective read-

alouds. Hence, following book selection, I previewed and practised reading the picturebooks aloud in advance of lessons. During the read-alouds, I modelled fluent reading and expression. A central aspect of my read-alouds was encouraging student dialogue, as this links closely to my values. I would ask purposeful questions that I had planned in advance. Often, I would have prompts for these questions written on small sticky notes to remind me. I would encourage the children to make connections to differing parts of the story, the images, the setting etc. Finally, in line with the main goal of this research, the pre-selected tier two vocabulary was highlighted throughout the read-alouds. In line with Zucker et al. (2021) the flashcards of the pre-selected vocabulary were used before, during and after the read-alouds to remind children of the vocabulary alongside child-appropriate definitions that I had decided upon in advance.

In conclusion, this approach of using picture books to help children learn and use new vocabulary enabled me to determine if this approach improved or decreased their motivation for vocabulary learning by the end of this ARP.

Figure 3.5 Vocabulary Display in Classroom

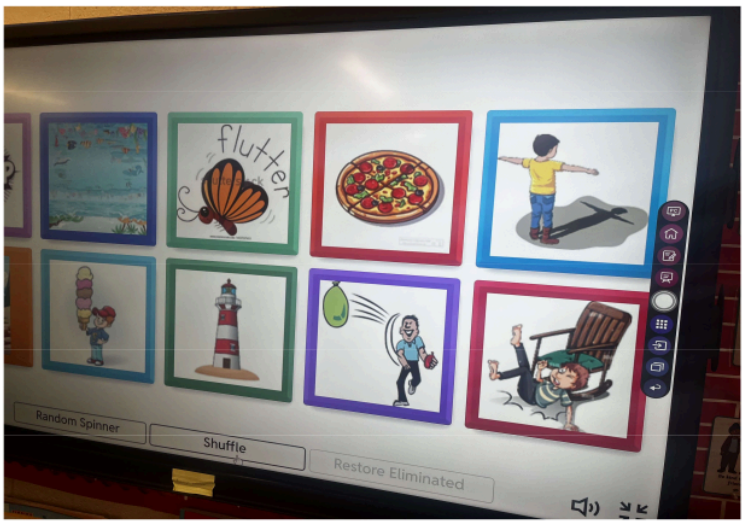

Figure 3.6 Wordwall Digital Games based on the Vocabulary

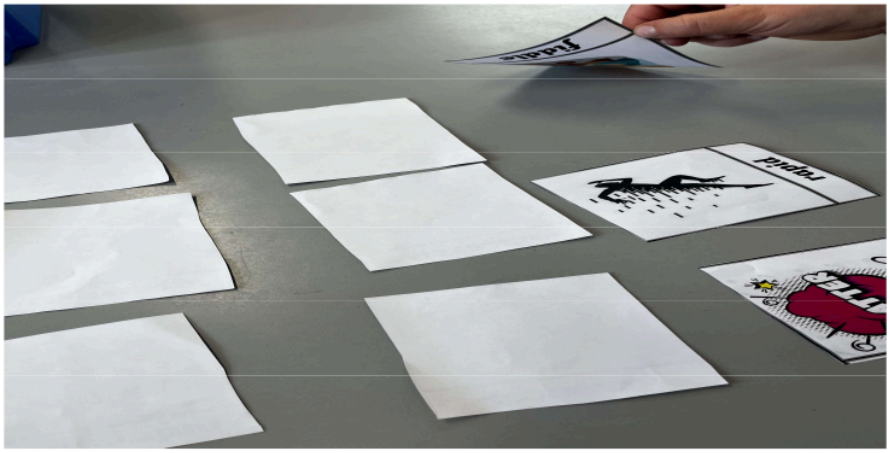

Figure 3.7 Concrete Games based on the Vocabulary

3.4.4 Adaptions made During the Research Cycles

Between cycles, I intentionally scheduled a one-week gap to allow time for reflection on each individual cycle and the data. Through critical evaluations made during this time, I was able to identify adjustments or improvements I could implement. One key adaptation that I made involved

the layout of the emoji-surveys. Reflecting on the age of my pupils, I, following the advice of my critical friend, adapted the surveys to make them more visually clear to the children and to simplify the layout. Together, we agreed that it would be clearer if each question was placed in a separate box with larger spacing between questions to make it less confusing. This helped ensure the children could complete the surveys more confidently.

Additionally, I enhanced the children's autonomy in the research by giving them greater choice in the process. This was something I discussed at length with my critical friend and validation group members, as I wanted to live closer to my values. Following these discussions, I decided to allow the children to help select books to focus on within the broader theme, giving them more autonomy in the process. I would pre-select a group of high-quality books that aligned with our theme and present them to the children, giving them a brief synopsis of them, and would let them decide on which books they would like to focus on as part of that theme. I also allowed them to select between activities, for example, an interactive Wordwall game based on the vocabulary or a matching card game based on the vocabulary instead. This increased engagement and increased pupil agency and autonomy, something that is closely aligned to my values.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues should be a priority for researchers both in advance and during research (Curtis and Curtis, 2011). Researchers need to plan carefully and be ethically sensitive to their context and participants (Curtis and Curtis, 2011). Before commencing this research, ethical approval was sought and granted by the Maynooth University Ethics Board. In line with Maynooth University's Research Ethics Policy, the Ethics Policy outlined in Maynooth's Master of Education student handbook and BERA guidelines, I acknowledged and understood the specific duty of care I had as

a researcher working with children and endeavoured to ensure full ethical responsibility. I also understood the importance of respect for people, beneficence, and justice as an important ethical consideration.

3.5.1 Informed Consent and Assent/Dissent

"The most important aspect of ethically appropriate research is voluntary informed consent" (Curtis & Curtis, 2011, p. 15). In ethical research, participants must be given a choice about their participation (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Parents were provided with an information letter and an information sheet outlining the voluntary research I was conducting, and a consent form for their child. Parental consent was necessary first, and then assent or dissent from the children. The assent forms were presented in child-appropriate language. Assent indicates to a researcher an agreement of the individual, in this case, the children, to participate in the research if they are unable to consent for any reason. Assent was a continuous process throughout the study, and while no child indicated dissent at any time, I was conscious of this through the ARP and would have discontinued their participation if I felt I no longer had their assent (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). I continually reminded the children throughout the process that they could withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason. Similarly, my critical friend and validation group members were provided with assent forms, and I stated to them that participation was voluntary and that there was no obligation on them to partake.

3.5.2 Vulnerability

In ethical research, issues of vulnerability must be considered. Children and young people are perceived as being inherently vulnerable due to their age. Researchers have a heightened responsibility to safeguard vulnerable groups and to minimise risks for these participants (Maynooth University, 2020). The duality or roles of being both a teacher and researcher can increase students'

vulnerability, and researchers should be mindful of individuals' right to withdraw at any time (Maynooth University, 2020). Power dynamics should also be considered, as children's power and agency may be greatly reduced in the classroom setting, and they may feel constrained due to the power imbalance between the researcher/teacher, and the children (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell, 2015). To counteract this, I continuously highlighted to the children and to the parents that the research is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any stage for any reason. I also considered insider-researcher dynamics throughout the project, recognising that I was the class teacher and this could influence the children's responses. To minimise the likelihood of this, I invited the children to complete the child-friendly emoji surveys anonymously. To further reduce vulnerabilities for participants, I always strive to create a classroom environment where all children feel comfortable sharing their opinions, and I only invite children to respond if they wish to do so during lessons. Child Protection Policy was and is followed at all times in line with school policy. As a mandated person, should a child have disclosed to me during this research or at any time, I am legally obligated to follow the necessary steps and report it.

3.5.3 Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Storage

Confidentiality in research data should ensure that data is not passed on without the consent of participants, and anonymity should ensure that no identifiable information of the participants is linked to the data outcomes or published work. To ensure these two principles are upheld in my research, access to data was restricted to my access only. General Data Protection Regulations (2018) (GDPR) principles were also adhered to. Computer data was stored in encrypted forms on a password-protected computer. Hard copy data was anonymised and kept in a locked home office filing cabinet. All participants' names were omitted, and pseudonyms were used. Furthermore, no identifying information about the children or the school were or will be published in this thesis. In line with the Maynooth University Research Ethics (2020) due care will be taken with data, and I

did my utmost to minimise anyone having contact with the data other than me, the data controller. Should the school have had to move to remote teaching during the duration of my research, Google Classroom would have been used.

3.6 Data Collection Tools

Data collection is integral to AR and should be completed accurately and honestly (Glenn et al., 2023). Data collection tools are "methods, devices and instruments researchers use to collect data" (Glenn et al., 2023, p.63-64). The data collection tools you select will vary depending on the data you wish to collect, but should also align with your values. The data collection tools were informed by my values and what I wanted to achieve from this AR project. The tools I selected included my critical friend and validation group, observations, surveys and a teacher reflective journal. Data triangulation will be employed as a method across the data collection tools to support reliability and validity (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.6.1. Observations

In this study, observations were used to understand if children were motivated to learn new vocabulary from the picture books. Throughout the research, I closely observed children's reactions, engagement, dialogue, and overall motivation during the read-alouds and re-reads. Observational data gives researchers first-hand, authentic data that may otherwise go unnoticed (Cohen et al., 2018). In this case, observational notes were taken in a semi-structured manner. This was due to the structure of the infant teaching day, as there is extremely limited time to document in the moment. I placed an observation note pad on my desk, and I would jot down things that I observed spontaneously, such as a child using the vocabulary or increased motivation during an aspect of the

read-aloud. This approach suited the dynamic of my classroom and aligned with my values, as it ensured I had optimal time to engage with the children and support their learning during the school day.

It should be noted that the value of observations is linked to how effectively they are recorded (Taylor, 2015). Taylor (2015) suggests that researchers often jot down reminders about their observations in real-time and will aim to expand on them later. Through observations, researchers "catch the dynamic nature of events to see intentionality and maybe to seek trends and patterns over time" (Cohen et al., 2018, p.544). Building on Taylor's (2015) advice throughout this AR project, I observed children's reactions and engagement with the vocabulary they encountered during picture book read-alouds and re-readings. I recorded these observations in an unstructured manner and expanded on the observations after lessons during my reflective time to determine if using picture books through these methods was motivating the children to learn new vocabulary.

3.6.2 Child-Friendly Emoji Surveys

Glenn et al. (2023) caution against questionnaires as they can be difficult to construct and open to misinterpretation. The complexity of the wording within questionnaires would also hinder data collection, considering the young age of the co-participants in my research. In light of this, I felt child-friendly emoji surveys would be an appropriate collection tool for my ARP. Drawing on Massey (2022) who utilised child-friendly surveys with emojis and drawings to gauge children of a similar ages attitudes towards mathematics in the United Kingdom. He found his emoji-surveys to be highly effective in gauging children's attitudes and gathering accurate data. I found this approach more suitable and in line with my values. Throughout this ARP the children completed six child-friendly surveys, one at the beginning and one at the end of each cycle. I encouraged the children to

complete these anonymously to reduce the influence of power dynamics. This aimed to minimise children feeling pressured to answer the questions in a certain way as I was both their teacher and researcher in this process (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell, 2015). Through the completion of the child-friendly surveys, I aimed to analyse and gather data on their motivation to learn and use new vocabulary from picture books. By observing their responses to the child-friendly surveys, I was able to create patterns and form themes about children's motivation for learning and using vocabulary.

3.6.3 Reflective Journal

Reflection is an integral part of the AR process. Schön's (1995 as cited in McNiff, 2013) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action model was created as a tool to improve one's practice. He emphasised the importance of engaging in both types of reflection, both during the experience and after the experience, as integral to professional learning and development. Engaging in reflection is not always a straightforward process, you can start at one place with one viewpoint and end up somewhere entirely different with a different stance entirely (McNiff, 2013). Glenn et al. (2023) highlight the importance of engaging in reflection at some point in the day, as through this meaning-making process of reflection can we truly engage with AR.

Throughout this AR, I engaged with reflection after school and used a combination of Brookfield's four lenses (2017) and Kolb's reflective model (1984, as cited in University of Hull, 2024). I created prompt questions based on these to help me engage with reflection initially (See Appendix K). I used my observations to help me critically reflect at the end of the day. In infant teaching, the day is remarkably busy, and lots of unplanned and unexpected things can happen throughout the day. Hence, taking short notes to refer back to, proved very beneficial for me as it ensured I would not

forget any critical observations. “Critical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions” (Brookfield, 2017, p.3). Using the combination of Brookfield’s lenses and Kolb’s model allowed me to challenge and reflect deeply on my teaching and assumptions. Initially, this was a difficult process, at the beginning, my reflections in my reflective journal lacked depth and clarity at times. However, through daily reflections and using my prompt questions as a guide, my ability to critically reflect improved. As I engaged more with my journal, I began to identify why certain things had occurred, things that had improved or patterns that had emerged. Using both the lenses and the model allowed me to view things from multiple perspectives. I hope the use of my reflective journal in the future will continue to refine and improve my teaching, leading to renewed professional growth that will continue to benefit the children in my care.

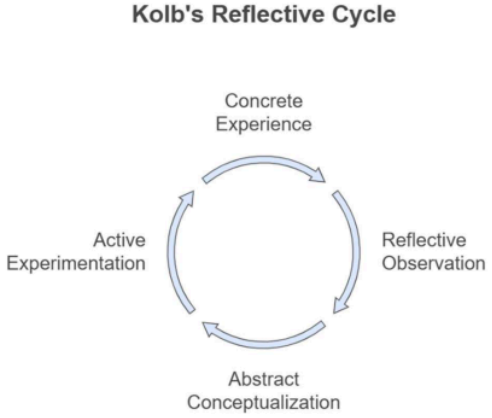

Figure 3.8 Kolb’s (1984) Reflective Cycle

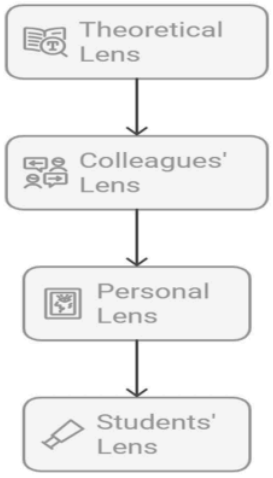

Figure 3.9 Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses

3.6.4 Critical Friend and Validation Group

As stated previously, AR is collaborative and participatory in nature (McNiff, 2013). "Sharing your tentative ideas with critical friends and validation groups from the outset is an important aspect of educational action research" (Glenn et al., 2023, p.29). With this in mind, it is important to select the people for this role carefully. The selected people should provide constructive feedback and engage critically with you on your topic (Glenn et al., 2023). My critical friend is another individual on the programme with me, she offers me advice and insights into aspects of my project and offers me a unique perspective. My validation group consists of three colleagues within my school. One colleague is another infant teacher within my school who has over twenty years of experience in infant classes. The other colleagues within my validation group are my special needs assistant and my special education teacher. Both of these individuals work with me daily and are present in my classroom for various activities throughout the day. I felt the individuals within my validation group would have an opportunity to see the lessons that were relevant to my ARP take place within my

classroom and could provide me with feedback and validation. Feedback from my critical friends and my validation group kept me aligned with my values and caused me to reflect on occasions when I may not have lived as closely to them as I may have liked. I completed post-reflective notes following meetings and dialogue with my critical friend and validation group members. In the subsequent meeting, these notes were read through and approved or refined. I followed this approach as the members of my validation group stated they felt more comfortable participating in this way rather than using audio or video recording. It also mirrored the school's format for staff meetings. Similarly, my critical friend felt comfortable and at ease with this approach also. Following this approach promoted my critical friend and validation group members' comfort while respecting their preferences simultaneously, which is something I value deeply. (See Appendix T)

3.7 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, there is an ongoing process of data collection and data analysis. Data analysis is a unique research process, and it can be difficult to communicate or teach. Qualitative data analysis in particular requires reasoning, theorising and in-depth thinking; there is no simple procedure to analyse qualitative data (Taylor, 2015). Prior to engaging and selecting a data analysis method, it is imperative to become very familiar with your data through re-reading and re-examining it several times (Taylor, 2015). Through this process, you should begin to 'mine your data,' unearthing new ideas and offering new insights (Glenn et al., 2023). The data analysis method I selected was thematic data analysis for numerous reasons.

3.7.1 Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a data analysis method that identifies, analyses, and produces patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is widely used, especially in qualitative research, but was often a

previously misunderstood analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to data analysis appealed to me for my ARP as it offered flexibility, detailed understanding and was relatively accessible to me as a novice researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step in my thematic analysis will be familiarising myself with the data. To do this, I transcribed the data electronically, including the data from my reflective journal and observations. My post-reflective notes from my critical friend and validation group members were already typed format. I also analysed the emoji surveys, tallying and graphing them. After doing this, I read through the data again, making analytical memos during this process, to record my thinking and help develop my theory throughout the transcriptions (Taylor, 2015). Following this, I generated initial codes and searched for themes. I then reviewed and finessed my themes, concluding with the production of my report and final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Chapter Four will outline in greater detail how I engaged with thematic analysis, leading to the production of my results.

3.8 Validity and Credibility

Researchers of quality research should demonstrate rigour (Glenn et al., 2023). According to Habermas (1976) (as cited in Glenn et al., 2023) researchers should be authentic, comprehensive, appropriate, and truthful. Researchers should have criteria and standards they abide by to enable them to live more closely to their values. Qualitative researchers often emphasise the meaningfulness of their research, this is termed validity (Taylor, 2015). Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and accuracy of the research. Both of these concepts were fundamental to me in undertaking this ARP and linked with my values. To ensure the validity of the research, convenience sampling was used. My convenience sampling group directly impacted my research question to ensure the research was valid. To ensure credibility, I employed the use of data triangulation, a critical friend, and a validation group. I encouraged my critical friend and validation group members to play ‘devil’s advocate’ in relation to my research, as to encourage them to not just passively agree

with me (Glenn et al., 2023). I met with my validation group weekly for approximately ten to fifteen minutes, and I corresponded with my critical friend at a minimum once per week, often much more. At times, I contacted her more often if I felt I needed her support or help. I was and am always open to constructive and critical feedback, and I emphasised the importance of their honesty to me. By implementing these measures, I intended to increase the validity and credibility of my research.

3.9 Conclusion

In this Chapter, I clarified my understanding of AR and discussed my rationale for this ARP. I discussed the nature of qualitative research and distinguished it from other types of research. I then explained my research design, including the research site, research participants and research implementation. I then discussed the ethical considerations, including informed consent, vulnerability, confidentiality, anonymity, and data storage. I then presented my data collection tools, including child-friendly surveys, my reflective journal, observations and my critical friend and validation group. Following this, I discussed data analysis and, more specifically, thematic data analysis. To conclude, I discussed the concepts of validity and credibility and how I applied them to my research. Chapter Four will present my research findings and analyse them using the thematic data analysis described in this section.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.0 Introduction

This section of my action research project (ARP) will present and analyse the data collected during the three cycles of my ARP. First, I will clarify the data that I collected and explain how I organised it. Then, I will explain the data analysis method I employed, that being Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and present my data based on this. Finally, I will present my findings based on my thematic analysis. My findings will be presented to answer my research question:

"How can I use picture books to motivate my Junior Infant class to learn vocabulary?"

I will then discuss three findings. Firstly, Finding One will identify how repeated readings of picture books increased children's vocabulary knowledge and use, and aided text comprehension. Following this, Finding Two will outline how the use of multiple teaching strategies enhanced the impact of picture books on children's motivation to learn and use vocabulary. Finally, Finding Three will discuss how engaging in teacher reflection fostered greater student dialogue and choice within my class. This section will then be concluded.

4.1 Data Analysis, Codes and Themes

It is accepted that thematic analysis is well-suited particularly to qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Hence, Braun and Clarke's thematic data analysis approach was selected for this ARP due to its flexible nature, and it also aligns well with research in educational settings examining teaching and learning (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The main goal of this data analysis approach was to identify themes that would lead to the production of my findings for this section. It was important in my research that the themes I produced went beyond the research question to ensure an in-depth

analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The six steps I followed in my data analysis based on Braun and Clark's (2006) model are outlined below.

Step 1: Familiarisation of data • I transcribed the data from my reflective journal and observations. • I reviewed the typed post-reflective notes from my validation group members and critical friend. • I became familiar with the pre/post-cycle surveys and tallied my results on Microsoft Excel. • I read and re-read through the data, jotting down notes.	**Step 2: Initial Coding** • I identified potential codes during re-reads and noted them, keeping my research question in mind. • Initially, I had approximately twenty codes • I then divided the twenty codes into four groups of five based on shared characteristics. • I then coded my data electronically using Microsoft Word.
Step 3: Searching for Themes • I made mind-maps to help visualise between the codes. • Following this, I tried to build on the group codes and build them into themes.	**Step 4: Reviewing Themes** • I reviewed the themes by revisiting and re-reading the survey tallies and the journal entries. • I refined the themes to ensure they aligned with the data, my research question, and to check for nuances in my data
Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes • I defined and named four themes based on my re-reads. • These four themes were: 1. Building vocabulary through repeated reading of picture books 2. Engaging students through multiple strategies 3. Collaborative meaning-making through dialogue 4. Fostering a student-centred environment. • I read over the corresponding codes for each theme to make sure they aligned.	**Step 6: Producing the Report and Identifying Findings** • Through analysis and re-analysis of these themes, I identified three key findings in my research • I used the thematic analysis to help me write my findings in this section. • I supported my findings with evidence from my data.

Figure 4.1 Steps in the Data Analysis Process that led to the Production of my Findings

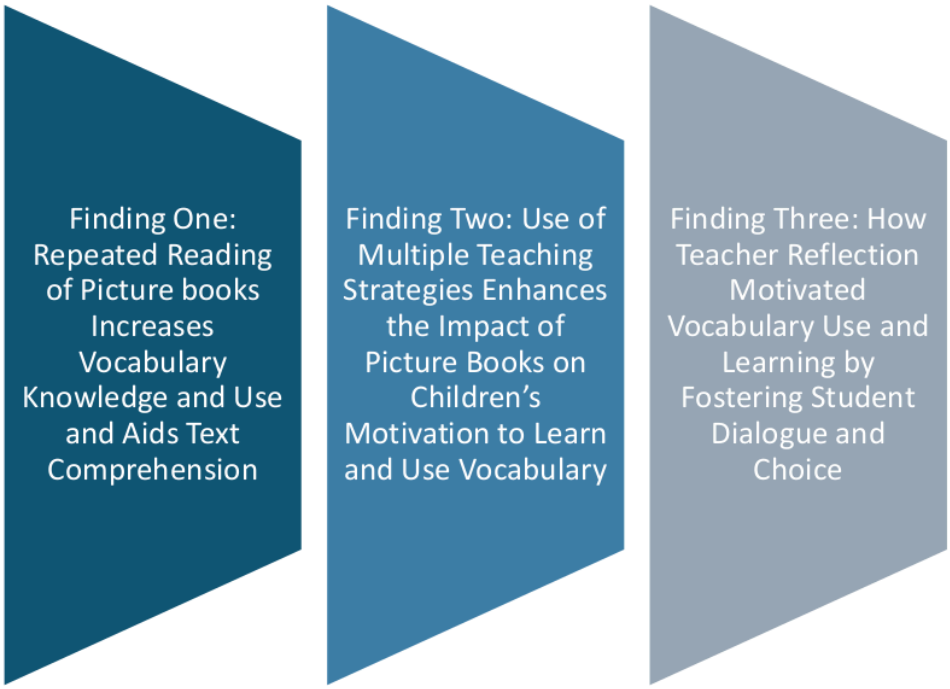

Figure 4.2 Summary of Findings

4.2 Finding One: Repeated Reading of Picture books Increases Vocabulary Knowledge and Use and Aids Text Comprehension

A central finding that emerged from my ARP was that repeated reads of the picture books significantly enhanced children's vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension. Through repeated readings of the picture books, the children's knowledge of the vocabulary and comprehension of the story deepened greatly. Initially, at the beginning of Cycle One, some of the children were unsure and seemed hesitant to engage in repeated readings of the picturebooks. This hesitation from the children reinforced the common 'one-and-done' perception of a book being complete after a singular read. However, with each repeated read and as we progressed through the cycles, the children began to deeply engage and eagerly anticipate the repeated read of each picture book, they even began to request and enquire when the read-alouds were occurring. Overall, the repeated reads resulted in

greater vocabulary knowledge and use and supported a deeper understanding of the picture book's structure. This is supported by evidence from both the teacher's reflective diary and the child-friendly emoji surveys.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)	
"We re-read 'The Hospital Dog' today. The kids seemed confused as to why I was reading it again at first and one of them said ' we read this yesterday,' I explained that its part of what I'm learning about" *(February 11th, 2025)*	"Before the read-aloud today three children had asked me when we were re-reading the story" *(May 2nd, 2025)*

This finding aligns with guidance from the National Council on Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023, p.6) who state that "the best picturebooks require multiple reads to ensure readers truly engage with the text, the vocabulary and the learning opportunities uncovered through discussions stemming from the text and illustrations". I aligned myself closely with Beck and McKeown's approach to vocabulary teaching using picturebooks. According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2013), vocabulary development is more successful for young readers of this age through the context of picture books that are revisited through repeated readings. They also state that repeated readings give children further opportunities to encounter the vocabulary. In my ARP, the repeated readings allowed the children opportunities to recognise and engage further with the selected vocabulary, supporting Bruner's (2021) view that repeated readings of picturebooks support children's learning of the vocabulary within them. With each repeated read-aloud, the children's motivation and engagement with the picture book visibly increased, and as we progressed through the cycles, they enjoyed the consistency and familiarity of the regular read-aloud sessions. They

often inquired when the next read-aloud would be and seemed disappointed when it wasn't on our daily schedule. This underscores the enjoyment they gained from the repeated reads and how motivated they were by the repeated reads.

Over time, the children's initial reluctance began to shift towards anticipation of the vocabulary that was coming up in the picture book. The children's enthusiasm for repeated reads was supported by evidence from the child-friendly emoji surveys. In Cycle One, the number of children who "agreed a lot" that hearing the story through repeated readings helped them learn new words increased from two to four pupils. This was echoed in cycle two with an increase of five pupils who agreed that hearing the stories helped them learn new vocabulary. There was also a marked increase across cycles in the number of pupils interested in picture books overall. (See Appendices U-Z). These results demonstrate their increased motivation, engagement, and familiarity with the words because of their increased encounters through repeated readings. During the repeated read-alouds, the children began to predict what word was coming next as I would turn the page and would seek to identify the word before, we discussed it or before we would encounter it through the read-aloud. At times, the children would get so excited during the repeated reads that they would shout out the word once they had spotted it.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"I reread the story today. The children were motivated to spot the words before I read them. As I opened the page one boy shouted one of the Tier-two words out after correctly spotting it on the page. I discussed this with my critical friend this afternoon and explained how it made me feel" *(March,5th, 2025)*

This enthusiasm to identify the words during the repeated read-alouds continued across the range of picture books the children encountered throughout this action-research project (ARP). Their anticipation of encountering the new vocabulary and using it in this way highlighted the growing recognition of the words and demonstrated an intrinsic motivation present in the vocabulary learning process.

Additionally, the children's use of the vocabulary from the picturebooks extended beyond the classroom and Literacy lessons. During playtime and during yard time, I noticed the children incorporating these words into everyday contexts. My validation group members and I discussed how these situations exemplified how the children were moving beyond passive recognition of the words and highlighted how they were able to actively use and apply the words situationally and in the correct context. My SNA, who is one of my validation group members, had also heard the children using the selected vocabulary on yard when I was not present. The children's increased vocabulary and desire to use it was also remarked on by parents within the class. This is outlined by Beck and McKeown (2007) as a crucial part of vocabulary growth. Through organic interactions with the vocabulary in this way, children began to internalise the words and use them actively, further emphasising their increased understanding of the vocabulary and their motivation to use it.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"On yard I heard one of the boys saying 'I'm using my imagination.' It was one of our words." *(March, 7th, 2025)*

Additionally, through repeated readings of the picture books, the children's abilities to comprehend the text in greater depth. This finding is supported by NCCA (2015), who advocate for multiple reads of picture books to fully engage children with the text, vocabulary and other learning

opportunities. Similarly, Beck and McKeown (2007) outline that repeated exposure to vocabulary during read-alouds, combined with supportive instruction, allows children to develop a deeper sense of the vocabulary, story and comprehension during the repeated reads. In my research, children frequently demonstrated the ability to make connections between differing parts of the story, these connections often only emerged during repeated reading sessions. This was evident when one child made a connection between a small visual detail in the opening of the story and how it related to the plot.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"Today I was impressed with how they made connections between different parts of the story that would only become clear after re-reading. For example, one of the boys noted the thorn on page 1." *(February 18th, 2025)* "We read our story again today. The kids were very familiar with the vocabulary. One of the words this week was 'eaves'. One of the children made a connection saying that his dad had went to the eaves of their attic to get their summer clothes for holidays**.** It was great to see them use their words in context. Another boy added he doesn't have eaves in his attic as he lives in an apartment. It made me feel proud to hear them organically continue the discussion about this new word" *(May 8th, 2025)*

These connections illustrated how the repeated read-alouds allow children to notice patterns, make inferences and link vocabulary with visual and contextual clues, skills which are emphasised in the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (2019). It also aligns with the emphasis on 'meaning making' from the PLC (2019) as the children often would use the encountered vocabulary and transfer and

relate it to their own lives. Additionally, the comparison between the pre-cycle and post-cycle student emoji surveys echoes this finding. The findings from the surveys suggest that the majority of children thought that not only did picture books help them learn new words, but they were also interested in learning new words from picture books, but also that hearing the new words more than once through repeated readings helped them learn the new words. (See Appendices U-Z).

To conclude, repeated readings not only played a crucial role in strengthening children's motivation to learn and use new vocabulary from the picture books in my research but also greatly aided their comprehension and thus deepened their understanding of the vocabulary further.

4.3 Finding Two: Use of Multiple Teaching Strategies Enhances the Impact of Picture Books on Children's Motivation to Learn and Use Vocabulary

The second key finding that emerged from the data analysis was the significant impact of using multiple teaching strategies to assist the children in learning the new vocabulary. The use of multiple teaching strategies to ensure inclusive teaching and learning is something I consistently strive to incorporate into my teaching, as it reflects my values of care and respect for all types of learners. The data suggested that the use of multiple teaching strategies in my research not only enhanced vocabulary acquisition from picture books but also boosted children's motivation to learn and use the vocabulary. The child-friendly emoji surveys that were completed at the start and end of each cycle also noted a consistent increase in the confidence of the children to use the words, especially in the post-cycle survey at the end of Cycle Two and most notably at the end of Cycle Three (See Appendices U-Z). This data supports the observational data from my reflective journal entries, which suggested that the integration of multiple strategies to support children's vocabulary learning from picture books significantly enhanced their motivation to learn and use vocabulary. In this section, I will outline the teaching strategies I employed, including visual flashcards, displays and interactive games.

A key element to assist the children in learning the new vocabulary was the use of visual strategies to support vocabulary learning. For each selected picture book I used, I created visual flashcards of the targeted tier-two words (See Appendix M). Each flashcard contained the word and a visual representation of it. I used the flashcards to introduce, explicitly define the word, and discuss the word with the children both before and after the read-alouds. Zucker et al. (2021) encourage this type of approach, and Wasik, Hindman and Snell (2015) emphasise the importance of defining words for children while book reading. The flashcards assisted with this. Additionally, a recent study by Riyadi et al. (2024) also supports the idea that using visuals such as flashcards during storytelling can aid vocabulary learning, especially for English as an additional language (EAL) learners. This further reflects my values and is particularly important within my class due to the large proportion of EAL learners. Furthermore, I made a display of these flashcards and the cover of the picture book they were taken from, in a prominent area of the classroom visible to all the children. This display remained visible throughout my research, and it was added to after a new picture book was introduced. The children were highly motivated by this display, and I noted how they were looking at the beginning of the research.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"I revised our words from yesterday today and created a display board area. The kids were intrigued by the new display and kept looking at it. Even my SET and validation group member noted it when she came into the room" *(February 11th, 2025)* "During playtime I noticed the boys writing from the word display board." *(April 7th, 2025)*

"In our writing copy L. wrote some of the words from our display"

(March 26th, 2025)

Another finding of the visual flashcards and display was how the children interacted with it as a result. According to Fisher et al. (2004) displays are powerful tools for vocabulary learning, and it is important to create and refer to them to support vocabulary learning. After the research began, I often noted the children looking at the display, even after the formal research had concluded, they still referenced the vocabulary from it and would often point and look at it. Members of my validation group who would regularly be in my classroom during the day also noted this. We discussed the positive impact the display was making during our weekly meetings. At times, the children even wrote the words from the display in their free writing or at the writing station during playtime, when they are free to choose their own play activities. This self-initiated use and writing of the new vocabulary demonstrates their motivation to use and apply it and highlights how the visual strategy of the flashcards and the word wall display supported this.

Interactive activities also proved a helpful strategy to engage the children, including games and using props. I created word games and utilised 'Wordwall', an online game-making resource, to make games of the selected words to help reinforce the vocabulary. These games allowed the children to engage with the targeted vocabulary in a fun way through matching visuals and the words and matching words. The children were motivated to play the games, and it allowed me to assess their growing understanding of the vocabulary and their recognition of the words and visuals. These games align with Wasik, Hindman and Snell (2015) as they were a post-reading activity related to the vocabulary and research from Hassinger-Das et al. (2016), who recommend combining vocabulary with learning games to enhance children's expressive language of the target words through a playful manner. This is echoed in the emoji surveys, where in Cycle Two, eight pupils

within the class agreed or agreed a lot that learning new words was fun, highlighting the enjoyment of this approach (See Appendix Y). Additionally, the children were so eager to apply their learned vocabulary to other contexts that they even asked me to add items to the role-play corner related to select vocabulary we had encountered in one of the picture books. This eagerness showed their motivation to apply the vocabulary to other situations.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"We finished our last read of 'The Hospital Dog'. One of the kids asked me, 'if we could get a Dalmatian for the role play corner?'. Dalmatian was one of our selected words of the week. The boys really enjoyed the Wordwall game based on the vocabulary". *(February 14th, 2025)*

To conclude, my findings from this section suggest that using multiple strategies strongly enhanced the children's engagement with the vocabulary of the picture books. The strategies explained above not only reinforced the word learning but also provided children with opportunities to use the words in other contexts, through writing, during playtime and so forth. The findings in this area suggest that children are more likely to be motivated and learn new vocabulary from picture books when the picture book vocabulary is supported by various teaching strategies to reinforce it.

4.4 Finding Three: How Teacher Reflection Motivated Vocabulary Use and Learning by Fostering Student Dialogue and Choice

The third finding that emerged during my data analysis was how reflective teaching practices enhanced children's motivation to use and learn the vocabulary from the picture books, particularly through increased student dialogue and choice. Data from the emoji-surveys showed that two children 'agreed' and six children 'agreed a lot' that they felt confident using new words with others.

However, following implementation of the ARP for six weeks, prior to cycle three, this number increased to eight pupils agreeing and four agreeing a lot (See Appendix W). This suggests a growth in confidence but also in motivation to use the vocabulary. Teacher reflection played a crucial role in shaping a more student-centred classroom in this research, which in turn created a more comfortable learning environment for dialogue amongst the children, their peers, and the teacher. This teacher reflection was greatly aided by my critical friend and validation group members. The analysis of the data also revealed that when I prioritised student choice and dialogue, prompted by my reflections, it led to an increase in children's vocabulary use. These pedagogical approaches are aligned with my values of care and respect for the students that I teach. In this section, I will outline how these approaches increased vocabulary learning and use from the picture books and relate it to my values.

The analysis revealed that teaching reflections, both reflection-in-action, during the lessons and reflection-on-action, after the lessons (Schön, 1983) played a key role in shaping teaching and pedagogical decisions. The decisions made through engaging with teacher reflections led to enhanced and increased motivation to learn and use the vocabulary. During lessons, I would make on-the-spot reflections or jot down in-the-moment reflections in shorthand. I would complete a more in-depth analysis after the school day was complete. These reflections led me to question and analyse elements of my practice and consider their impact, both positive and negative, on the students within my class.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"My read-aloud really engaged the children but felt rushed at the end. They made connections between the vocabulary and images. While we had a great discussion about

> why we would like/not like to be a vet, in hindsight we didn't have enough time to really engage with the book. I contacted my critical friend to discuss this after school".
>
> *(February 26th, 2025)*

Examples from my reflective journal, particularly in the initial Cycle of the ARP, including the example above, emphasised key tensions of how I felt pressured to complete lessons and fit as much into the school day as possible, often at the expense of children's experiences. Through engaging in ongoing reflection, I began to shift my mindset and realised that by rushing these moments, the children were missing richer moments of engagement with the books, which I felt did not align with my values. In truth, I felt in part like a living contradiction (1989, as cited in Whitehead 2018). I discussed this area of contention with my critical friend and validation group. Reflections on this unease and advice from my critical friend and validation group prompted me to slow down and prioritise more meaningful engagement with the children. This led me to prioritise a more student-centred classroom, where student dialogue was more central and where there were greater opportunities for student choice. These shifts in practice, driven by teacher reflection, became the catalyst for change.

Another theme within this finding was how this shift in teacher practice, as a result of teacher reflection, prompted greater student dialogue, resulting in increased motivation for vocabulary learning. As discussed in Chapter Two, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory outlines how language learning is an inherently social endeavour. My findings supported this idea. During read-alouds, the children frequently displayed a powerful desire to engage in conversations about the vocabulary, asking questions and making connections. Outside of the read-alouds, these social connections and desires to build on the vocabulary were often even more evident. These interactions reflected collaborative meaning-making through dialogue as the children worked and built on each other's opinions and knowledge to create a shared understanding. This collaborative dialogue not only

enhanced children's understanding of the pre-selected vocabulary but also aided text comprehension. Engaging children in dialogue using discussion and questions about the vocabulary is identified by Wasik, Hindman and Snell (2015) as a key strategy to increase children's vocabulary from book reading. The NCCA (2024) also advocates for talk, discussion and dialogue throughout read-alouds and emphasises the importance of children sharing related knowledge and connecting to the story.

As a teacher, I tried to let these discussions flow naturally and positioned myself as a facilitator for them. Often, I would prompt the children with an open-ended question, if it was required, or I would encourage the children to build on one another's ideas. I would often have these questions prepared in advance and written down on post-its during read-alouds. (Fisher et al., 2004). For example, when one child made a connection about levers, it prompted a broader peer-based discussion about levers around them, in cars, in Minecraft etc. Conversations like these further reinforced the vocabulary and helped the children make sense of it through collaborative meaning-making through dialogue and communication, which is supported by the PLC (2019).

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"The children engaged with the first read-aloud today at our new picture book. They seemed very interested. I introduced the new words using flashcards. One of the words was 'lever'. One of the children made a connection to a handbrake in a car. It started a discussion about levers." *(April 8th, 2025)*

In this ARP, I also observed the children naturally using the vocabulary in their everyday conversations, further aiding their understanding of it for each other. This was evident in the

playground in which they had created a game based on the word wallaby, one of the selected words from our picture book the previous week.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"On yard I heard one of the boys saying 'let's play the wallaby game', then they started hopping. That was one of our words from last week." *(February 24th, 2025)*

Another theme under this finding that emerged was how student choice proved to be a powerful motivator. Through engaging in teacher reflection and shifting towards a more student-centred approach, I began to involve the children more in the decision-making process, seeing them as co-participants in the research rather than passive recipients. For instance, I began to offer them the choice on the books we would read in each theme and where we would do our read-alouds. This agency gave them greater ownership in the process and led to increased engagement in the picture books during lessons and greater motivation to learn and use the vocabulary. This shift aligns with my values of care and respect and also supports the PLC (2019) view of viewing learners as active agents in the learning process.

Reflective Journal (Delaney, 2025)
"They also selected 3 books for this cycle out of 6 I had borrowed from the library. They seemed excited and asked if they were starting today" *(April 7th, 2025)* "We did our read-aloud outside today in the sunshine as the children requested it and it was such a nice day"

(April, 30th, 2025)

In Cycle Three, the emoji surveys show there was a marked increase in the number of pupils who agreed and agreed a lot in comparison to the previous cycles (See Appendices U-Z). This strongly suggests the beneficial effects that student choice and reflective teaching had on the project. To conclude, this finding illustrates that teacher reflection played a pivotal role in motivating vocabulary use and learning of the pupils in my class. Through engaging in reflective practice, I was able to enhance the learning experiences of the children and give them more autonomy in the process. This resulted in greater motivation for language learning, creating a more student-centred classroom environment overall.

4.5 Summary of My Findings

Overall, my findings from this ARP highlight how picture books can prove powerful in motivating children to learn and use new vocabulary. Across the Cycles, the emoji-surveys suggest a positive progression in children's motivation for vocabulary learning as does evidence from my reflective journal, observations and dialogue with my critical friend and validation group. The first finding demonstrated how repeated readings of picture books significantly enhanced vocabulary use and deepened children's text comprehension. The second finding emphasised how multiple teaching strategies, including visual flashcards, interactive games, and displays, enhanced children's motivation and engagement in vocabulary and led to an increased use of it. The third finding shed light on how student dialogue and choice, prompted by teacher reflections, motivated the children and gave them greater ownership in the research process. Collectively, these findings suggest that

picture books are an effective tool to increase children's motivation to learn and use new vocabulary and this will be discussed further in the concluding Chapter.

4.6 Conclusion

In this section, I clarified the data collected and explained how I organised it. Then I explained my method for data analysis, that being Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and I clarified how I used this method. Following this, I outlined my three findings. Finding One outlined how repeated readings of picture books increased children's vocabulary knowledge and use and aided text comprehension. Finding Two explained how the use of multiple teaching strategies enhanced the impact of picture books on children's motivation to learn and use vocabulary. To conclude, Finding Three discussed how my engagement in teacher reflection motivated children to engage more deeply in vocabulary use and learning by fostering student dialogue and choice. I then summarised my findings collectively. This section concludes my data analysis and findings, in the next section, I will conclude my research and make a claim based upon my findings.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This Chapter will provide a summary and conclusion to my thesis. This thesis was guided by my research question:

"How can I use picture books to motivate my Junior Infant class to learn vocabulary?"

In this final Chapter, I will provide a brief summary of my research. I will then outline the limitations of my research and reflect on the messiness of Action Research (AR). Following this, I will outline the implications of this research on my professional practice going forward. Finally, I will present recommendations for professional practice and future research. These will be informed by the insight I have gained through this process.

5.1 Summary of my Research

This self-study action research (SSAR) project set out to determine:

"How can I use picture books to motivate my Junior Infant class to learn vocabulary?"

As I embarked on this action-research project (ARP), I clarified my core values of being of care, respect and agency. As a teacher with a passion for reading and vocabulary development, I recognised the importance of vocabulary learning, especially in the formative years of primary school. However, I observed that some children within my class seemed unmotivated to learn vocabulary. I identified myself as being a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989, as cited in Whitehead 2018), as I deeply understood and valued children's motivation and vocabulary learning; however, it was obvious to me that my current teaching practices weren't adequately supporting this. This lack of motivation for vocabulary learning was particularly apparent in children within

my class who were English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and children who were experiencing expressive language difficulties or language delays. This rather uncomfortable realisation led me to identify an issue within my practice, that being, how I was supporting children's motivation to learn vocabulary in junior infants. I then considered how I could best support children's motivation for vocabulary learning.

In line with my values and interests, I selected picturebooks as a tool for motivating children's vocabulary learning. I was drawn to picturebooks from the outset due to the rich vocabulary within them, their meaningful context, and their versatility in planning and thematic teaching. Picturebooks are also very purposeful tools to support EAL learners (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018) and for children experiencing expressive language difficulties and delays (NEPS, 2015). In addition to their numerous benefits, my class also thoroughly enjoyed picturebooks and read-alouds. Before beginning my research, I engaged and critically analysed literature pertaining to the background of these intersecting and overlapping areas of children's language and vocabulary development, expressive language, motivation, picturebooks and repeated reading of picture books and teaching strategies to support word learning. I also considered all these areas in line with my values and interests, aiming to incorporate practices and strategies that would promote student motivation, agency and dialogue during lessons.

The review of the literature led me to create a SSAR project that was embedded in theory and ethics while still aligning with my personal values. This project aimed to explore strategies that support and motivate children's vocabulary learning rooted and based around picturebooks in a thematic approach to align with school planning, while maintaining a focus on children's motivation, agency and dialogue. The research was designed thematically to support school-planning. Each picture book was carefully selected to ensure it was high-quality, aligned with the theme and supported all my intentions for the SSAR project. The research approach incorporated strategies that included

repeated read-alouds, visual flashcards, vocabulary displays and follow-on game-based activities. The SSAR project consisted of three cycles. Within each cycle, three carefully selected picturebooks were implemented over the course of three weeks, with a week at the end of each-cycle for reflection and adaptations to be made. I had a critical friend and a validation group to support and advise me through this process.

Each cycle followed a similar structure; the picture books were introduced and read-alouds occurred using them three times throughout the week. Pre-selected tier-two vocabulary was taught before, during and after readings, supported by visual flashcards and vocabulary displays. Interactive game-based vocabulary activities were created and children completed them to support vocabulary learning. Data was collected using my critical friend, validation group, observations, a teacher reflective journal and six emoji surveys that the children completed prior to and following each cycle.

Data analysis occurred following this, which led to the formation of three main findings. Finding One outlined how repeated reading of picture books increased vocabulary knowledge and use and aids text comprehension. Finding Two presented how multiple teaching strategies enhanced the impact of picture books on children's motivation to learn and use vocabulary. To conclude, Finding Three detailed how teacher reflection motivated vocabulary use and learning by fostering student dialogue and choice.

5.2 Limitations

Children are inherently vulnerable due to their age, particularly those within a Junior Infant class. While every care was taken to address ethical considerations and power dynamics, it is possible that my researcher positionality of being both a teacher and researcher to the children may have led to

power imbalances that affected children's input and responses (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell, 2015). Additionally, this SSAR project employed convenience sampling to a small group of children who were within my own Junior Infant class. This may limit the results of my findings as it may not transfer easily to other classroom settings or class levels. Additionally, my approach aligned with school planning and the thematic approach, which influenced the topics and picturebooks I could select during the research. I was unable to record, either audio or video, of the read-aloud lessons, hence, data collection relied heavily on observational notes and reflections, which may have limited broader findings. Finally, the research was carried out in a relatively short timeframe and was completed a few weeks prior to the summer holidays, which limited my ability to monitor children's long-term retention of the selected vocabulary.

The most prominent limitation that emerged was my inability to include anonymised samples of the children's writing and drawings. Ethical boundaries are crucial to ensure appropriate research conduct. At the planning stage of my research, I did not anticipate the richness and relevance of the drawings and writing the children would create based on the selected vocabulary. In truth, I did not envisage the children creating drawings or writing the key vocabulary during the planning stage. However, as I did not include them in the original ethical proposal, I could not include them in this research project as I didn't have prior consent to do so. While I did my utmost to reflect on these through observations, in my reflective journal and through dialogue with my critical friend and validation group, in hindsight, I feel that including anonymised drawings and writing samples of the vocabulary from the children would have added depth and enriched the findings further.

5.3 Messiness of Action Research (AR)

According to Rabgay and Kidman (2023) teachers often experience messy experiences when carrying out AR. In their study, teachers went through different sequential phases of planning, acting,

observing and reflection. The study highlights that it is regular for AR to require multiple iterations, and that AR can be very messy, however, the multiple iterations and adaptations that occur as a result can prove valuable.

I can relate to and validate this experience in my AR. In the initial cycle, my AR felt messy, and I was prompted to go back and adapt certain elements of my research. For example, during Cycle One, I redesigned the layout of the post-cycle survey following the completion of the pre-cycle survey to make it easier to explain to my infant class. I realised on reflection that the layout was confusing as the emojis were only along the top of the page and not alongside each question. For the post-cycle survey, I placed the emojis alongside their corresponding question, running down the length of the page. I also adapted my approach to picturebook selection, involving the children more in the selection process. This adjustment ensured the books greater aligned to their interests and fostered deeper motivation and agency from the children. Similar to the teachers in Ragbay and Kidman's (2023) study, I found that embracing the messiness enabled me to make adjustments that overall, greatly enhanced my SSAR project.

5.4 Implications for my Professional Practice

Conducting this SSAR project has had a profound impact on my professional practice. This SSAR project has thoroughly deepened my understanding of children's motivation for learning vocabulary in the junior infant classroom. Before commencing this research, my approach to vocabulary teaching, in hindsight, lacked knowledge and was unmotivating in many ways. This research will have several implications on my professional practice, including changing my approach to vocabulary teaching, increasing awareness of children's motivation, enhancing pupil agency and highlighting the importance of reflective practice and flexibility.

Following this project, my approach to vocabulary teaching has completely shifted. I now have a greater understanding of children's motivation in vocabulary learning and see the benefits of using a meaningful context like high-quality picturebooks, as a basis for building children's vocabulary. Overall, this research has highlighted the importance of not viewing vocabulary teaching in isolation but rather through an integrated, picturebook based approach. It has also highlighted the importance of pre-selecting vocabulary from picturebooks, specifically tier-two vocabulary appropriate to your class and setting, and analysing and engaging with the picturebook prior to read-alouds. By doing so, I can plan and create resources, prompts and questions to ensure optimal learning experiences during read-alouds. Furthermore, I deeply understand the importance of repeated readings of picturebooks and varied strategies to support vocabulary learning from picturebooks including, visual flashcards, displays and games based on the vocabulary. Going forward, I will continue to use all of the methods outlined above to motivate children to learn vocabulary through meaningful, high-quality picturebooks as I can now see the many benefits of this approach.

In addition, this research has increased my awareness of children's motivation across all curricular areas. Prior to this study, I failed to recognise the strength of the connection between children's motivation and the impact of this on their engagement during class lessons. Through engaging in reflection throughout this process, it has highlighted the importance of incorporating approaches, strategies and resources that children are motivated by. In this research, it was evident that my class were motivated by picturebooks, hence I built and planned my project around this as a basis for their vocabulary learning. This experience has reinforced to me the importance of recognising and building on children's interests to motivate them further, and I will apply this across all areas of curriculum learning going forward.

An additional important implication of this research was the insights I gained regarding pupil agency. While I previously felt at times, pupil agency is something that is more applicable in older

classes, my research has highlighted to me that even junior infant pupils enjoy taking an active part in their learning. Initially, in this research, I selected the picturebooks from the theme, however, on reflection, I realised that this was not supporting the children's agency. Hence, I began to involve the children in the picturebook selection process, still ensuring the picturebooks were high-quality and in keeping with thematic planning. This small adjustment had a deep effect; the children seemed more motivated, and their participation increased. This also aligned more deeply with my values. Going forward, I now see the many benefits of pupil agency and voice within the classroom, even in junior infants, and it is something I endeavour to continue to incorporate and strengthen in the children that I teach.

To conclude, the key implication as a result of this SSAR project is the importance of engaging in reflection. Without engaging in sustained, honest and often uncomfortable reflection, none of the other implications would have become apparent. Throughout this research, and since this research has concluded, I reflect daily on my teaching, often using the questions that I formulated based on Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) and Brookfield's four lenses (2017) as prompts. This is something I intend to continue to do daily, as I can attest to the benefits of it, both for professional practice and for my personal growth.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Recommendations for Practice

There are several recommendations from this research to implement in classrooms, particularly in infant classrooms. This research highlights that high-quality picturebooks are versatile tools for vocabulary development. This is further supported by guidelines from the NCCA (2024). This research also suggests that teachers should use picturebooks as a basis to select vocabulary,

specifically tier-two words. In line with the views of Fisher et al. (2004), this research suggests that teachers should take time to engage with picturebooks before read-alouds, not only for vocabulary learning purposes but also to identify opportunities for prompts, connections and questions. Additionally, this project strongly supports the idea of repeated read-alouds and suggests it has many benefits over the 'one-and-done' approach. This aligns with Bruner's (2021) and NCCA (2024) guidance in this area. It is also suggested that varied strategies help support this vocabulary learning (Fisher et al., 2004). These strategies include encouraging the use of visual flashcards, before, during and after read-alouds, aligning with Zucker et al. (2021) view on these topics. This research also suggests the importance of creating a vocabulary display to reference and support vocabulary learning, this is consistent with Fisher et al. (2004). Games focused on the vocabulary are also recommended from this research as an approach to motivate children's vocabulary learning, corresponding with Hassinger-Das et al. (2016), who highlight the benefits of a game-based approach to vocabulary learning. The research also indicates that promoting pupil agency, such as involving children in the book selection process, can boost motivation for children's vocabulary learning. This emphasis on children's agency is strongly reflected in the new Primary Curriculum Framework (2023).

To conclude, this research strongly suggests that using picturebooks can act as a powerful motivator for vocabulary learning. However, it suggests that picturebooks should be carefully selected, purposefully planned for, read repeatedly and supported by additional strategies to maximise children's motivation in the vocabulary learning process.

5.5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

While this SSAR project provided deep insights to this area, there are recommendations to be made that could extend and improve further research in this area.

Firstly, this study was small in scale and was limited to one junior infant class within a single gender school in an urban area. Further research in this area could be extended to include other class groups and schools that are rural or co-educational to ensure a broader depth of findings. Additionally, the data that was collected was limited, hence, further research could include broader data sources, including children's work samples, or audio/video recordings of lessons that could be analysed in a more in-depth manner. Furthermore, future research could occur over a longer period and research children's vocabulary retention following the research. This could offer valuable insights into the long-term effectiveness of the approaches and strategies used.

Additionally, there was limited literature or research pertaining to motivating vocabulary learning for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners or children experiencing difficulties or delays within the Irish context. While there was some research from the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland that provided insights, research from an Irish context within primary classrooms could prove beneficial. Hence, future research could examine this area to better inform effective practices for EAL learners and children with expressive language difficulties or delays.

5.6 Conclusion

This Chapter concluded my thesis. In this Chapter, I provided a summary of my SSAR project and I outlined the limitations of my research. I then elaborated on the messiness of AR and clarified the implications of it on my professional practice. Following this, I presented recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

To conclude, this SSAR project has been a truly transformative experience. It has deeply reshaped my approach to vocabulary teaching and deeply enhanced my understanding of children's language, vocabulary, expressive language and motivation. Through completion of this project, I have gained

a new approach to motivating children's vocabulary learning grounded in the rich context of picture books, which is something I deeply value. Additionally, this process has instilled within me a desire to reflect and improve both professionally and personally. While the project sample size was small, it has truly left a tremendous impact on my practice and pedagogy. It has inspired me to continue engaging in reflection and professional development to better myself for the children whom I have the incredible privilege to teach, guide and nurture.

"The more reflective you are, the more effective you are"

(Hall and Simeral, 2017, p.28)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Dear Board of Management,

I am currently completing the Master of Education, Research in Practice programme at Maynooth University. As part of the programme, I am completing an action research project in my classroom which I am seeking approval for. My research focuses on picture books and whether the use of picture books increases children's motivation to learn and use new vocabulary.

To do this, I intend to carry out research with my class of junior infant pupils by teaching selected vocabulary using picture books as the basis. I will use teaching methods including read-alouds and repeated readings of the picture books with the children during three weekly English lessons over a period of ten weeks from February until May 2025.

The data will be collected using six age-appropriate emoji surveys, teacher observations and a daily teacher reflective journal. Additionally, the children will be asked their opinions through oral discussions of the picture books and the associated vocabulary during the selected lessons. These oral discussions will allow the children to express their thoughts on the books and vocabulary within them.

The children's names and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. No identifiable information about the children or the school will be shared, and the children can withdraw from the research process at any stage without having to provide a reason.

All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in, at maximum, a ten-year time frame in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. This research is not related to the formal assessment of any child. The research will not be carried out until board of management approval and Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education approval have been granted. In the future, findings from this research may be published in academic journals or used in other professional platforms. However, should this occur all data will be presented in a manner that ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

I have attached my drafted consent forms, information sheets and consent forms for both children and parents. I have also attached an information sheet and consent form for the board of management.

If you have any queries regarding my action research project, please contact me by email at laura.delaney.2025@mumail.ie.

I appreciate your consideration on this matter.

Yours faithfully,

Laura Delaney.

Appendix B

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath-Oideachas

Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Information Sheet for Board of Management members

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for the members of the Board of Management

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education, Research in Practice programme in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a qualified teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using teacher observations, child-friendly emoji surveys and a teacher reflective journal. The children will be invited to express their thoughts during oral discussions about the picture books and the vocabulary, thus providing them with an opportunity to share their opinions on both the books and the vocabulary that will be used. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project

What are the research questions?

- How can I use picture books to motivate my junior infant class to learn and use English vocabulary?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Child-friendly emoji surveys, teacher observations and a teacher reflective journal.

Who else will be involved?

I will carry out the research as part of my Masters of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Professor Marie McLoughlin and Dr Suzanne O'Keeffe and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with the children in my junior infant class within our school. In all cases, the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously with no personal identifiers used. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in a maximum timeframe of ten years in accordance with University guidelines. The children can withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason and this research is not related to the formal assessment of any child. The findings of this research may be published in academic journals or presented at professional conferences in the future. However, should this occur all data will be presented in a manner that ensures the utmost anonymity and confidentiality.

Contact details: Student: Laura Delaney *E: laura.delaney.2025@mumail.ie*

Appendix C

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Board of Management Consent Form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and information sheet. I, a representative of the Board of Management, give consent from the Board of Management for the research to be conducted in the school. I confirm that we have been fully informed about the nature of the research, the measures in place to protect participants, and the use of data.

Role:_____

Signature:_____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student in the Master of Education, Research in Practice programme at Maynooth University. As part of the programme, I am completing an action research project. My research focuses on picture books and whether the use of picture books increases junior infant children's motivation to learn and use new English vocabulary.

To do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by teaching selected vocabulary using picture books as the basis. I will use teaching methods including read-alouds and repeated readings of the picture books with the children during three weekly English lessons over a period of ten weeks from February to May 2025.

The research data will be collected using six children's emoji surveys, observations and a daily teacher reflective journal. Additionally, the children will be invited to express their thoughts during oral discussions about the picture books and the vocabulary, thus providing them with an opportunity to share their opinions on both the books and the vocabulary that will be used.

The children's names and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. No identifiable information about the children will be shared and the children will also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide a reason. This research is not related to the formal assessment of any child.

In accordance with University guidelines, the research data will be stored for a maximum of ten years. After this period, all data must be permanently destroyed. All guidelines will be complied with, and all information will be confidential when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education and the school's board of management.

I would like to invite you to give permission for your child to take part in this project by completing the attached forms.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, please contact me by email at laura.delaney.2025@mumail.ie.

Yours faithfully,

Laura Delaney.

Appendix E

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Information Sheet Parents and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education, Research in Practice programme in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a qualified teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using teacher observations, child-friendly emoji surveys and a teacher reflective journal. Additionally, the children will be invited to express their thoughts during oral discussions about the picture books and the vocabulary, thus providing them with an opportunity to share their opinions on both the books and the vocabulary that will be used. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- How can I use picture books to motivate my junior infant class to learn and use English vocabulary?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Child-friendly emoji surveys, teacher observations and a teacher reflective journal.

Who else will be involved?

I will carry out the research as part of my Masters of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Professor Marie McLoughlin and Dr Suzanne O'Keeffe, and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with your son who is a pupil in my class. In all cases, the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, the analysis will be reported anonymously, and no personal identifiers will be used. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in a maximum timeframe of ten years in accordance with University guidelines. The children can withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason and this research is not related to the formal assessment of any child. The findings of this research may be published in academic journals or presented at professional conferences in the future. However, should this occur, all data will be presented in a manner that ensures the utmost anonymity and confidentiality.

Contact details: Student: Laura Delaney *E: laura.delaney.2025@mumail.ie*

Appendix F

Consent Form for Parents/Guardians

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature:_____

Date: _____

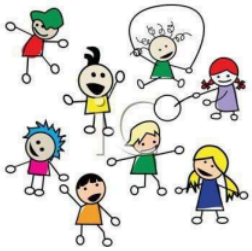
Name of Child _____

Child's signature:_____

Date: _____

Appendix G

Child's Information Sheet



Child's name ……..

I am trying to find out if your motivation to learn and use new English words is changed by how teachers use picture books in the classroom. I would like to find out more about this. I will be trying to figure out the best ways to help you learn and use new vocabulary during English lessons three times per week. I will use picture books to help me do this. I will also give you six emoji surveys to fill in. I will also be looking at how you learn and use the new words during our English lessons. You will also be asked to share what you think about the books and words during these lessons.

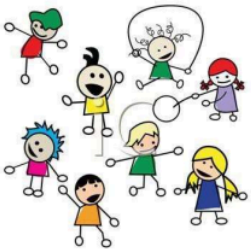
Would you be ok with that? Circle one. YES NO

I have asked your Mum or Dad or Guardian to talk to you about this. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that you can sign the form that I have sent home?

If you change your mind after we start and don't want to do it anymore, that's ok too, you can stop taking part without giving a reason at any time.

Appendix H

Child's Assent Form



Child's assent to participate

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and I agree to take part in this research.

Name of child (in block capitals):

_____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix I

Consent Form for Critical Friend

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Critical Friend Consent Form

I agree to participate as a critical friend in this action-research project. I will provide honest and constructive feedback to the researcher throughout this process. I understand the purpose of the role and that participation is voluntary. I understand that this role will require a time commitment that may vary throughout the project.

Critical Friend Name:_____

Critical Friend Signature:_____

Date: _____

Appendix J

Consent Form for Validation Group Members

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Validation Group Member Consent Form

I agree to participate as a member of the validation group in this action-research project. I will provide honest and constructive feedback to the researcher throughout this process. I understand the purpose of the role and that participation is voluntary. I understand that this role will require a time commitment that will be approximately 15 minutes per week.

Validation Group Member Name:_____

Validation Group Member Signature:_____

Date: _____

Appendix K

Prompt Questions for Reflective Journal

My reflective prompts are based on Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) and Brookfield's four lenses (2017)

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984)

1. **Concrete Experience**
    - What happened and who was involved?
2. **Reflective Observation**
    - How did I feel about the situation and what do I think about it?
3. **Abstract Conceptualization**
    - What did I learn from the experience?
    - What are my beliefs now and have they changed?
    - Does this relate to any theories or concepts I know of?
4. **Active Experimentation**
    - How will I apply what I've learned now and going forward?

Brookfield's Four Lenses (2017)

1. **Self-Reflection**
    - How did my actions align with my values?
    - How do I feel about the situation?
2. ***Student Lens***
    - *What feedback did I receive from my students and what is their view?*
3. **Theoretical Lens**
    - Do any theories relate to this?
    - Do any frameworks/school policies relate to this?
4. ***Colleagues Feedback***
    - *What can my peers contribute to this?*
    - *Will it challenge or correlate it with my view?*

***Specific focus on colleague and student lens concerning Brookfield's Lenses**

Appendix L

Mog the Vet. Pre-Selected Tier Two Vocabulary

1.	Suddenly
2.	Evening
3.	Super
4.	Rude
5.	Proper
6.	Nasty
7.	Rushed
8.	Perhaps
9.	Difficult
10.	Squawk

Appendix M

Mog the Vet

Pre-Selected Tier Two Vocabulary Visual Flashcards

suddenly 
evening 
super 
rude 
proper 

nasty	
rushed	
perhaps	
difficult	
squawk	

Appendix N

Pre-Cycle Three Survey

Child-friendly Survey

1.I feel interested in learning new words					
2. I like to use picture books to help me learn new words					
3. I don't like new words from picture books					
4. I like to show and use my new words to people					
5 Hearing stories often helps me to learn new words					

Appendix O

Post-Cycle Three Survey

Child-friendly Survey

1. I was interested in learning new words from picture books					
2. Using picture books helped me learn new words					
3. I felt happy when learning new words from picture books					
4. Learning new words from picture					

books was fun					
5. I felt confident to show and use my new words to people					
6. Hearing the new words in the stories more than once helped me to learn new words					

Appendix P

Survey Scale

	Strongly disagree (*I don't agree at all)*
	Disagree *(I don't agree)*
	Not sure *(Not sure)*
	Agree *(I agree)*
	Strongly agree *(I agree a lot)*

*Italicised writing indicates how I will explained each emoji to my class

Appendix Q

Codes and Themes from Data Analysis

Initial Codes	Initial Codes
1. Word Teaching and Recall	Building Vocabulary Through Repeated Reading of Picture Books
2. Children's Enjoyment	
3. Children's Motivation	
4. Text Comprehension	
5. Children's Word Use/Prediction	
6. Read-Alouds	Engaging Students Through Multiple Strategies
7. Games	
8. Flashcards	
9. Display/Word Wall	
10. Scaffolding	
11. Making Connections	Collaborative Meaning-Making Through Dialogue
12. Open Questions	
13. Teacher Prompted Dialogue	
14. Peer Dialogue	
15. Discussion For Clarification	
16. Adaptive Teaching	Fostering A Student-Centred Environment
17. Reflective Practice	
18. Child Suggestion	
19. Pupil Voice	
20. Classroom Environment	

Appendix R

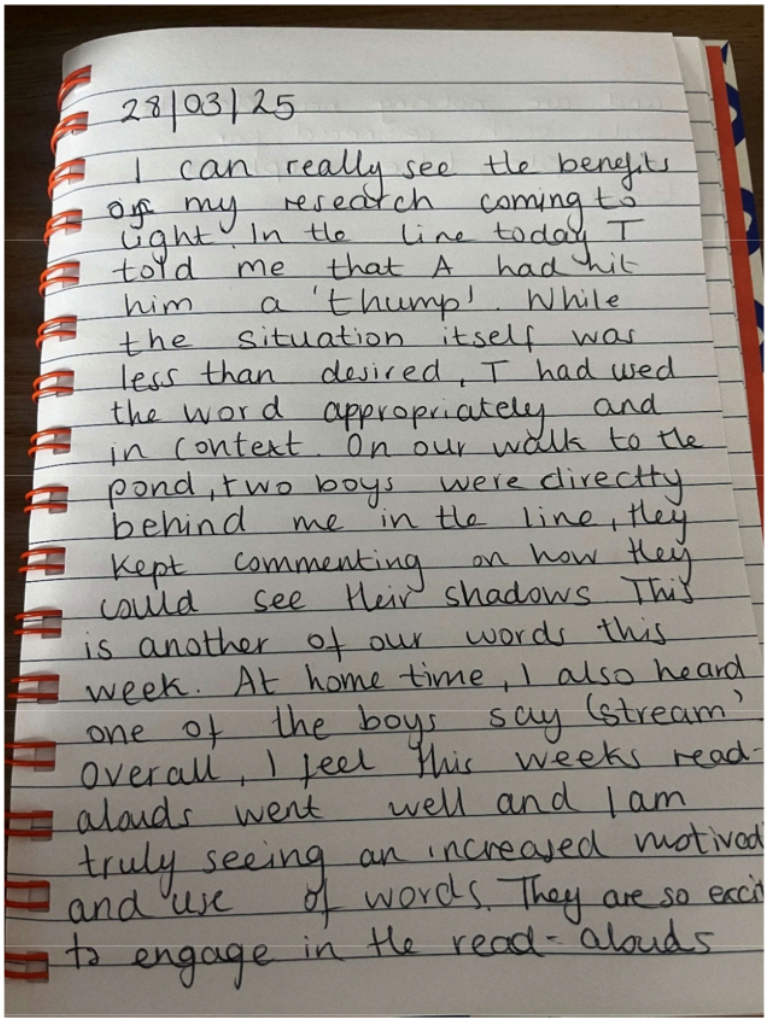
Coded Version of my Typed Reflective Journal Entry March 28th

28/03/25

I can really see the benefits in my research come to light. In the line today T told me that A had hit him a 'thump. While the situation itself was less than desired T had used the word appropriately and in context. On our walk to the pond, two boys were directly behind me, they kept commenting how they could see their shadows. This is another of our words this week. At home time, I also heard one of the boys say stream. Overall, I feel this weeks read alouds went well and I am truly seeing an increased motivation and use of words. They are so excited to engage in the read-alouds and are noticing new details with each re-rea, for example, the elephant today.

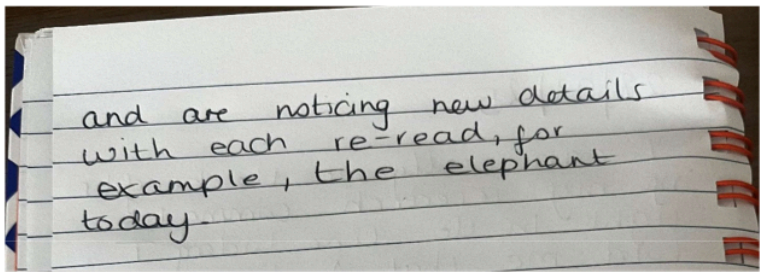
Appendix S

Reflective Journal Entry March 28th



28/03/25

I can really see the benefits of my research coming to light. In the line today T told me that A had hit him a 'thump'. While the situation itself was less than desired, T had used the word appropriately and in context. On our walk to the pond, two boys were directly behind me in the line, they kept commenting on how they could see their shadows. This is another of our words this week. At home time, I also heard one of the boys say 'stream'. Overall, I feel this weeks read-alouds went well and I am truly seeing an increased motivat and use of words. They are so excit to engage in the read-alouds



and are noticing new details with each re-read, for example, the elephant today.

Appendix T

Coded Post-Reflective Meeting Notes March 7th

Validation Group – Post-Reflective Notes
Week Ending- 07/03/25

Summary of Meeting:

- Discussed classroom activities from this week, including read-aloud sessions and vocabulary games.
- Talked about how the children engaged with the new theme of Spring / Garden Centre.
- Reflected on the pre-cycle two survey and how the children responded and completed it.

Reflections / Insights:

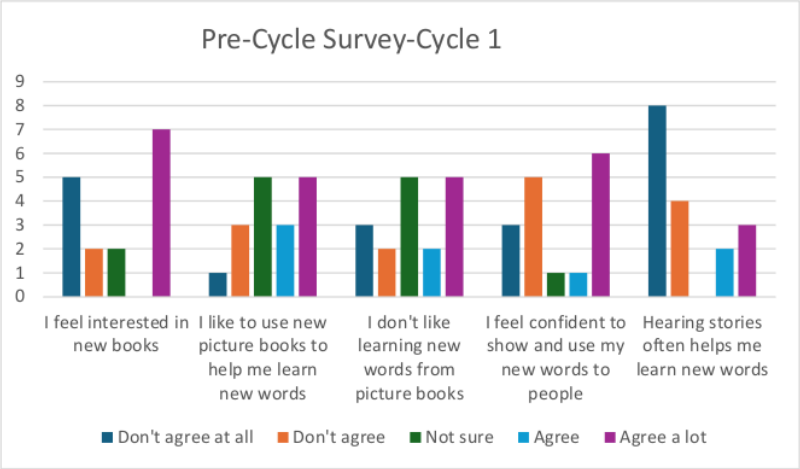
- Validation group agreed that my observations about the children's engagement with illustrations and flashcards were accurate.
- They liked the use of the covers of individual books in the display to support the children's understanding of the words.
- Some children were using the new words outside the classroom, showing meaningful learning (e.g., S. noticed children using words during a movement break).
- The group suggested I consider the pacing of read-alouds, as some sessions felt rushed, and make sure there is enough time for discussion and connecting the story to the vocabulary.

Next Steps:

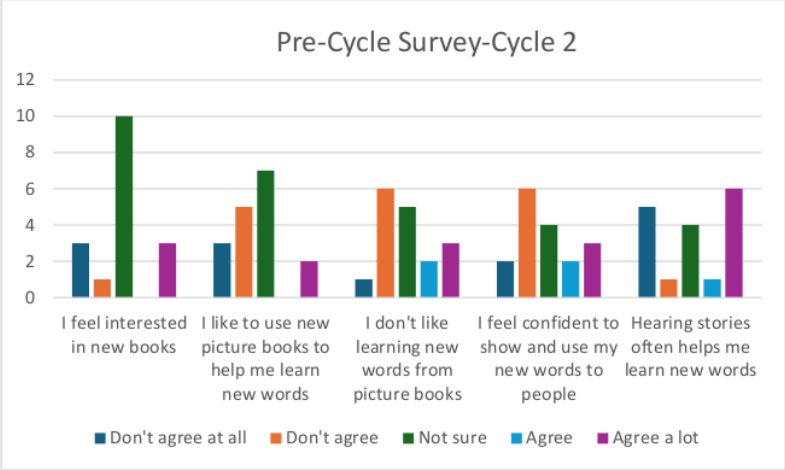
- Make sure that future read-alouds allow enough time for discussion and making connections. May need to adjust the timing.
- Continue documenting classroom observations for discussion in validation group meetings.

**Notes approved at subsequent meeting 14/03/25*

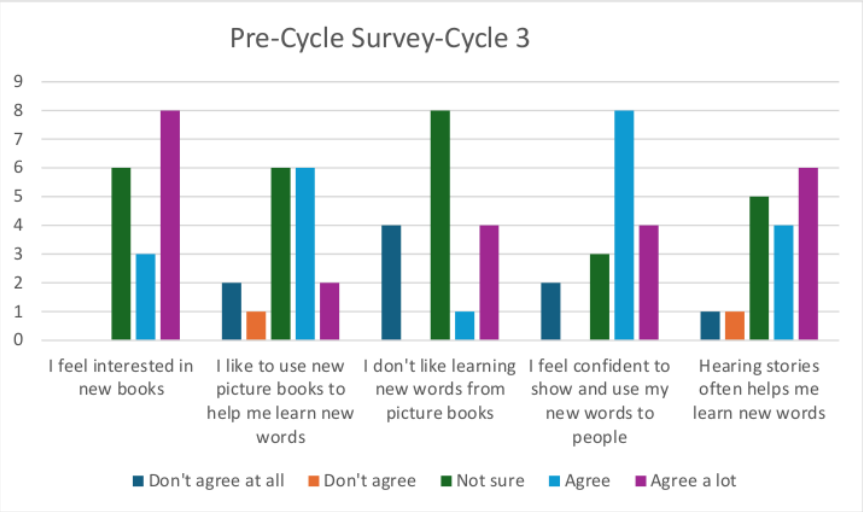
Appendix U



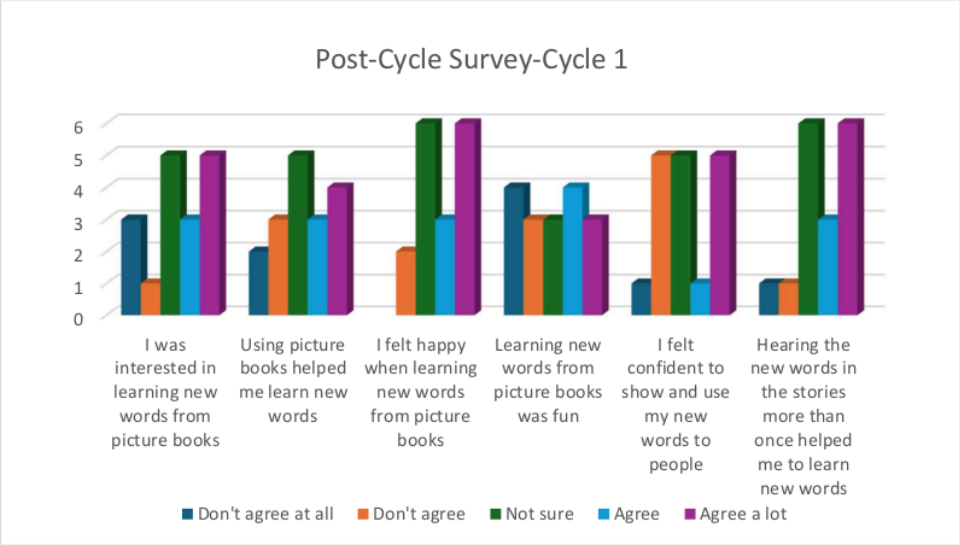
Appendix V



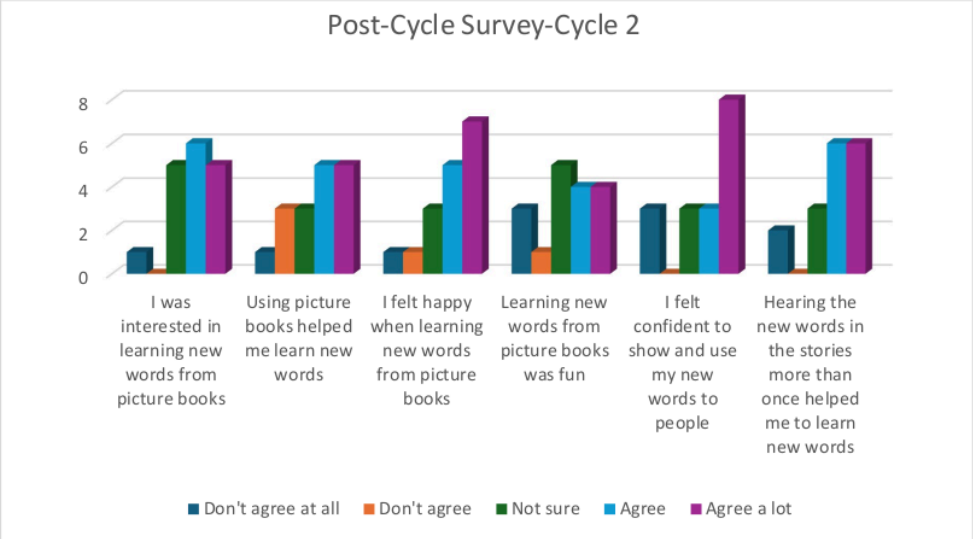
Appendix W



Appendix X



Appendix Y



Appendix Z