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Elicited vs. Recalled narrative skills in kindergartners from diverse linguistic backgrounds

Cover Page Footnote

I am particularly grateful for the assistance given by Dr. Elena Zaretsky for her valuable and constructive suggestions during the planning and development of this research work.

ELICITED VS. RECALLED NARRATIVE SKILLS IN KINDERGARTENERS FROM DIVERSE LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS

Keke Kaikhosroshvili '16 | Psychology Major



ABSTRACT

Oral language proficiency is an area of deficit among English Language Learners (ELLs) that is more acute among ELLs from low Socioeconomic Standings (SES) attending Title I urban schools than anywhere else. Narrative, as a form of discourse describing a single event, is considered to be an important and valid measure of language proficiency. The present study examined the narrative skills of kindergartners from diverse linguistic backgrounds to establish their levels of language proficiency as a factor of narrative type. Two types of narratives were examined: 1) Recalled, where the narrator requires good memory skills but may also benefit from provided words and the given structure of a story, and 2) Elicited, which allows the narrator to use their own words and grammatical structures to create a story. Our results indicate that the Recalled paradigm is beneficial for ELLs as it provides them with vocabulary and set narrative structure. However, Elicited narratives showed an advantage in syntactic complexity and perspective-taking, despite vocabulary deficits.

Narrative development has been identified as an important indication of a child's growing linguistic abilities as well as an important predictor of future literacy achievements (Roth et al., 1996; August & Shanahan, 2006). Research investigating children's narrative abilities focuses on two specific aspects: 1) story structure or organization (i.e., macrostructure), and 2) lexical and morphosyntactic domains (i.e., grammatical complexity or microstructure). Both story structure and organization point to the ability to sequence a narrative according to the order of the described events as well as provide details that allow the listener to understand, follow, and appreciate the story. The lexical and morphosyntactic domains reflect the narrator's ability to use varied vocabulary within an appropriate sentence structure (Hipfner-Boucher, Milburn, Weitzman, Greenberg, Pelletier, & Girolametto, 2015). Many

studies examining the narrative skills of bilingual children, as compared to their monolingual peers, show appropriate usage of the macrostructure by bilingual children, implying a good understanding of the narrative's organization (Iluz-Cohen & Walters, 2012). The observed differences between the narratives produced by bilingual children in English and their monolingual peers reside in the use of vocabulary and morphosyntax, the domains that are considered as the areas of deficit (Roseberry-McKibbon, 2008).

With increased immigration and globalization, the number of children whose native language is not English continues to grow in the United States. These children, identified as English Language Learners (ELLs), are students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English because they come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. They

typically require specialized instruction in both the English language and their academic courses. ELLs are a heterogeneous group and have unique experiences with language acquisition in both their native and second languages (L2) (Hammer, Hoff, Uchikoshi, Gillanders, Castro, & Sandilos, 2014). Their acquisition of lexical and syntactic skills in English depends on cognition, pragmatics, social interaction, and the quality of language input (Paradis, 2010; Ucelli & Páez, 2007). Therefore, schools that admit ELLs into their programs need to be aware of the specifics that distinguish their learning processes from those of the native speakers. As a result, instruction for ELLs must be approached differently than instruction for native speakers to ensure literary success for ELLs.

Oral language proficiency, among children from different linguistic backgrounds, is an area of concern as it affects their

future reading achievements, especially their reading comprehension levels. While ELLs may perform similarly to their monolingual counterparts on decoding and spelling, they are significantly behind in oral language complexity (Uchikishi, 2005; August et al., 2005; Ucelli & Páez, 2007). This lack of language proficiency is especially noticeable in children from low-income families who attend urban Title I schools. These schools receive funding from a federal program under Title I of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This funding is based on the percentage of children in poverty served by the school. The poverty rate of a school is measured by the percentage of families who qualify for the free lunch program, and only schools with a high poverty rate get Title 1 funding.¹

Narratives are defined as discourse structures describing a single event, with required coherence (sequential order, macrostructure) and cohesion (vocabulary, syntactic and morphological complexity, microstructure) (Cain, 2003). Two types of narratives may indicate linguistic abilities: Recalled and Elicited. Recalled narrative of a story just told to children may rely on memory, i.e., children essentially retell what they remember. Elicited narrative, on the other hand, allows the narrator to create their own story, meaning the narrator is in charge of vocabulary and syntactic structure to convey the story line. Hence, narratives are considered to be a valid assess-

ment of developing oral language proficiency and complexity.

As narrative skills are considered to be a good indication of language development, the current study tried to answer questions that are essential to understanding narrative skills among kindergartners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. There is limited research that compares the effects of differing narratives types (Elicited vs. Recalled) in relation to the complexity of the narrative structure. However, some findings indicate that producing more complex language in Elicited narratives, in which the narrator is producing the story, is easier for ELLs (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). This study seeks to determine whether or not the type of narrative makes a difference in expressive language output, and whether or not the type of narrative determines its coherence and cohesion.

Three key questions were addressed in this study:

1. Are there differences in the expressive language output (number of words, different types of words, and sentence structure) as a factor of its narrative type (recall vs. elicited)?
2. Is there a difference in narrative coherence (sequential structure) based on the narrative type?
3. Is there a difference in narrative complexity (cohesion) based on the narrative type?

We posed these questions to find specific information regarding English language pro-

ficiency among ELLs in kindergarten in order to find ways to support and better develop their vocabulary, morphosyntactic skills, and general understanding of narrative structure. These skills are important not only for everyday communication, but also for successful participation in academic activities. It was hypothesized that providing ELLs with specific sequential information, vocabulary, and syntactic variety within the story structure would help them produce a more cohesive and coherent story.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-four kindergartners (Mage=5;7², SD=.36, Range: 5;1-6;5) participated in this study. 96% of the sample was from linguistically diverse classrooms in a Title I urban school located in the vicinity of Clark University, Worcester, MA. The school has 86% ELLs compared to 30% at the district level. Prior to participation in the study, all students were given an Informed Consent form that was signed by their parents.

Materials

The research team used two picture-based stories to measure children's elicited and recalled narration skills, which are part of the Assessment of Literacy and Language (Lombardino, Lieberman & Brown, 2005). The picture stories used were *Tina's Truck* story (Figure 1) for the Recalled narration and *Sam's Surprise* (Figure 2) for the Elicited narration.

¹ All elementary schools in Worcester Public School system are considered Title I.

² In literature examining language and reading development, it is customary to identify the age of a child with specific notation. Therefore 5;7 denominates the age of 5 years, 7 month. All numbers referring to the age of our participants follow the same structure.

Design and Procedure

All students were tested individually. Both types of narratives were presented to them during one session: Recalled followed by Elicited. All the narratives were recorded and transcribed to reflect the child's vocabulary and grammatical skills, as well as their ability to provide the essential structure of the story.

Each narrative type was coded for specific aspects that were identified as measures of micro-(cohesive) and macro-(cohesive) structures. As a measure of lexical knowledge, the team used Type/Token ratio (T/T), which is regarded to be a good measure for vocabulary breadth. "Token" is any word used in a narrative, and is calculated by the total number of words used to tell a story. "Type" identifies different words used in the narrative. For example, if the child uses "and" many times throughout the narrative, all the instances of its use will be counted as "Token," but only once as "Type." Using this method, one can size up the active vocabulary of a child. The Mean Length of Utterances (MLU) was used to measure morphosyntactic structure. MLU is one of the most prevalent measures of developing grammar and is calculated by counting all the sentences (utterances) used to tell a story, divided by number of morphemes used in each sentence. Morphemes are any freestanding words, i.e., "car," "play," and grammatical inflections, i.e., "cars," "playing"; the usage of grammatical morphemes indicates growing knowledge of morphosyntactic structure. The team looked at the use of complex syntactic structures, descriptive words, and emotional words

(e.g., sad, happy, funny, etc.), as a part of the narrative cohesion. For the macrostructure, the retention of the elements and sequences of the narrative was examined as an indication of narrative coherence.

First, every participant was shown the *Tina's Truck* picture story, and was told that they will hear a story and will need to retell it afterwards. The story was read out loud by the research assistant while pointing at the relevant part of the illustration:

"Tina is playing with her truck.

She rolls it across the carpet and hits a bump.

A tire pops off!

Tina's mom says, 'Don't worry. I can fix it.'"

Although the story has only four sentences, it is a good representation of different grammatical structures. After listening to the story, children were asked to recall and retell it. Their responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

As a second part to the interview, the children were shown the *Sam's Surprise* picture story. This time, instead of the research assistants telling the story, the children were asked to tell it based on the illustration they were looking at; they needed to produce the story on their own.

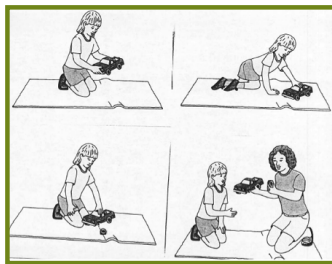


Figure 1. *Tina's Truck*

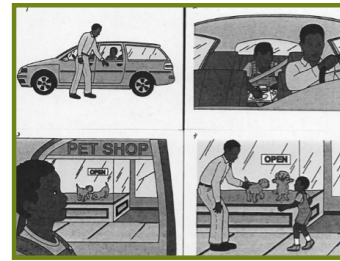


Figure 2. *Sam's Surprise*

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

To answer the first research question regarding possible differences in children's narrative skills as a factor of narrative type, the research team ran a one-way repeated measure ANOVA. The results showed a significant effect of narrative type on expressive language output: $F(3)=65.28$, $p<.0001$, with an advantage for Recalled.

The second question, suggesting possible differences in narrative coherence (sequential structure) based on the narrative type, was addressed through the use of t-tests. The results showed that the children were able to retain more elements and sequences in their Recalled narratives than in the Elicited narratives ($t(46)=3.25$, $p=.002$ and $t(46)=2.7$, $p=.009$, respectively) (Figure 3).

The third question, regarding the possible differences in narrative complexity, was also addressed through the t-tests. Compared to the Recalled narratives, Elicited narratives produced more complex syntactic structures ($t(46)=2.62$, $p=.01$), descriptive words ($t(46)=1.8$, $p=.07$ – trend) and perspective-taking, signified by the use of emotional words ($t(46)=2.01$, $p=.05$) (Figure 4). Interestingly, the finding that the T/T ratio

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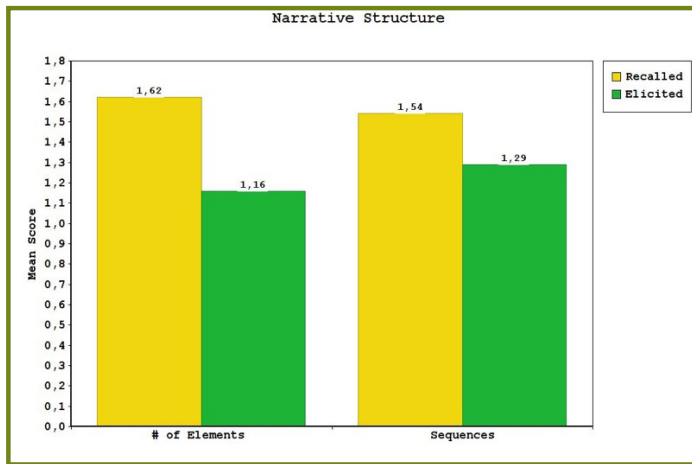


Figure 3. Retaining narrative structure as a factor of narrative type.

comparison between narrative types showed a significant advantage of Recalled ($t(46)=7.19$, $p<.0001$).

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data supports the results of previous studies that indicate the advantage of Elicited narratives in producing complex sentences, and using emotional words (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). Some children expressed their own emotions while telling the story based on the Sam's Surprise picture story (Figure 2). One of them said, "I think he sees a cute puppy. I like the puppy standing up", which shows sympathy towards the puppy. Children were able to bring their socioeconomic experiences by assuming lack of money to pay for the puppy. For example, one child said "They're still standing outside and he (the father) doesn't have money." Though other participants assumed that the father would buy a first pet for his son, this 6-year-old decided that they were only able to look at the puppies in the glass window because they were unable to afford it. Another par-

ticipant also used emotionally descriptive words together with socially constructed ideas that buying a puppy means sheltering and rescuing it by saying, "I can see some dogs calling for help [and] they're mad. And I think they're sad for no owners." These examples indicate the children's awareness of socioeconomic situations and their ability to connect the identified situations to their own experience.

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken to examine the narrative development of ELLs for children from low-income families that attend urban Title I schools. As narrative development is considered an important indication of a child's growing linguistic abilities as well as an important predictor for future literacy achievements, the aim was to identify specific aspects of narratives – use of vocabulary, morphosyntactic structures, retaining sequences, and maintaining the topic – that are indicative of growing language proficiency (Roth et al., 1996; August & Shanahan, 2006). Although research comparing the effects of narrative types on complexity of narrative structure is limited, some previous findings indicated that Elicited narratives are easier for ELLs in terms of producing more complex language (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). The current study differs from previous research in that it assesses narrative skills of kindergartners only and compares

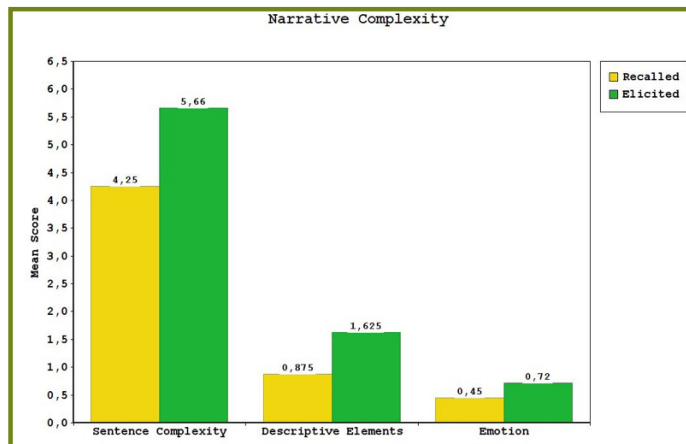


Figure 4. Differences in the use of linguistic elements between Recalled and Elicited narrative.

both types of narratives, Recalled and Elicited, supported by picture stimuli.

The results indicate that narrative type plays a significant role in the length of the produced narrative and the use of different words (expressive language output). Recalling the narrative may be a positive contributing factor to narrative coherence, as ELLs were able to retain more story elements and sequential structure, as illustrated in Figure 3. The significant differences in the T/T ratios suggested that Recalled narratives allow children to use vocabulary that they have just heard, without having to relying on their own resources. However, the stories told for the Elicited narratives were longer and more linguistically complex (cohesive), showing greater use of emotional language (Figure 4).

The complexity of Elicited narratives suggests that, when asked to produce their own story based on pictures, children were free in their interpretation and imagination. These factors can account for the length of their produced stories and use of more descriptive words, as the statistical analysis indicated. As seen in the analysis of the qualitative data, some ELLs added deeper meanings and explanations to the picture story by looking beyond the illustrations and adding a social perspective to their narratives. As such, being in charge of storytelling could encourage children to get more emotionally involved, while the additional creativity can be accountable for the increased sentence complexity and use of descriptive words in elicited narratives.

These results support Gutiérrez-Clellen's (2002) finding

that Elicited narratives produce longer stories with more complex morphosyntactic structures. However, when comparing T/T ratios (a measure of vocabulary knowledge) for two types of narratives, the results showed an advantage for Recalled narratives. These results are in line with the previous studies conducted by Paradis in 2010, and Ucelli and Páez in 2007, suggesting that ELLs lack elaborate vocabulary required for eliciting their own stories. This finding can be attributed to the advantage of re-telling paradigm: a recently heard story makes it easier to use the same vocabulary and tell the story more concisely, with larger variety of words. Therefore, it can be implied that the limited nature of the Recalled narrative helped children follow the storyline better, with the use of the provided vocabulary and structure. This interpretation concurs with previous research suggesting difficulties ELLs experience in their lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge (Hipfner-Boucher et al., 2015). Additionally, the results suggest that, despite their limitation in English language proficiency, ELLs do not have problems with immediate recall. This finding is significant because it implies that ELLs' limited narrative skills are attributed to their lack of vocabulary and narrative knowledge rather than their cognitive developmental processes, such as memory development. Retelling paradigms may provide the needed structure, as well as the required vocabulary, for children with limited English language proficiency to improve their language development.

One of the few limitations of the study is the order in

which the two narratives were presented to the children. Participants had to recall a narrative first and then produce their own. This specific sequencing of the interview could have influenced their performance. There lacked a measure of productive (speaking and writing) and receptive vocabulary (reading and listening), which would have provided a sense of participants' previous lexical knowledge. Lastly, there was not any information regarding the students' home literacy practices, which are influential in oral language and narrative development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study presented substantial evidence that narrative type plays a role in language production of ELLs from low SES, attending Title I schools. ELLs come to school with limited abilities in English (Hoff, 2014) and continue to lag behind their monolingual peers in language development and academic achievements (Paradis, 2010). As seen in our results, children were able to increase the different types of words they used when they were provided with a story and were asked to retell it. This suggests that ELLs will benefit from more opportunities to listen to the stories as part of their curriculum, and then retell and discuss the stories using provided vocabulary. On the other hand, the ability to create their own story gave ELLs opportunities to express their perspective on the story and use complex sentence structures that reflected their feelings.

Implications

Despite the limitations of the

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study, several educational implications can be derived from these results and findings. ELLs follow the same cognitive and developmental trajectory as their monolingual peers. However, they need to be provided with more vocabulary and structure that Recalled narrative exercises can offer.

Additionally, the use of a specific format for teaching ELLs, such as dialogic teaching, developed by Robin Alexander in 2000s, is recommended (Alexander, 2004).

This tactic relies on the power of talk to stimulate and extend students' language production by interactions, argumentation, discussion, and feedback.

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Keke Kaikhosrovshvili is a Psychology major and Women and Gender Studies minor from the Republic of Georgia. She has multiple research interests in child development, cognition, parenting, gender, masculinities, and violence. After graduating in 2016, she is planning to extend her research experience before continuing to pursue higher education. She is currently working on an independent research concerning normalized psychological abuse in romantic relationships in Georgia. By implementing her findings, she hopes to raise awareness of the issue, and design an intervention program in her home country.