



Development in narrative competences from oral to written stories in five- to seven-year-old children



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ABSTRACT

This prospective cohort study analyzes the predictive power of oral narrative competence in kindergarten on written narrative competence in first grade, and compares it to the predictiveness of phonological awareness and conceptual knowledge of the writing system. The participants were 122 Italian children. Children's narrative retells were tested twice. First, children's emergent literacy skills (i.e. oral narrative competence, phonological awareness, and conceptual knowledge of the writing system) were tested in the last year of kindergarten; then their narrative competence in written stories was tested one year later in first grade (narrative competence in written stories). A series of hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses showed that, among the emergent literacy variables, narrative competence was the only statistically significant predictor of the children's competence in giving structure, coherence, and cohesion to their written stories. Among narrative competence components, structure in oral narratives was the only statistically significant predictor of narrative competence in written productions. These results contribute to our understanding of the development of children's narrative competence in the transition from oral to written productions.

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1. Introduction

Children's development of narrative competence begins early and it continues through early adulthood (Makinen, Loukusa, Nieminen, Leinonen, & Kunnari, 2013). The acquisition of the written language includes the development of narrative competence elements of discontinuity and continuity. As far as discontinuity is concerned, since the studies conducted by Olson (1994), scholars have agreed that we cannot automatically extend what we know about oral narrative competence to written narrative competence, as spelling might play an interference effect (Pinto, Tarchi, & Bigozzi, 2015). On the other hand, findings from studies of "emergent literacy" have highlighted the continuity existing between specific early skills and the formal acquisition of literacy (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In the first grade, children learn to tell their narratives through a new instrument, which they are still acquiring (i.e. the written language). Therefore, this particular age, in which the transition from emergent to formal literacy and from oral to written narratives takes place, is particularly important for our understanding of the development of narrative competence. Studies adopting a longitudinal

perspective are needed, as they contribute to the explanation of this phenomenon (Kim, Al Otaiba, & Wanzek, 2015).

This prospective cohort study explored the predictive power of narrative competence in oral productions on narrative competence in written productions, in the transition from kindergarten to the first grade in Italian children. The predictive contribution of oral narrative competence was compared to two other components of emergent literacy, namely phonological awareness and conceptual knowledge of the writing system (Hooper, Roberts, Nelson, Zeisel, & Kasambira Fannin, 2010). Narrative competence was measured through aspects of structure, coherence, and cohesion assessed in oral narrative retells in kindergarten and written narrative retells in first grade.

Studies on the development of narrative competence generally explore two lines of inquiry, focusing either on oral narratives or on written narratives. Only a few studies have explored the transition from oral to written narrative competence. These studies share the definition of the construct of narrative competence and the methodology to study it.

1.1. Definition of narrative competence

Narratives are a complex form of text; they are not just talk about past events, but a specific talk in which the sequence of clauses matters, and it matches the sequence of events which actually occurred (Labov, 1972). Narrative competence is a mul-

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tidimensional construct, and it is important to assess the specific features of a narrative, differentiated into macrostructure and microstructure (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010). Narrative macrostructure is defined as the general, global characteristics of a narrative (Justice et al., 2010). Macrostructure is probably the most evident element of a child's narrative, and it can be analysed through the traditional story grammar approach to determine if the narrator is organising the discourse around recognizable conventions (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004), and/or an assessment of the overall coherency of the narrative (Justice et al., 2010). It is also important to assess the micro-level properties of a narrative, such as the way in which words and sentences are linked to each other through the use of specific cohesive devices (Justice et al., 2010). Following, we describe these levels more in detail, the macro-level, i.e. structure and coherence, and the micro-level, i.e. cohesion.

1.1.1. Structure

Stein and Glenn (1982) pointed out the importance of structure in narratives. The notion of structure refers to the macrostructure of text organization, composed of unique rules and guiding principles. Although a minimal narrative includes only two clauses, generally narratives have a more complex structure and include several elements (Labov, 1972): a narrator is expected to include an introduction, characters, and a sequence of events developing and leading to the solution of the problem and the conclusion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Ripich & Griffith, 1988). This type of analysis originated in the research on story grammar, a concept that has evolved from anthropologists' analysis of folktales in the 1900s (for a summary of research on story grammar see for example Dimino, Taylor, & Gersten, 1995).

1.1.2. Coherence

Coherence concerns how the components of a story and the events are interrelated and organized in a meaningful way (Louwerse & Graesser, 2005; Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). To produce a coherent text, writers need to use a scheme to organize the content that helps the reader to understand the characters, the problem, the solution, and the conclusion. This is achieved by including a formalized introduction, a background, and a setting (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). Errors in the use of cohesive devices, for example, can hinder the reader's/listener's efforts to understand the message included in the narrative (Struthers, Lapadat, & MacMillan, 2013).

1.1.3. Cohesion

Cohesion is a characteristic of the text that makes a list of sentences become a unitary total on a micro level (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). Cohesion is achieved through linguistic elements that link ideas across the narrative (Struthers et al., 2013). There are five linguistic devices used to establish cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976): referencing (linguistic elements referring to previous information); conjunction (linguistic elements describing additive, temporal, causal, adversative, and continuative relationships); lexical cohesion (semantically related words); substitution (replacement of redundant elements); and ellipsis (elimination of redundant elements). Cohesion is necessary, since it facilitates the comprehension of underlying semantic relations (Widdowson, 1978), but not sufficient to create a coherent text and interpret the discourse: readers and listeners generate inferences on the basis of their own background knowledge (Louwerse & Graesser, 2005).

1.2. Oral narrative competence

Most studies on early narrative competence development in the transition between kindergarten and primary school have focused

on oral narratives. Berman (1988) studied Hebrew-speaking children's oral narratives and found a significant increase in narrative competence during preschool and school-age years. Preschoolers' narratives were poorly developed from a macro- and micro-level perspective, but, by early school age, children were already displaying a basic macrostructure in their narratives (initiating event, goal-directed actions, and a consequence), even if they were still putting too much emphasis on the micro level. Typically, school-age children tell narratives that include several macrostructure elements (characters, setting, initiating event, plans, goal-oriented actions, consequence, and internal responses) (Squires et al., 2014). As regards cohesion, Lahey (1988) reported that children increase the number of connectives included in the narrative and move from additive connections to temporal connections and then to causal connections. At the age of six, causality is clearly evident in children's oral narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). To, Stokes, Cheung, and T'Sou (2010) studied the oral narratives of typically developing Cantonese-speaking children aged between 4 and 12 and found a high correlation between syntactic complexity, narrative vocabulary, referencing, and the use of connectives. In terms of coherence, Makinen et al. (2013) explored the predictive relationship between preschool and school-age children's oral narrative competence and reported that children reduce the level of ambiguity and increase referential adequacy in their narratives.

However, it would be interesting to support the literature on narrative competence, which is mainly based on English, with studies on other languages. Indeed, narrative styles and expectations about children's narratives may differ across cultures (see McCabe's review on cultural background and storytelling, 1997; Squires et al., 2014). For instance, John-Steiner and Panofsky (1992) examined macro- and micro-level variations in a series of cross-cultural studies on narratives produced by children and adolescents aged 5–15 years. The authors found thematic differences between the cultural groups examined, i.e. Black, Hispanic and Native American, as each ethnic group was using different cultural schemas to give structure and coherence to their stories; and differences in narrative cohesion between English-speaking American and Hungarian students, with the latter ones using more cohesive devices than the American students.

1.3. From oral to written narrative competence

The importance of the specific cultural and linguistic context in which the child grows is even more important in the transition from oral to written narrative competence, given the influence that the specific characteristics of a language have on the process of acquisition of spelling competence (Pinto, Bigozzi, Tarchi, Gamannossi, & Canneti, 2015). Generally, studies on this aspect have explored narratives written in English, a language characterized by a deep orthography in which the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes is inconsistent (Botting, 2002; Makinen et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to analyze early narrative writing skills also in transparent orthographies, i.e. orthographies in which the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes is relatively simple and consistent (Babayigit & Stainthorp, 2010). In the early stages of learning the written language, the lack of automaticity of transcription skills could interfere with children's narrative competence as expressed through writing: the novice writer might struggle to generate a narrative while his or her attention is devoted to spelling (Babayigit & Stainthorp, 2011). Oral skills and transcription skills share many components, but writing puts additional demands on children's cognitive system (Dockrell & Connelly, 2009; Kim et al., 2015). Several studies have failed to find solid relationships between children's oral language skills and the quality of their written narratives (Berninger et al., 1992). The question to be answered is whether or not spelling constrains the

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