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Narratives
Twenty-Five Years Later

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This article discusses the potential value of working with school-aged children to increase their competence with narrative forms. With illustrations from current research, it argues that increased knowledge of, and experience with, narrative should have positive effects on comprehension of classroom language, selective listening, peer relations, and literacy. Narrative interventions can also be incorporated into dynamic assessment protocols and can help us identify children with limitations in language processing. **Key words:** *developmental language disorders*, *language intervention*, *narrative*

MY mother was a grand storyteller. Night after night, my brother and I fell asleep with visions of magic wands and three perfect wishes. Perhaps it was those "stories in the dark" that resonated when, 25 years ago, I read the initial studies on narrative development. I sensed immediately that this research was pointing us to crucial aspects of language learning, and I decided to write an article about how narrative could be incorporated into a speech–language pathologist's (SLP's) work with school-aged children (Johnston, 1982).

Since that time, I have followed the literature on narrative development and its clinical importance with great interest: narrative intervention, narrative processing, narrative assessment, narrative as a predictor of future language status, etc. This literature has convinced me that narrative abilities should be included among the intervention goals for all school-aged children with language learning problems. In the sections that follow, I will discuss six reasons for my recommendation and will summarize recent studies that support this view. The review will be more illustrative than comprehensive, but I trust it will at least whet the reader's appetite for the larger narrative literature. Readers new to this literature may also find some useful frameworks that will motivate further investigations.

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TO EXPLORE PROCESSING DEFICITS

In the 1982 review article, I argued that four distinct knowledge bases are needed to support a narrative. Because my initial reason for targeting narratives assumes the validity of that framework, I will summarize it here. First, the speaker must know the content of the narrative, both its general nature and its specific details. Here is a remembered event from my younger years that assumes a general script about travel.

In 1960, my family went to Mexico for Christmas. In Mexico City my brother came down with the flu and we missed our plane to Merida. We drove to Taxco and stayed at a resort named Villa Hermosa.

Those are the facts I would begin with if I were to relate this experience. But I would also need to have a narrative framework to help me make a story of the facts. Personal experience narratives are typically arranged around a "high point," (Bliss & McCabe,

2008) and generally include a context and an evaluation.

When I was a child, we always celebrated Christmas with an extended family gathering, much food and music. One year, however, my family went to Mexico for Christmas. Unfortunately, in Mexico City my brother came down with the flu so we missed our plane to Merida. We ended up going to Taxco on the spur of the moment and stayed at a resort named Villa Hermosa. It was just the four of us, but we had a beautiful Latin Christmas I will never forget.

Here I use the facts to make a point about unplanned experiences turning out well. I could use the same facts to make the point that it is impossible to rebook holiday plane travel, but that would be a different narrative. The possibility of creating more than one personal experience narrative from the same set of events helps us see the distinction between content and narrative schemes.

The third knowledge base is linguistic in nature. Narratives are more than collections of sentences related by meaning; they are unified texts. To create a text, the speaker uses specific language forms to knit and bind the sentences of a narrative into a cohesive whole. Repeated names and key words echo from one sentence to another; anaphoric pronouns or definite articles or pronouns or adjectives refer back to persons and objects that were mentioned earlier; and conjunctions indicate temporal, causal, and/or logical relationships from one sentence to the next. Children typically learn these forms in the context of a single sentence and only later extend them to create text.

The fourth and final knowledge base that supports narrative deals with communicative adequacy. In real life, narratives have listeners, and the storyteller must shape the narrative to fit the prior knowledge and communicative expectations of these listeners. At a macro level, this involves decisions about focus and content. If I were to tell my brother my story of the Mexican Christmas, I would include very little factual information because he shared the trip with me. There would still be evaluative material, however, because the responses and "the point" would be wholly mine. At a micro level, communicative adequacy requires clear reference. As stories accumulate more characters and move from setting to setting, it becomes increasingly important that anaphoric pronouns and other referring expressions have clear referents so that listeners can identify the actors. Before children can make decisions of this sort about focus, the inclusion of specific content, or the adequacy of referential expressions, they must learn to take the perspective of the listener—both the generic listener and the actual listener at the moment of speech.

These were the four knowledge bases that I discussed in the 1982 article, and although we know more about their nature and development now, there has been no radical change in our understanding of their necessary contribution to narrative. It remains clear that effective storytelling implies the availability of these several different and distinct bodies of knowledge and a given child may find one or another of them relatively more challenging.

In writing this article now, however, I make one important addition to our narrative framework, namely, the cognitive processing demands inherent in telling a story. Narratives are planned texts. They require that content *and* structure *and* cohesive language *and* the listener's needs be considered simultaneously in a coordinated fashion, keeping in mind the purpose and shape of the whole. Because it should be clear from the prior discussion, the knowledge base in each of these areas is substantial, making simultaneous deployment of schemes a major challenge for any child speaker. Moreover, because the listener's needs keep changing as the story progresses, the speaker must continually monitor and update a record of referring expressions (Wong & Johnston, 2004). If schemes in any one area prove hard to deploy, there may not be sufficient working memory capacity to call up and/or coordinate the remainder and the story will suffer.

Our recent study of the fictional narratives told by 7- to 9-year-olds provides evidence of the effects of processing limitations on storytelling (Curran, Colozzo, & Johnston, 2004). We had collected the stories using the *Test of Narrative Language* (TNL; Gillam & Pearson, 2003). As we scored them following the TNL protocol, we noticed that two stories earning the same score could nevertheless be very different in grammaticality, formal complexity, and/or content. Using a subset of the TNL criteria, we awarded each story a score for form and a score for content and compared the resulting profiles for children with and without language impairments. It turned out that, regardless of overall developmental level, the stories told by children with language impairments were likely to be relatively strong in either form or content, whereas the stories told by children with normal language development were likely to be equally proficient in the two areas. This data pattern could reflect processing "trade-offs" in the group with language impairment, which would imply that they functioned closer to the limits of their processing capacity in the narrative task.

The notion of processing "trade-offs" raises the interesting possibility that when working with children with language impairment, that what you see may not be the true problem. A story text may lack cohesion, not because the language forms are unknown, but because the child focused too much attention on organizing the narrative according to story grammar schemes and ended up without sufficient capacity for the language. The referent of a pronoun may be unclear, not because the child lacks the ability to take the point of view of the listener, but because the complexity of the plot line has consumed too much of the child's mental resources. To explore the possible effects of processing limitations on the narrative performance of a given child, we could change the task so as to allow the use of simpler and/or more familiar schemes in one area (e.g., narrative structure), and look for improvement in other areas (e.g., cohesive devices).

TO DECONTEXTUALIZE LANGUAGE

A second reason for the benefits of narrative derives from its distance from current events. The language of very young children is thoroughly embedded in context. They talk almost exclusively about what is happening, or what they want or feel, in the moment. It is this connection with the immediate context, of course, that aids children in learning language in the first place. But the real power of language is to take us away from the "here and now" to the "there and then," to places outside our personal experience, to the abstract and imperceptible, and to hypotheses and solutions. Such decontextualized language is the language of the classroom, and it is a challenge for children with language learning difficulties (e.g., Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001). Among other things, it requires a firm hold on the links between sound and meaning and the ability to use words to evoke realties rather than vice versa.

For children who struggle with language, narrative tasks can help them bridge the gap between the language of immediate reference and the language of possibility. Whether a personal event or a fictional story, narratives are clearly situated in some place other than the "here" and "now." When we scaffold a conversation about recent experiences or model the use of familiar scripts to structure a superhero saga, we help children discover the power of language to take us away from the current context.

TO HELP KIDS CONNECT

Narrative is best conceived as a family of forms rather than a single entity. Even if we restrict ourselves to the language of children, there are at least three major sorts of narrative: scripts, personal experience narratives, and fictional stories (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). Most of the clinical literature on narrative focuses on fictional stories, but we might do better to focus, at least initially, on personal experience narratives. This is not only because they are an earlier-learned form but also

because they could support positive peer interactions, an area of growing concern for children with language impairments (Hart, Fujiki, Brinton, & Hart, 2004).

In everyday discourse, we are much more likely to tell a tale arising out of personal experience than one that is fictional. Think for a moment about the last time you told a story to a friend—was it about missing your plane, a really great vacation, or the Godfather? If you are like me, you have a growing stock of stories drawn from your own life that you relate whenever opportunity arises. A moment's reflection tells us why. Personal experience narratives allow us to build and renew the bonds of common experience and create our public identities. They reveal what we laugh at and care about and help explain the ways in which we are alike, or different, from our listeners. What a powerful social tool, and how profound its absence!

TO IMPROVE LISTENING SKILLS

Ever since the 1960s and the work of neuroscientists such as Karl Pribram, we have known that perception is fundamentally interactive. Available knowledge schemes not only interpret shapes and sounds but also actively guide, "top-down," our exploration of the sensory world. We can observe the eye gaze patterns of an infant who anticipates the movement of an object, but it is more difficult to observe active listening—or its absence. I suspect, however, that this is an area of real challenge for many children with language impairments. In the words of Jay, a 9-year-old with serious language problems who was explaining his new strategy for paragraph comprehension, "You hafta listen really hard."

Narrative discourse can provide an important forum for the practice of active listening. Knowledge of script and knowledge of narrative structure bring some degree of predictability to the listening task and make it possible to listen for something in particular—the elements of a story, such as the characters, the point, the problem, etc.

A team of researchers in Great Britain (Davies, Shanks, & Davies, 2004) conducted a research study in which narratives served exactly this purpose. The participants were 34 children in kindergarten and Grade 1 who had been identified by their teachers as language delayed. Subsequent testing indicated that virtually all of the children had difficulties with narrative. The children were seen in small groups that met for three sessions a week over a period of 8 weeks. One of the weekly sessions was led by a SLP and the other two by a "learning support assistant" on the basis of observations of, and training by, the SLP. Following the initial 8-week period, the learning assistant continued the intervention activities for a month in pullout sessions and also incorporated work on narrative into the regular classroom lessons.

The purpose of the intervention was to "help children recognize the structure of their own and other narratives" (Davies, Shanks, & Davies, 2004, p. 279), making use of a Wh-question framework (e.g., Who. . .? What happened. . .?). Cue cards were used for the various story grammar elements. Other intervention activities included taping and listening to their own stories, acting out stories with puppets, picture sorting, and drawing pictures to represent the various elements of story grammar. Comparison of pretest and posttest performance showed accelerated improvement on information recall and grammar scores on the Renfrew Action Picture Test, but not on scores for The Bus Story Test (Renfrew, 1969). The latter may have been inappropriately complex for these children. What particularly interested me about the results from this project was the response of the teachers. Prior to the intervention, the participating children had typically been unable to "focus sufficiently during whole class verbal activities" and "gave inappropriate responses when asked to contribute." Following the intervention program, teachers reported that, "the children had increased in confidence and were more able to listen and contribute appropriately in whole class activities" (Davies et al., 2004, p. 283). Although this part of

the results was presented only in anecdotal fashion, it is in line with my predictions and invites further research on the effect of narrative intervention on classroom listening.

TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION

Public education views literacy as the paramount goal of the primary grades. We may wish there were more attention to individual differences and greater recognition of the importance of oral language growth during these years, but priorities are not likely to change. Fortunately, we have evidence of important links between oral language skill and reading success. Hugh Catts and his colleagues (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999), for example, found that oral language abilities in kindergarten were correlated with reading comprehension abilities in Grade 2. The timeframe for these correlations would seem to imply that oral language facilitates literacy and not vice versa. Further confirmation of this interpretation comes from a recent intervention study

Garner and Bochna (2004) enrolled 35 children in a classroom intervention program and compared their progress to that of a control group drawn from a nearby school. Twice a day for 15 to 20 minutes, over a period of 16 weeks, teachers read stories to their pupils, explicitly discussed the elements of a fictional narrative, and had children read stories themselves. Children in the control group read the same number of stories on the same schedule, but from basal readers and without the teacher's explanations about story structure. At the end of this time, children in both groups were retested. The most interesting findings concerned reading. The intervention group and the control group were equally fluent when reading aloud, and spontaneously recalled the same amount of information from the stories they had read. However, when the examiner questioned further, it was children in the intervention group who had the more in-depth understanding of the story. This was true even for children whose comprehension was tested on stories they had read only silently. Children who know the generic narrative schemes can use this knowledge to guide their independent search for meaning in written texts.

TO REVEAL STRENGTHS

Thus far I have been describing ways that an ongoing emphasis on narrative skills could benefit school-aged children with language learning disabilities, but limited-scope narrative teaching can also be useful. One of our greatest challenges in school practice is to distinguish between children with language learning disorders and those with language delays because of differences in culture, language, or experience. This is particularly true in some North American urban school districts, in which most children speak English as a second language. One promising assessment approach uses the child's response to short-term intervention as an index of underlying language strengths or problems. Advocates of this "dynamic" approach argue that children who are essentially normal learners will show greater improvement following one to three intervention sessions than children who are fundamentally impaired learners.

A team of researchers from the University of Alberta has just tested this strategy using narrative materials (Kramer, Mallett, Schneider, & Hayward, 2007). The Grade 3 children from a Cree community were rated by their teachers and other school personnel as having, or not having, a learning disorder. Members of the research team—blind to the ratings—administered a test of narrative abilities and established learning goals for each child. Following two sessions of explicit instruction on the targeted aspects of narrative, a second version of the narrative test was given. The children who had been identified by their teachers as typical learners showed more overall gain from pretest to posttest, more gain on aspects of narrative that had not been explicitly taught, and were judged by their SLP to be more modifiable.

This certainly indicates the value of short-term narrative intervention in identifying children with language learning strengths versus difficulties. To use this approach, we will need to establish a fairly standard intervention protocol and some normative sense for how much gain can be expected of normal learners from the various communities we serve. These local norming projects would be excellent candidates for researcher–practitioner collaborations.

THE VALUE OF NARRATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Twenty-five years ago, I had a hunch that narrative forms were going to prove to be a valuable, perhaps even essential, focus in the work of language specialists with school-aged children. The studies cited here, and many others, would seem to confirm this prediction—and in more interesting ways than I could have imagined. By focusing on narratives in our language intervention, we can explore processing limitations, create opportunities for using decontextualized language, facilitate social relationships, provide practice in constructive listening, improve reading comprehension, and identify language learning strengths and weaknesses. Virtually, any child in primary grades who has a history of language difficulties or a current delay will profit in some respect from narrative intervention, and there continues to be new evidence that such therapies "work." The fact that story telling is also fun is a bonus for everyone, including us.

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