

Narrative skills in Greek preschoolers

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INTRODUCTION

Narration, or storytelling, is an important aspect of language for young children. Narrative skills have academic and social importance (Spencer & Slocum, 2010). Storytelling reflects children's pragmatic language ability, which develops rapidly in early childhood and is related to various characteristics of the child's environment (Urska et al., 2010). Narration, or storytelling, is defined as orally presenting causally related events or an experience in temporal order (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997; Peterson, 1990). Narrative discourse plays a critical role in the development of discourse and literacy, and forms the bases of many social interactions (McCabe, 1996). Narration is a precursor and a predictor of literacy attainment and early narrative abilities predict later academic performance. Feagans and Appelbaum (1986) found that narrative skills were better predictors of academic problems than were syntax and semantic skills. Bishop and Edmundson (1987) investigated several language measures at 4.0 years of age that predicted persistent language impairment and school success at 5.5 years of age where in this study found that the ability to tell a simple story while looking at pictures was identified as the strongest predictor ($r = .76$). Moreover, Fazio, Naremore, and Connell (1996) examined a number of language skills in kindergarten as potential predictors of need for academic remediation in second grade. When compared to vocabulary, grammar, rote memory, and morpheme learning, story retelling was the best predictor of academic remediation in the second grade ($r = .40$). Beyond previous studies there were several researchers found moderate correlations ($r = .31$ to $.57$) between early childhood narrative abilities and reading comprehension in elementary grades (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang 2002; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004).

Narrative skills begin to develop in the preschool years and continue to be refined

throughout childhood and school-age. Development is demonstrated through the use of increased numbers of episodes and complex embedding strategies (Hedberg & Westby, 1993), but also through pragmatic features, such as the more advanced use of referencing and adjustments to the listener's needs. According to Stein & Glenn, 1979 children at the age of 3 can tell stories about real-life events combined with emotional content including all parts of the episode such as initiation and plan of action. By five they are able to sequence events chronologically and gradually order multiple events if their culture values this type of discourse (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

The purpose of this study is to present and discuss the unique data, in Greek language, of children's narrative abilities through a five picture event sequencing story. The story used in this study is taken from The Test of Receptive and Expressive Language Abilities (TRELA) (Vogindroukas, Grigoriadou 2009). TRELA is an evaluation test for young children and pupils with language and communication difficulties. In the first evaluation of TRELA sequence story mean age was 4.8 years whereas in this study children are slightly older between 5 and 6 years old. Moreover in this study the expressive ability level (EAL) is evaluated. The data for EAL through narratives in Greek population are only from control groups so far.

Data analysis and results will be presented and discussed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study conducted from two speech Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) able to facilitate the communication with children.

Participants were recruited through kindergardens in region of Epirus in Northwest Greece. Inclusion criteria for participants were: 1) age between 4.11 and 6 years old and 2) consent forms from parents and teachers where they don't seem to appear with any developmental or sensory disorders through to clinical observation and parental and teacher information.

All participants first asked if they would like to take part in the study and only after

they agreed the assessment took place. Additionally they found the assessment funny and they complete the task with no complaint.

Procedure and measures

The study obtained ethical approval by the Organization for Social Protection and Preschool Education from the City Council of Ioannina. All participants were evaluated with the same sequence story. The story consists of five pictures of a boy in an everyday routine. Pictures show the boy during his morning preparation for school; waking up, wearing clothes, brushing his teeth, eating breakfast and going to school. The recruiting clinician gave to the participant the sequence story and asked him firstly to put the pictures in the right order and afterwards tell the story of the pictures in the order he had put them. All the participants interviewed in their school environment. The narrative has been recorded for better analysis of the structure and the key words. The key words used as predictors for the narrative were the verbs describing each action the boy was doing in the pictures. More specifically they were: ξυπνάει, ντύνεται, βουρτσίζει, τρώει, πηγαίνει, (waking up, dressing up, brush, eat, goes), in order of appearance. There was no time limit during the assessment instead the clinician informed the participant at the beginning that there is no reason to hurry and he can take all the time he needs.

RESULTS

A total of 20 participants were eligible to take part in the study. Their mean age 5.4 years and they ranged from 5 to 6 years old.

Story Sequence

Success in story sequencing is 55%. Eleven of the participants managed to put the pictures in the right order. Seven of the participants that ordered the pictures in a wrong way made a mistake between two pictures and two of them sequence the story in the wrong order. Regarding the time the participants needed to order the events of the story is 23.5 sec with time ranged between 9 and 43 seconds. Time was counted after the participant had fully understood what the clinician asked him to do and from the moment when all the pictures were given to him.

Table 1: Sequence Story results

Variable	n(%)
Participants	
Right Order	11(55%)
Wrong Order	9 (45%)
Time	
Average Time	23.5 sec

Narrative

The recorded narrative used to evaluate the expressive ability level (EAL) of the participants and evaluate how many of the key words were used to form the narrative. The EAL was counted in words and the average was 17 words per narrative ranging between 14 and 35 words. Regarding the time needed to complete the narrative the average time is 21 sec ranged from 14 to 38 seconds. In terms of the key words most of the participants used all five of them. 17 of them (85%) used all the key words, 2 of them (10%) used four words and 1 of the participants (5%) used only three words.

Table 2: Expressive Ability Level results

Variable	n(%)
EAL	
Mean expression in words	17
Key Words	
5 words	17(85%)
4 words	2 (10%)
3 words	1 (5%)
Time	

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine the ability of story sequencing and the narrative skills based in this story in Greek preschoolers. It was the first pilot study focused in the expressive ability level in Greek language thus it was difficult to compare the results with many previous studies. Especially the factor of time is not present either in Greek or foreign literature. Results of the study indicate that Greek preschoolers scored very well in story sequence as well as in narrative abilities. In both variables more than half of the participants scored substantially well in all key factors of the assessment. To sum up 55% of participants ordered correctly the picture story in an adequate time, mean length of narrative is 17 words with 85% of participants using all the key words.

Regarding sequencing results can be compared with previous Greek studies where success was enough smaller, 15.5% in Koskina & Lazaridou 2006 study and 31% in Antoniadis & Karagiannis study. It is worth to mention that in previous studies the mean age was smaller (58 months). The most usual mistake made in the order was between second and third picture where participants put them by contraries. There are no clear evidence or results concerning the success but if Peterson & McCabe (1983) study can be taken into account the success result should be higher. Lastly worth to mention that most of the participants manage to order correctly the picture task were between 5.4 and 5.10 years old.

Narrative skills indicate a good narrative in terms of the number of words but there is no adequate context, syntax and grammar based on the age of the participants. It was not mentioned any difficulty in the expression of the narrative from participants that didn't order correctly the picture task. Additionally the participants that didn't use all the key words were successful in the story sequence. The key words seem easy to be used as there were verbs and these words the most suitable for the participant to describe the action. As already mentioned there was no adequate syntax and grammar except three participants, which used time prepositions and links combined with the

correct types of grammar. Narratives can be compared with the results of Vogindroukas' (2002) study where EAL was measured with Derbyshire (Picture Test of Derbyshire Language Scheme) (Knowles & Masidlover 1982) and the mean of words expressed was 4.78. In Derbyshire the four words level is the highest and it can be assumed that participants had also a good EAL. Both studies although, present on and Vogindroukas (2002) face the same limitation, adult control group. A comparison of these results with an adult narrative would lead in better outcomes.

The most important limitation of the study was the potential for selection bias. Because of the small range of the participants and the specific range of kindergartens there was no option to select a broader and more homogenized sample in terms of age. More children were below 5.6 years old. Moreover more factors regarding participants could be taken into consideration such as mood and time of the assessment. On the other hand one of the strengths of the study is that this is the first study expressive ability is measured based on a specific picture sequence task and not in single pictures. Additionally it is the first attempt to measure narrative skills in Greek language and in preschoolers without any language delays.

There are challenges yet to be met and future research need to address certain areas of narrative skills and story sequence in order coherent results and reliable scales to be conducted for Greek language.

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