



Early narrative skills in Chilean preschool: Questions scaffold the production of coherent narratives



Macarena Silva^{a,*}, Katherine Strasser^a, Kate Cain^b

^a Escuela de Psicología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

^b Department of Psychology, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2012

Received in revised form 28 January 2014

Accepted 3 February 2014

Keywords:

Narrative
Preschoolers
Questions
Scaffolding

ABSTRACT

This study examined whether or not question answering aided the construction of coherent narratives in pre-readers. Sixty Chilean preschoolers completed two tasks using a wordless picture-book: 30 children answered questions about the story and then produced a narrative using the book; 30 children completed the tasks in reverse order. Elements of coherence were assessed in both tasks, namely problem, resolution, and mental-states. The findings indicate that questions can scaffold the production of more coherent narratives. Narratives elicited after questions were judged to be more coherent than those produced before the question–answering task. In contrast, there were no differences between scores for the question answers in the different order conditions. The results are discussed regarding the interactional role of questions and the facilitative effect they have on focusing attention to the narrative task.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Narrative is one of the main forms of complex discourse through which events are organised (Fivush & Haden, 2003). The production of a structured narrative involves the encoding and interpretation of information, and also the organisation of this information in a coherent form (McKeough, Genereux, & Jeary, 2006). Despite their complex nature, children are exposed to narratives from an early age (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Stein & Albro, 1997; Ukrainetz, 2006), as they are involved in activities such as talking about past events, watching TV shows, and sharing books and stories at home or in school (Skarakis-Doyle & Dempsey, 2008). The ability to understand and produce narratives develops before children begin reading instruction (Paris & Paris, 2003), and narrative competence has been linked to school success (O'Neill, Pearce, & Pick, 2004) and to reading comprehension development and difficulties (Cain, 2003; Oakhill & Cain, 2012). Therefore, it is important to determine how we can foster narrative growth in the early years. The aim of the current study was to examine whether answering questions can improve narrative skills, particularly the ability to produce a coherent narrative, in preschoolers.

1.1. Narrative skills and reading comprehension

It has been shown that children who have better narrative skills when starting kindergarten may have educational advantages over children with less developed narrative abilities (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004). For older children, several studies have demonstrated a link between narrative skills and reading comprehension. Snyder and Downey (1991) found that narrative skills explained unique variance in reading comprehension in children from 8 to 11 years old, and a higher proportion of variance in reading comprehension was explained when children were 11–14 years old. Oakhill and colleagues found that the ability to organise a written story into a coherent sequence is an independent predictor of reading comprehension skill in 7- to 9-year-olds (Oakhill, Cain, & Bryant, 2003) and a longitudinal predictor of reading comprehension, over and above verbal ability and vocabulary, in this age group (Oakhill & Cain, 2012). Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency (2010) found that at age seven, the quality of children's narratives, measured as a function of elements such as temporal terms, causal terms, evaluations, internal states, and dialogue, uniquely predicted their reading skill concurrently and one year later, even after controlling for their receptive vocabulary and early decoding. In younger children, Paris and Paris (2003) found that 5- to 8-year-olds' narrative comprehension and retelling were reliable indicators of reading comprehension ability.

Together, these findings indicate that narrative skills and narrative knowledge are strongly related to the ability to understand written texts. One reason for this relation is that children's ability to understand and produce fictional narratives includes many

* Corresponding author at: Centro de Investigación Avanzada en Educación, Universidad de Chile, Periodista José Carrasco Tapia 75, Santiago, Chile. Tel.: +56 229782598.

E-mail address: macarena.silva@ciae.uchile.cl (M. Silva).

of the same skills important to reading comprehension, such as oral language skills, the ability to construct meaning, and memory resources (Paris & Paris, 2003). Despite these findings, there have been only a few studies investigating how best to foster narrative abilities in young children. Such knowledge is essential to develop support and interventions to foster narratives and early comprehension skills.

1.2. Narrative features: focus on coherence

Research on narrative skill has focused on two main features: its sense-making function and its structure (McKeough, Davis, Forgeron, Marini, & Fung, 2005). Research that focuses on the sense making function of narrative investigates its use as a tool to organise experiences in a meaningful way (Bruner, 1990). This feature of narrative is more apparent when we consider personal narratives and autobiographical memory (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Research on this strand has also focused on the role of culture in the acquisition of narrative, concluding that autobiographical narratives adopt cultural patterns (Fivush & Nelson, 2004).

On the other hand, the structure of narrative and its development has been extensively studied, mainly addressing two main elements: coherence and cohesion (Cain, 2003; Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). Cohesion refers to how the relations between phrases or sentences are established through linguistic devices such as connectives and pronouns. It has been called local structure or microstructure (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Liles, 1987; Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). Coherence, which is the focus of the current study, refers to the overall structure or macrostructure and, therefore, concerns a higher level of organisation between the story elements (Justice et al., 2006). In other words, coherence concerns how the events in the story are related (Cain, 2003) or how the events are connected in the mental representation constructed from the text (Sanders & Maat, 2006). In relation to coherence, narratives usually include a series of elements. Shapiro and Hudson (1991) proposed five main elements that are typically considered in traditional narratives: the beginning and orientation that provide a setting and introduce the characters; the initiating event, which refers to a situation which promotes the unfolding of the story; attempts made to achieve the goal; and a resolution of the main problem. Consequences and reactions to the final outcome can be included, but these elements are part of more sophisticated stories. These elements help to establish coherence. In addition, the type of relation between events (e.g., causal, temporal) can be used as an indicator of coherence (Stein, 1988).

A sensitivity to narrative coherence is important for comprehension of stories (Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009). Moreover, the ability to construct a coherent narrative has been used as a measure of reading comprehension in non-independent readers (Paris & Paris, 2003). Fictional stories are generally used in this type of research, because they are more decontextualized and constitute material that is closer to that used when children read a story (Paris & Paris, 2003). In this study, we examined whether or not children's ability to produce a fictional narrative that included these elements could be fostered by the use of questions.

1.3. Narrative development

There is a large literature on the development of children's ability to organise narratives (Peterson & McCabe, 1991). McCabe and Rollins (1994) proposed some developmental stages of narrative, in which children include a greater number of narrative elements with age. At the age of 3 years and a half, children might be able to construct simple stories with no more than two story elements. As they get older, although children include more story elements, they fail to produce a proper sequence of events. By five years old,

children produce stories with a sequence, but these stories often have an early ending, so the solution of the problem is missing. It is not until six years of age that children are able to create a narrative with a proper sequence of events that are linked together in an organised way. A wealth of evidence supports the general idea that as children become older, they produce narratives in which the story elements are related in a more coherent way. For example, Muñoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehnle (2003) found that narratives of 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds are different, the youngest tend to describe isolated events and the oldest narrate a sequence of events oriented to a purpose. Despite the clear progression of narrative skills, there are individual differences that cannot be explained just because of maturation or age (Lever and Sénéchal, 2011).

Cultural environment and home background have shown to impact children's performance in narrative skill (Heath, 1982). Children narratives might vary in both their content and organisation (Gorman, Fiestas, Peña, & Clark, 2011). McCabe and Bliss (2004/2005) found that the shared narratives (those told by parents and children) of Latino children had an emphasis on family topics. Gorman et al. (2011) found that children coming from three ethnic backgrounds differed in their creativity to construct a narrative but not in the organisation of the story. Although these studies suggest that cultural variations impact more directly on the content of the story than its organisation, there is evidence that more constrained tasks, such as fictional storytelling, might reduce the impact of those factors on children's performance, and are a less culturally-biased way to assess language skills (Craig, Washington, & Thompson-Porter, 1998).

1.4. How to foster narrative skills?

Narratives do not vary just as function of age as previously discussed, and several studies have focused on the experiences that promote the development of narrative competence, especially personal narratives that depend on autobiographical memory and recall (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Reese & Newcombe, 2007; Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010). Reese and their colleagues, for example, have shown experimentally that a language style called *elaborative reminiscing*, specifically a "highly elaborative style in which [mothers] provided rich amounts of information in their statements and questions" (Reese & Newcombe, 2007, p. 1153), promotes children's production of richer and more structured narratives about past experiences. This research does not speak to the role that questions might play in the production and comprehension of *fictional* narratives, which is our focus here.

The production and understanding of fictional narratives are tasks more closely related to the reading and writing challenges children will face in school, for at least two reasons. First, the majority of the texts that children encounter in the early school years are fictional stories, or at least with stories about other people, not themselves. In contrast, personal narratives in the family context are more frequent than fictional stories (McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett, 2008). Second, the ability to structure a fictional story provides a transition to literacy because those narratives use a higher degree of decontextualized language, of the sort found in books (Purcell-Gates, 1988; Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). Fictional stories are less dependent on the context, and children get more familiar with them when entering formal education.

There is only a weak relationship between the quality of personal and fictional narrative productions (McCabe et al., 2008). Therefore, one possibility is that knowledge about experiences that promote the development of personal narratives may not be easily transferred to the development of fictional ones. As a result, other types of experience might be necessary to promote coherent fictional narratives. There are only a few empirical studies that show effects of how different types of interaction

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/353909>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/353909>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)