

The effects of personalisation on young children's spontaneous speech during shared book reading



Natalia Kucirkova^{*}, David Messer, Kieron Sheehy

Faculty of Education, Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

Received 15 November 2013; received in revised form 13 July 2014; accepted 14 July 2014

Abstract

This paper is concerned with a so far little explored situational context: sharing books which have been personalised for individual children in a pre-school. Thirty-five children (mean age 36.94 months) were read a book with a personalised and non-personalised part. Their spontaneous verbal responses were video recorded and later transcribed. The analysis focused on the difference between the personalised and non-personalised context in terms of the amount of children's utterances and the pragmatic intent of their speech, which included self-referencing, use of questions and corrections. The findings are interpreted from both developmental and socio-cultural Vygotskian perspectives, and evaluated in light of their implications for the understanding of pragmatic aspects of sharing personalised books with children.

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Keywords: Shared book reading; Personalisation; Language; Pragmatics; Self-referencing

1. Introduction

Personalisation has recently received considerable attention from educators and education researchers, primarily because of a rapid progress in technology-mediated personalised learning environments (see [Gutnick et al., 2011](#)). Personalised learning environments are known to motivate children in educational activities, to engage their interest in educational resources ([Hartley, 2007](#); [Oulasvirta and Blom, 2008](#)) and to influence children's language and cognitive development (e.g., [Ditman et al., 2010](#)). Evidence of these effects come mostly from special populations, for example, [Sheehy and Howe \(2001\)](#) found that children with severe learning difficulties achieved higher word recognition scores when they were taught new words with a personalised mnemonic approach than with other non-personalised methods. Also, [Bracken \(1982\)](#) found that personalised reading texts facilitate reading comprehension in struggling high-school students. In addition, in cognitive psychology, there has been a long-standing interest in the 'self-reference effect' in memory which facilitates memory processes ([Rogers et al., 1977](#)). What past research has paid less attention to is the effect of personalisation on young children's responses and speech during everyday situational contexts such as shared book reading. There are research investigations which focus on how specific book genres affect children's behaviour and outcomes (e.g., [Becker, 2010](#)) and also several comparison studies documenting the impact of new book formats (e.g., paper-based versus electronic books, see [Parish-Morris et al., 2013](#)). However, as far as we know, no study has looked at children's pragmatic responses to the content features of new children's books such as their heightened personalised content.

^{*} Corresponding author at: The Open University, Walton Hall, MK6 7AA Milton Keynes, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 1908 659204.
E-mail address: n.kucirkova@open.ac.uk (N. Kucirkova).

We consider personalisation as an important contextual characteristic which has the potential to positively influence children's language and focus on how personalisation might affect the pragmatic aspects of children's spontaneous speech. In this paper, we investigate personalisation and children's spontaneous speech in the relatively unexplored context of adult–child shared reading of personalised books which have been tailored to each individual child in the study.

1.1. Personalised books

Children's books have become extremely diverse, both in terms of their form and content. These books encompass fiction and non-fiction and they come in multiple story formats, such as paper-based books, simple electronic displays or sophisticated interactive formats. Personalisation can potentially be applied to all of these different forms and contents. The extent to which a book is personalised to a particular child can vary from entirely personal books (also known as 'experience books', see [Pakulski and Kaderavek, 2004](#)) to customised or lightly personalised books. The former are typically hand-made by a parent or therapist for a specific child and include several text and pictorial references to children's personal lives. The latter merely replace some of the book's content with personal information, such as the name of a fictional character with a child's name (see [Demoulin, 2001](#)). Personalised books are increasingly available and affordable, with several new technologies facilitating their production ([Kucirkova et al., 2010](#)). Personalised books can be ordered from commercial suppliers, but also can be self-made and created with various tablet and smartphone applications (e.g., iBook creator or Our Story app). This study focuses on personalised printed books which were based on a fictional story and enriched with pictures and personal references about each of the participating children. The books were created digitally and printed on coloured paper. In terms of their content, the books were based on a fictional story and were each enriched with personal information about individual children. While previous research has explored how personalisation influences young children's learning through the books they create (e.g. [Rowe, 2012](#); [Bernhard et al., 2008](#)), we were keen to investigate children's responses in the context of books they share/read with rather than compose with an adult.

1.2. Personalised books sharing with an adult

There are important differences in infants' communication according to specific situational characteristics, for example whether the context involves book reading or toy play ([Yont et al., 2003](#)). Consequently, there is a need for researchers to 'pay more careful attention to situational context when studying child language' ([Yont et al., 2003](#), p. 450). A context which is particularly conducive to children's language development is adult–child shared book reading. Shared book reading is a well-established and well-researched approach to supporting a range of children's literacy and social skills and has been described as a 'literacy event par excellence' ([Pellegriani, 1991](#), p. 380).

Several studies give indications of the potential of personalisation to engage children (and their carers) in shared book reading and to positively influence children's language outcomes, notably with immigrant families (e.g. [Janes and Kermani, 2001](#)). What is less well understood is the effect of personalisation on the pragmatics of children's spontaneous speech during the reading of personalised books. In a small case study, [Kucirkova et al. \(2013b\)](#) showed how a personalised book presented on an iPad created a 'happy atmosphere' that was jointly experienced by a mother and her 3-year-old daughter. In another case study, [Kucirkova et al. \(2013a\)](#) documented how self-made paper-based books which contained specific reference to the child (pictures or text), elicited more smiles and laughs with 12- to 33-month-old children than comparable books without personalised features. It is not known how older, pre-school children respond to personalised book features and how such books might influence their speech with an adult. One way to assess the effect of context on the pragmatics of children's speech is to compare their spontaneous speech when being read a personalised and a non-personalised story.

1.3. Spontaneous speech

Children's spontaneous speech during shared book reading is a good proxy for assessing children's active participation in a literacy activity and one of the best predictors of children's subsequent gains from book reading. In 1977, Flood noted that the overall number of words spoken by a child during shared book reading sessions was related to gains in pre-reading skills. More recently, [Kim et al. \(2011\)](#) found that children's spontaneous repetition of their mothers' utterances during book reading positively predicted their overall retelling skills, as well as their ability to include specific events in story-retelling. Correspondingly, [Moschovaki \(1999\)](#) argues that children's spontaneous verbal participation during book reading is an important indicator of their readiness to learn and a pointer to children's thinking and cognitive maturity.

Our outcome measurement was informed by this line of research, and children's responses were compared in terms of quantity as well as quality of speech produced. In particular, we were keen to examine the extent to which children's

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