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NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

by

Sara Hegsted

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education

Approved:

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Abstract

Children hear and use narratives in a variety of contexts including school, social situations, and at home. A narrative is a form of discourse that is used to tell the listener what happened in a temporally sequenced, agent-focused way, and these stories can be a production of a real or fictional account. Speech language pathologists take a particular interest in children's narrative abilities because children's story telling capabilities play a large role in language acquisition as well as future academic success, especially literacy. The following literature review seeks to synthesize information on narrative development, production, and intervention from the perspective of speech language pathologists. This article will discuss the importance of narratives, narrative structure, and a variety of narrative intervention techniques. Because it is difficult for a child to generalize language goals to settings outside of the therapy room without additional support, applications for both parents and teachers to continue working on narrative language goals will also be discussed.

Children's ability to tell stories, or narratives, has been a topic of interest in a variety of areas including psychology, linguistics, literacy, child development, and speech language pathology (Liles, 1993). The following paper will focus mainly on narratives and narrative development in children from the standpoint of the field of speech language pathology. The literature reviewed will include information on what constitutes a narrative, the importance of narratives, narrative structure, and narrative interventions. Application for both teachers and parents will also be discussed.

Narratives

From the day children are born, they are constantly exposed to story telling through actual book reading activities, movie or television storylines, telling stories with friends, families talking about their day, and many other activities. This exposure to stories plays an important role in a child's language development because it provides a model for many important aspects of language development, such as vocabulary, grammar, episodic structure, propositional content, and cohesive devices (Ukrainetz, Justice, Kaderavek, Eisenberg, Gillam, & Harm, 2005). A narrative is a production of a real or fictional event that is temporally sequenced (Justice, Bowles, Pence & Gosse, 2010), and this form of discourse is used to tell what happened (Ukrainetz et, al., 2005). These temporal, agent-focused stories can take the form of personal experiences, retells, or stories that the child makes up (Scott, 1988). Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse (2010) describe narratives as language in context, meaning that story telling is a natural setting for children to learn, explore, and produce language.

When telling stories, an individual takes the use of language beyond the transmission of information to expressive production that draws the listener in by using a variety of literary elements, such as familiar patterns, humor, foreshadowing, tension, emotional involvement, or

mystery (Ukrainetz et, al., 2005). During narratives, individuals talk about why characters (real or fictional) did what they did, what their thoughts were, and how they felt about certain situations. This allows children to explore and express their own perspectives in addition to building relationships with people who are listening (Ukrainetz et, al., 2005).

As children develop, they transition from listening to other peoples' stories to telling stories of their own. McCabe, Bliss, Barra, and Bennett (2008) found that the majority of 5-6 year old children's language is made up of personal narratives, and from an early age, children know what constitutes a "good" story. Scott (1988) noted that narratives become the link between home and school where children share stories of their personal lives at school through show and tell, writing assignments, and talking with friends, while also bringing home stories from school by reliving a recess experience or retelling a reading assignment.

The Importance of Narratives

Telling stories requires high levels of language and cognition skills as children are required to do many tasks at once in order to tell an engaging, complete narrative (Paul, Hernandez, Taylor, & Johnson, 1996). In the midst of telling the story, the child must plan what he or she is going to say, organize his or her thoughts to be both temporally sequenced and meaningful, and also incorporate creative elements in order to keep the listener interested and involved (Fiestas & Peña, 2004). McFadden & Gillam (1996) found that students with language disorders produce narratives that are not only structurally less complex, but also lower in quality when compared to their same age peers, because of the difficulty they experience trying to combine all the tasks required to tell a quality story. This is a problem because a child's ability to listen to and understand narratives also prepares him or her for the typical learning demands and circumstance he or she will encounter in the classroom (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010).

Developing the ability to produce narratives at a young age also plays a large role in students' success in school settings. Narrative abilities form a bridge between oral language and literacy, and narrative skills are one of the best predictors of school success in four-year-old children with language disabilities. A child's capacity to tell stories can predict future reading and writing success and is especially connected to reading comprehension (McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Uccelli and Páez, 2007). Paul, Hernandez, Taylor, & Johnson (1996) also found that the narratives of primary-aged children with learning disabilities can be used to accurately predict scholastic outcomes. If tracked over time, narrative expansion can be used as an indicator for a child's language development.

Producing and comprehending narratives is a foundational element in any elementary school classroom. Children are given reading assignments where they are expected to grasp the overall theme of the story as well as note character development and resolutions or morals of the story. Writing narratives, whether real or fictional, is also a frequent part of a child's education, and he or she must be able to sequence a story around a main idea from a very young age. Having a child practice his or her story telling abilities by asking him or her to retell a past experience or summarize a story he or she has heard before, provides a similar experience to school settings when children are asked to listen to new concepts then summarize, or retell, what they learned either through completing assignments, helping peers, or taking tests (Scott & Windsor, 2000).

Narratives not only predict a child's future school success, but can also be used as an assessment tool when working with school age children at any language level. Before a child reaches school age, conversation is the best method to obtain a language sample; however, the school age child gives the most accurate representation of his or her language skills through

narration. Because narratives are a familiar part of language elicitation at home and school, they provide a context that allows for a more natural sample of the child's language (Justice, Bowles, Pence & Gosse, 2010; Leadholm & Miller, 1992). Story telling is present in all cultures, so assessing a child's ability to tell stories based on the culturally acceptable themes, structure, and topics can be a less biased way to evaluate children as opposed to standardized tests that are normed for middle class, Caucasian children (Fiestas & Peña, 2004).

Narratives can also be used to assess children who may be at risk for language disorders. Justice, Bowles, Pence, and Gosse (2010) stated that there is no other single testing approach that can reveal so much about a child's language skills because when telling a story, children are exhibiting all the domains of language (phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and morphology). As children use temporal elements in their stories (before, after, when, etc.), they are exhibiting syntactic development as these words typically signal a complex sentence. For example instead of using "and" or "then" to connect sentences the child may say, "After we went to the store, we put away the groceries." The presence of morphological markers (past tense –ed, plural s, possessive s, irregular past tense, etc.) and articulation (phonology) can also be assessed in this way. Acquiring new vocabulary also occurs as children listen to narratives. Heilmann, Miller, Nockerts, & Dunaway (2010) found that children gain new vocabulary through repeated exposure to narrative forms. When the form is predictable, children can focus on the content, and learn new words. Finally, narratives are an excellent way to observe children's pragmatic abilities. Pragmatics is defined as the appropriate use of language in context (Bishop, 2000) and includes both verbal and nonverbal language. When assessing a child's pragmatic abilities while telling a story, a teacher or speech language pathologist (SLP) would note the child's eye contact, gestures, proxemics, topic initiation, topic maintenance, and conversational repairs. The

ability to tell stories that are culturally appropriate and appeal to a given audience is both a cognitive and social ability that many children in the primary school years have begun to exhibit (Liles, 1993).

Narrative Structure

A child's narrative structure also evolves as they get older and language becomes more complex. When a child is 3-4 years old their narratives are more of a temporal chain that is not thematically motivated (Munoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehule, 2003). These stories can be described as a list of actions instead of focusing on a specific event or experience of the day. For example, when asked about a trip to the store, a 3-4 year old child could be expected to respond with,

> "We drove to the store. And I sat in the cart. Then Mom bought bananas and cereal for breakfast. And mom dropped her phone. We paid. We drove home."

These stories have temporal features, the child told the experience from beginning to end, but it is still just a list of events that the child saw or experienced.

However, when a child turns five years old, he or she begins to use language to illustrate the plot of an experience and identify the motives of the characters (Munoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehule, 2003). This shift to thematically motivated stories, leads to the development of classic narratives. Classic narratives orient the listener to the characters in the story, where it takes place, and when the story takes place. They also relate the sequence of events, while building to the high point in the story; then the child ends the narrative by sharing how things turned out (McCabe & Rollins, 1994).

Children with language disorders often exhibit underdeveloped stories, and these stories show similarities to the 3-4 years old, typically developing child's stories discussed above.

McCabe & Rollins (1994) described these stories as having a slideshow like quality. Slideshow stories sound similar to an adult narrating a photo slideshow, where the child essentially relates a list of actions to simply state where they were or what happened with little or no contextual information. Children with language disorders also produce what McCabe and Rollins described as leapfrog narratives. Leapfrog stories are characterized by skipping around in time, leaving out events, or inserting unrelated events within a particular narrative.

When analyzing stories, SLPs typically focus on two main domains of narration, macrostructure and microstructure. Children need to exhibit both in order to produce narratives that the listener is interested in and understands.

Macrostructure

Macrostructure elements of a story have been described as the global characteristics of a story, also known as story grammar elements (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010; Fiestas & Peña, 2004). These story grammar elements are the underlying story structure, which gives specific rules about what makes up a story to make the structure predictable to the listener. Story grammar elements are the features that make up a story, such as setting, character, initiating event or problem, internal response or feelings, action/ attempt, and conclusion. Ukrainetz et. al (2005) described the complicating action and resolution in a story as the backbone of narratives because they are what the action in the narratives focus on.

Not all of the story grammar elements are recalled equally in any child's story and this is especially seen in the narratives of children with language disorders (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000). Children with language disorders are more likely to only include only a few story grammar elements especially omitting those that go beyond the basics of the experience, such as the character's internal response to the problem (Colozzo et.al, 2011). However, children who

become familiar with the story grammar elements have less difficulty understanding and recalling new stories (Hoggan & Strong, 1994).

Microstructure

Where the macrostructure of a story focuses on the overall elements of the story, the microstructure of the narrative looks at stories at the word and sentence level. These elements are the internal properties of the sample, and they include number of words in a sample, complex utterances, specific phrase or clause structure, conjunctive phrases, and grammaticality (Justice, Bowles, Pence, & Gosse, 2010). Microstructure also includes literate languageuse. Literate language often described as classroom language because it is highly decontextualized (Heilmann, Miller, Nockerts, & Dunaway, 2010). Features of literate language that researchers examine when assessing narratives are abstract notions, metacognitive and metalinguistic verbs, elaborated noun phrases, and adverbs. All of these text level elements are important in aiding the listener to have a clear understanding of the message that the speaker is trying to convey.

Narrative Interventions

Based on the extensive research that has been done in regards to narratives, SLPs have begun to adopt narratives into their interventions in a variety of ways. Working in the context of narratives allows SLPs to target many different language goals all within the production of stories. Some examples of language that children can be taught through narratives are to use adjectives or similes, add personality to characters, incorporate sequencing words, or include dialogue among characters. Narratives are also excellent intervention tools because they appeal to students at different ages and with varied interests (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). Swanson, Fey, Milis, & Hood (2005) found that therapies that focus on narratives increased a child's confidence in using appropriate volume for speech, maintaining eye contact, and initiating conversation.

Narrative interventions can take many forms and the specific format should based on the individual client's needs and interests, but several basic narrative interventions will be outlined.

Personal Narratives

McCabe, Bliss, Barra, & Bennett (2008) argued that personal narratives should receive greater focus in intervention than fictional narratives or retells. They noted that the majority of a child's language includes personal narratives, so this way of sampling is ideal because the child is using language in a more natural setting. The authors also noted that personal narratives are more complex and complete than fictional narratives because the child doesn't have the added task of making up a new story in addition to using story grammar elements and literate language, sequencing events, and making the story interesting.

McCabe, Bliss, Barra, and Bennett (2008) noted that in classroom settings children are asked more often to write about personal experiences rather than making something up, so using personal narratives as a goal in therapy can benefit a child's classroom experience too. Helping a child to become proficient in relating personal narratives will not only aid his or her success in school, but also in day-to-day life. As stated above, narratives are a significant part of a child's daily life, and the authors argue that personal narratives are more likely to generalize to everyday social interactions. The child will see this focus on personal narratives as having broad applications that extend well beyond the therapy room to casual conversations.

Peer Support Intervention

McGreggor (2000) points out that peers have a significant effect on a child's language skills because kids are much more likely to imitate someone who is their own age than a therapist. The author encourages that clinicians use a child's peers in therapy settings as a tutor to provide a positive model for language production. The tutor can be a child who is typically

developing in language, or the tutor can be a child who has different language difficulties than their peer so that both can act as tutors for the other.

McGreggor (2000) noted that incorporating a peer tutoring approach provided dialectically correct and age appropriate models to the student with a language disorder. The author also noted that the tutoring didn't have a negative reciprocal effect on the child who was in the role of the tutor even though the student he or she was paired with displayed specific language difficulties. So while the student with a language disorder showed an increase in targeted language production, the tutor did not show a decrease in the targeted language even though he or she was exposed to delayed language.

Narrative Units

Narrative units are goals and activities that are centered on the theme of a specific storybook. This type of intervention extends a shared book reading experience to include activities that make the story and themes more applicable to the child. Owens & Robinson (1997) encourage therapists to use storybooks in therapy because children benefit from early print exposure, and these stories allow for interactive activities that can turn stories into social events. Hoggan & Strong (1994) recommend narrative teaching strategies where the clinician plans activities for pre-, during, and post- story activities.

Pre-Story Activities.

During the pre-story presentation the clinician can do a variety of activities to help the child understand and connect with the story. These pre-story activities are used to help decrease the disconnect between what the child already knows and what he or she will need to know to understand the story, which will increase story comprehension. Activities can be as simple as talking about words in the title of the book or phrases that show up repeatedly in the story that

the child may or may not understand. Doing these type of activities will activate background knowledge that the child already possesses or teach a concept for the first time. The SLP will not just define new words, but also have the child explore how specific vocabulary words relate to him or her. For example, if the story was about an owl, the clinician may ask questions such as, "what is an owl? What noise does an owl make? Where do owls live? And/ or have you ever seen an owl?" These questions will allow the child to expand his or her meaning of words and make the story more meaningful because personal connections have been made.

Directed reading/ thinking activities are another method that clinicians use to introduce a story to a child (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). In directed reading/ thinking activities the clinician tells the child the title of the story and they look through all of the pictures without telling the child the topic of the story. Then the SLP encourages the child to make predictions about what the story is about. After reading the first few paragraphs or pages of the story, the clinician will pause and ask if the child would like to change his or her hypothesis, and this pattern periodically continues through the reading. At the end, the clinician and student can reflect on predications that the child had correct and events in the story that surprised the child. This method helps children to stay engaged throughout the story because they are listening to see if their predictions were right.

Music is another pre-activity that Hoggan & Strong (1994) recommend. Music allows the child to learn new language through song lyrics and become familiar with rhythm and pitch. If the clinician can find a song that has to do with the theme of the story, he or she can teach it to the child using pictures or writing the words on a chalkboard before reading the story. After hearing the song several times, the clinician can use cloze procedures where the clinicians sings most of the line of a song but has the student fill in familiar words by pausing and looking

expectantly at the child. Because songs tend to rhyme, this can also help children who struggle with phonological awareness. Phonological awareness includes a child's ability to recognize and produce rhyming words, so having the child fill in the last word of a song for each line could help him or her begin to see and use words that rhyme.

During-Story Activities.

After doing activities to gain the child's attention, the SLP can get into reading the story; however, to keep the child engaged, the clinician must continue provided activities and experiences for the child. One activity that clinicians often use during a story is questioning (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). While reading, the clinician will pause to extend a child's knowledge about abstract words or phrases, obtain information, guess what will happen next, discuss why a character did what he or she did, or will ask the child how he or she would feel if what happened in the book were to happen in their life. Questioning can also reveal misunderstandings the child may have about the meaning of words or phrases or the general storyline. Questions can also be used to check for story comprehension following the reading.

Story mapping is another method to keep children's attention during a reading. When using story mapping, the clinician will first teach the child the story grammar elements and how these elements connect with each other (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). While listening to the story, the child and SLP "map" the story by listing or filling in the different elements as they are read, such as the setting, problem, actions, or conclusion. This method is excellent for children who may be struggling with telling a full narrative that includes these necessary components of a story because it is explicitly teaching the features that the child may be struggling with. Then when the child hears and recognizes the story grammar elements in a story, he or she sees a direct application of different elements being used to make the story understandable. After

mapping out the episodes, the clinician could discuss with the child how the story would be different if an element was left out.

The clinician could also provide activities that focus on the story at a word or sound level. If a clinician is focusing on a specific class of phonemes such as fricatives, the child could be instructed to clap whenever he or she hears /s/, /z/, or /sh/ sounds at the beginning of a word. Similarly, if the clinician is focusing on sequencing words (first, next, when) or conjunctions the child can clap when he or she hears the target word. This sort of task helps the child to first recognize a sound or part of speech, which over time should help in generalizing to his or her speech and language outside of the therapy room.

Post-Story Activities.

Participating in activities after reading a story increases comprehension as well as language expression (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). One method that SLPs can use is a question-answer pattern where the clinician uses varying levels of questions to increase the child's story comprehension, and Bloom's Taxonomy can be used as a guide to formulate these questions (Krathwohl, 2010). The first level of questions that a clinician could ask has answers that can be found easily and directly from the story. These questions give a child opportunity to show that he or she had an overall understanding of the plot. The next type of question requires the child to synthesize information that is all stated in the story but may be in different sentences or pages. The answer to the next level of questions is not stated in the story, but instead utilizes information that the child picks up from the story in addition to information that the child already knows about the topic. The final level of questions is inferential and forces the child to use their own experiences and knowledge in order to answer the question. Using these tiers of questions

will help the child internalize the story and combine it with knowledge he or she already has acquired.

Discussion webs are an excellent activity that can be used with groups of older children after listening to or reading a story. The clinician introduces an abstract or inferential question that relates to the topic and uses the discussion web to support the students' ideas. Often, the discussion question will be introduced to pairs of children who will discuss their points of view, then present their conclusions to the class, which leads to a class discussion. Discussion webs are an excellent way to allow students to explore their own reasoning as well as react to other classmate's point of view. It also provides practice for students to use oral language to explain their ideas to a group of their peers.

Story-retelling is another activity that SLPs can use after reading a story with children. The child has opportunity to practice narrative discourse, and the clinician can prompt or provide transitions if the child gets stuck. Retelling can also be used for groups of students where each child is giving a key element of the story on a card, and they go around retelling the story in order.

Assigning children different roles and acting out a story using dramatic play has been another activity recommended by several researchers (Hoggan & Strong, 1994; Owens & Robinson, 1997; Ukrainetz etl al, 2005). Dramatic play is a fun way for students to bring stories to life and collaborate with their peers to present a meaningful story. Dramatic play gives children the opportunity to take part in all the responsibilities of putting on a play; they are the narrators, actors, and stage managers for their production. When students perform the narrative sequence for their class they increase story comprehension and memory, practice vocabulary, and adopt more complex syntax to match that of the story.

Finally clinicians can use story generation to increase narrative skills with children after they read a story (Hoggan & Strong, 1994). Clinicians prompt children to either tell personal or made-up stories about themes or ideas that were present in the story. Because this is typically a more difficult task for children, SLPs can scaffold in order to help the child tell a successful story. First the clinician can give the client a theme for a story as well as a complicating event. For example, the SLP could have the student make up a story about going to the store and forgetting the money. After the child becomes comfortable with this format, the clinician could shift to just prompting the child during the story if the child gets distracted. As the child becomes more comfortable with this format and telling stories, he or she will be able to tell stories on his or her own.

Application

Swanson, Fey, Mills, and Hood (2005) found that children respond well to narrative interventions because the students can talk about their own experiences, knowledge, and interests. There are several ways that clinicians can incorporate stories into their therapy, which helps children become familiar with story structure and common themes. Interventions focused around storybooks also give children opportunity to begin to tell their own stories about related themes in a natural context. This also allows clinicians to use a combination of both personal and fictional narratives in the intervention because they can have the child tell about his or her past experiences in addition to making up narratives that relate to the themes presented in the storybook.

Providing models for narratives and focusing on story telling is not only an activity that SLPs can focus on. Parents can also provide excellent narrative models to children through a variety of means. First, parents can model good story telling techniques by ensuring that their

stories are complete and interesting to the audience they are talking to. Parents can also encourage their children in story telling by not interrupting the child and not finishing the story if the child pauses. Instead, the parent can use prompts to help their child fill in the elements that are missing and encourage the child to finish the story. Finally, parents can ensure that the child lives in a very print-rich environment. Parents can also provide shared book experiences with children as they grow up. Reading books with children from an early age teaches them to appreciate stories and develop narrative structure.

Teachers also have a variety of opportunities to encourage students' narrative development. Like parents, teachers can also read to students, but there are several additional activities that incorporate producing and understanding narratives. For example, teachers can do writing activities in order to give students a different context where they can practice using their narrative skills. Teachers can have students reflect on experiences, such as field trips, conflict with other students, or things that are happening in the community, in order to elicit personal narratives and reactions from students. Teachers can also have creative writing units where students are encouraged to write imaginative stories. Writing narratives tends to be a more difficult task than telling stories because students are more likely to leave out story grammar elements when writing (Kaderavek & Sutzby, 2000).

Conclusions

Narratives are an important aspect of a child's language development, and children's narratives give therapists and teachers an in depth look at a child's language. Telling stories allows a child to connect with others and learn important social skills such as maintaining eye contact, initiating conversation, and topic maintenance (Munoz, Gillam, Pena, & Gulley-Faehule, 2003; Hoggan & Strong, 1994; Liles, 1993). Story telling also gives children opportunity to

examine their personal thoughts and beliefs, and narratives play an important role in a child's academic success (Paul, Hernandez, Taylor, & Johnson, 1996; Scott & Windsor, 2000; McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Uccelli & Paez, 2007).

Narratives can also be used in a variety of therapy and teaching settings. Teachers, parents, and SLPs can all work together on narrative discourse with children in order foster the child's language skills. When children are receiving support not only from therapy but also in the classroom and at home, these language skills will generalize to other social situations and increase children's potential for reading and academic success.

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Sara Hegsted, born and raised in Pocatello, Idaho, graduated from Highland Senior High School in 2009 with Highest Honors. She came to Utah State University in the fall of 2009 on the Presidential Scholarship. While at USU, Sara decided to major in Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education with an emphasis in Speech Language Pathology and minor in Organizational Communications. Sara had many leadership and research opportunities through her department and the Honors Office. She worked as a research assistant in the Language and Literacy Lab, an Undergraduate Teaching Fellow for Honors Creative Arts and Language, Speech, and Hearing Development, an Honors Mentor and the Honors Mentor Coordinator, an Honors Career Specialist, and an assistant to the Office of Research and Graduate Studies. Sara was awarded the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services Undergraduate Researcher of the Year, the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services Scholar of the Year, and the A Pin. Following graduation in May 2013, Sara will take time off from school to gain work experience before deciding what field of study she may want to pursue for a Master's Degree.