

# Mothers' autobiographical memory and book narratives with children with specific language impairment

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## Abstract

This study examined the role that mothers' scaffolding plays in the autobiographical memory (AM) and storybook narratives of children with specific language impairment (SLI). Seven 4–5-year-old children and their mothers co-constructed narratives in both contexts. We also compared children's narratives with mothers to their narratives with an experimenter. Narratives were assessed in terms of narrative style (i.e., elaborativeness) and topic control. Mothers' elaborative and repetitive questions during AM and book narratives were related to children's elaborations, whereas mothers' elaborative and repetitive statements were not. Mothers produced more topic-controlling utterances than children in both contexts; however, both mothers and children provided proportionally more information in the book context. Additionally, children were more elaborative with mothers compared to an experimenter.

**Learning outcomes:** Readers will be able to: (1) understand the importance of mother-child narratives for both typical and clinical populations; (2) understand how mother-child autobiographical memory and storybook narratives may differ between typical and clinical populations; and (3) consider the implications for designing narrative intervention studies for language impaired children.

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**Keywords:** Narrative; Autobiographical memory; Book; Language impairment; Mother–child interactions

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## 1. Introduction

Narratives are a popular language assessment tool for children with language impairments as they provide a particularly rich assessment of language abilities. Narrative abilities also seem to be particularly informative in terms of predicting later outcomes. For example, Botting, Faragher, Smikin, Knox, and Conti-Ramsden (2001) found that narrative skills of language impaired children at age 7 were most predictive of language diagnosis at age 11, above and beyond measures of receptive grammar, expressive vocabulary, articulation, and nonverbal intelligence. Thus, examining narrative skills of young children with language impairments may be particularly useful for identifying children at continued risk for language impairment. Because of the importance of narrative development for children with language impairments, researchers have pointed to the importance of examining how the narrative interactions of

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parents and their language impaired preschoolers can benefit the language skills of these children (e.g., Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999).

The population of interest for the current study is preschool children with specific language impairment (SLI). Children with SLI are defined as being delayed in language in the absence of any related cognitive, emotional, physical, or hearing disability (Leonard, 1998; Tomblin et al., 1997). The current study assessed the narratives of mothers and their children with SLI in the context of autobiographical memory (AM) and storybook narratives. We were also interested in how children's narratives differed under a supported (i.e., mother–child) versus a non-supported (i.e., experimenter–child) context. Because this study is somewhat exploratory, our sample size is small and largely descriptive. However, the rich amount of data this study provides is a significant starting point for future research on AM narratives of mothers and their children with SLI, as this context has not yet been explored in this population.

### *1.1. Theoretical framework for mother–child discourse*

From a Vygotskian perspective, typically developing children learn narrative skill through the scaffolding provided by parents in a supportive interactive environment. Parents model how to participate in narrative activities starting in the preschool years as children become more competent conversational partners (Vygotsky, 1978), and research shows that narratives of scaffolded children are more complex and rich than those that are not scaffolded (Hudson, 1993; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1994). In terms of mother–child book reading, mothers provide a supportive environment for their child to learn the forms and functions of reading stories and elicit the appropriate responses from their children when possible. Bus (2003) asserts that because children are initially unfamiliar with the structure of storybooks and how they are communicated, that children need parents to help them bridge this gap. Additionally, caregivers often provide a model of narrative that is slightly more advanced than their child's communicative abilities, resulting in an optimization of the child's opportunity to learn from the interaction (Arnold, Lonigan, & Whitehurst, 1994).

Researchers have found that adults do a great deal of discussion when reading books to younger children (Vigil & van Kleeck, 1996; van Kleeck & Beckley-McCall, 2002), and that the nature of this discussion is related to children's participation. For example, adult questions elicit more information than adult comments, and children's responses are more complex in response to mothers' wh-questions compared to mothers' comments (van Kleeck, 2004). Furthermore, intervention studies with children with typical language skills have shown that training parents in a particular style of reading referred to as dialogic reading, which includes asking the child open-ended questions, encouraging the child to play an active role in storytelling, and following up what the child says, results in an increase in children's language skill and participation during parent–child book reading (Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995; Sénéchal, 1997; Whitehurst et al., 1994a,b; Whitehurst et al., 1988).

### *1.2. Mothers' discourse with children with SLI*

Examining how mothers of children with SLI scaffold children's narratives is particularly important as many researchers have reported on the difficulties that children with SLI have with narrative production when producing narratives on their own. For example, they tend to make more syntactic errors (Norbury & Bishop, 2003; Pearce, McCormack, & James, 2003), provide less information (Bishop & Donlan, 2005; Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000), provide more inappropriate utterances (Brinton, Fujiki, & Powell, 1997), produce narratives that are less complex (e.g., goal direction; Pearce et al., 2003), and produce narratives that are rated as lower in quality (e.g., organization, clarity; McFadden & Gillam, 1996) than typically developing children.

Despite these difficulties, however, children with SLI do benefit from parent–scaffolded narrative interactions. Most studies of parents' narrative interactions with children with SLI have focused on the context of book reading as this is a very practical context for mothers to interact with children. Intervention studies with mothers and their preschool children with SLI in book reading interactions have shown that parents who are encouraged to ask more wh-questions, to follow up children's utterances, and to expand on children's utterances can increase children's participation and vocabulary growth (Dale, Crain-Thoreson, Notari-Syverson, & Cole, 1996; McNeill & Fowler, 1999; Yoder, Davies, Bishop, & Munson, 1994). These strategies are particularly relevant for children with SLI because these children tend to ask fewer questions, initiate new topics less often, and disregard their mothers' utterances more often compared to typically developing children (Marvin & Wright, 1997; van Kleeck & Vander

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