


How Narrative Skills Associate With Peer Relations: An Empirical Study on Chinese Primary School Children

Yiyuan Wang, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China


Rong Yan, Xian-Jiaotong Liverpool University, China*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6570-4824>

Miao Li, University of Houston, USA

Meng Wu, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

Zihan Chen, University of Warwick, UK

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5660-6648>

ABSTRACT

Narrative skills are essential for children's social development. However, existing research primarily focuses on narratives' impact on children's cognitive abilities, with limited attention given to the relationship between narrative skills and peer interactions. This study aims to explore how oral and written narrative skills are associated with peer relations from a social perspective. 166 Chinese primary school children were randomly assigned to tasks of oral and written narratives, as well as peer nominations. Results indicate that grade 5 students performed significantly better than grade 3 students in both written and oral narrative tasks. Moreover, the level of written narrative proficiency surpassed that of oral skills. Significant interactions were also found among grade level, gender, and narrative modes. Crucially, narrative skills exhibited positive correlations with peer nominations, with stronger correlations seen for written narratives. These findings have important implications for narrative research and language instruction.

KEYWORDS

Children, Narrative Skills, Peer Relations, Social Development

Narrative, also known as storytelling, is defined as a description of the course and outcome of an event that could have happened, is happening, or will happen (Nystrand et al., 1997). It can be either based on the actual and fictional events, developed from the original content, or even a retelling of the narrator (Berger, 1997; Kim et al., 2018). Ubiquitous in our lives, narratives can either occur in dialogues or in monologues (Bamberg, 2012). A high-quality and well-structured narrative requires

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*Corresponding Author

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appropriate grammar, vocabulary, logic, empathy, and memory coherence (Adler et al., 2018; Akdağ & Erdiller, 2013). Thus, narrative skills are usually assessed through macro and micro dimensions. Macrostructure, also defined as the story grammar model (Mandler, 1979; Stein & Glenn, 1979), is the higher-order hierarchical organization of a narrative text (Heilmann et al., 2010). Macrostructural elements encompass a story's characters, time, place, events, actions, consequences, and mental representation (Sung, 2022). Microstructure, on the other hand, is represented by the more minor linguistic elements of syntax and semantics. Microstructure constituents include noun phrases, pronouns, and connectives (Gagarina, 2015). Commonly used assessing indicators of narratives are mean length of utterance (MLU), total number of words (TNW), number of different words (NDW), type token ratio (TTR), etc. (Boerma et al., 2016; Dahlstrom, 2012; Habermas et al., 2009; Reese et al., 2011).

Narratives can be further classified into two categories: oral and written (Fludernik & Ryan, 2019; Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002). Oral narratives refer to the spoken discourse characterized by the transmission of culture in a way that conveys lived or imagined events to others (Bruner, 1990). By contrast, written narratives have a storage function which allows communication to cross time and space and transfer language from the verbal to the visual realm, thus allowing words and sentences to be presented outside their original context (Keane, 2013). Several factors have been identified to influence children's narrative skills, such as vocabulary (Wood et al., 2016; Souza & Cáceres-Assençó, 2021), executive functions (Boerma et al., 2016; Kalliontzi et al., 2022), gender (Bigozzi & Vettori, 2015; Troia et al., 2012), socioeconomic status (Mozzanica et al., 2016), and culture (Khimji & Maunder, 2012).

It has been well established that children's narrative experience and skills increase with age (Westerveld & Gillon, 2009). Early studies show that children's oral narrative skills emerge at the age two or three years (Applebee, 1978) when toddlers begin to produce one- or two-event narratives (Roth, 2009). At the age of three to four years, children are thematically motivated with a simple list of events (Imai et al., 1994) but demonstrate an evident lack of application of significant events or sequential orders, identified as the leapfrog narratives (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015; Stadler & Ward, 2006). Despite the incoherent structures, children at this stage master narrating details from physical aspects of characters to some goal-related actions (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007). By the age of five years, with significant progress in conjunctions, verbs, and grammar (Curenton & Justice, 2004), children are able to construct more complex narratives (Kendeou et al., 2008) with a detailed representation of characters (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007). Yet, they rarely provide resolutions to their stories, even though they can end their narratives with a high point if they choose (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). It is not until the age of six years that children begin to form comprehensive and coherent narratives with sufficient details, such as contextual information and complicating actions (Shapiro & Hudson, 1991; McCabe & Rollins, 1994). At this stage, their narratives are well-formed chronologically and culminate with a high point, an evaluation, a resolution, and remarks (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). By the age seven years, children produce narratives with multiple episodes, and later, they gradually embed considerable details and complete the episodes (Crais & Lorch, 1994). Around the age of eight and nine years, children start integrating characters' mental states, such as false beliefs and contrasting points of view, into the plot (Veneziano & Bartoli, 2022). Hamilton et al. (2020) find that the grammatical complexity and propositional content of children's narratives increase from age nine years to 12 years.

Oral narratives may not align with written ones, while preschool children's oral narrative skills are found to be significantly predictive to their written narratives in grades one and two at primary school, with phonological awareness serving as the mediator (Pinto et al., 2015). Many scholars claim oral narrative skills serve as the foundation for the future development of written narratives (Babayigit & Stainthorp, 2011). Evidence shows that the oral narrative structure is significantly predictive to the narrative competence in written productions (Pinto et al., 2016). Moreover, Bigozzi and Vettori (2015) identify both continuity and discontinuity in the transition from oral to written

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