



The Effect of a Narrative Intervention on Preschoolers' Language Skills

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PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of a small group narrative intervention on preschoolers' retell and personal narratives.

SUMMARY


Narrative intervention was delivered to children in groups of four for 10-15 minutes a day over five weeks. Pictures, colored icons, and systematic scaffolding procedures were used to explicitly teach story structure in retell and personal story formats. Intervention effects were tested using a strong research design and results indicated that all children's narrative skills improved.

IMPLICATIONS

Small group narrative intervention can be efficient and cost-effective. Children enjoy the game-like procedures, which can be carried out in classrooms or clinics. An understanding of story structure can support the acquisition of other literacy-related skills that are important for reading. Thus, these procedures could be applied with children who have or are at risk of having a disability.

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Introduction

Narrative language is an important aspect of language with direct relevance to the social and academic development of young children. It is well established that children with disabilities display poorer storytelling abilities than their typically developing peers (Colozzo, Gillam, Wood, Schnell, & Johnston, 2011). Children who have adequate storytelling skills receive more opportunities to engage socially with peers and more opportunity to practice language. Narrative skills of young children predict academic success in elementary school (Bishop & Edmundson, 1987). Understanding story structure and story retelling is a critical language comprehension task embedded in states' early learning guidelines. The purpose of the study featured here was to examine the effect of a small group narrative intervention on preschoolers' story retells and personal stories.

Featured Study

Participants included five 4-year-old children who attended Head Start. Children had delayed language skills and additional factors that put them at risk for developing reading problems in kindergarten. A speech-language pathologist and an early childhood special educator served as interventionists. They delivered the intervention four days a week for 10-15 minutes. Stories used during intervention were designed to be relevant to young children (e.g., getting dirty, playing with siblings, losing something) to facilitate transfer of language improvements to children's own personal stories. During the intervention, the interventionist modeled a story, led the group in retelling the story, and provided each of the four children an opportunity to independently tell the same story or a personal story. Teaching procedures included the use of simple pictures, colored icons representing story parts, and systematic prompting and prompt fading. Additionally, the intervention involved a variety of receptive language games to enhance active listening and participation.

A multiple baseline experimental design across five participants was employed for this study. To collect daily narrative samples from each child, an examiner told a short story and asked the child to retell it. Children were also asked to share personal stories. Narratives were scored for completeness and complexity. Completeness



involves the inclusion of the core elements of stories such as character, setting, problem, feeling, attempt, and consequence. Complex language structures include temporal markers (e.g., then),

causal subordination (e.g., “He was sad because his knee hurt.”), and temporal subordination (e.g., “When he came down the slide, he fell in the mud.”).

During the baseline condition, children’s narrative scores were low and stable, but after the onset of the intervention scores increased dramatically. Four of the five children showed remarkable progress after only a few intervention sessions. Most of the children showed improvements in personal stories, as well.

Implications for Practice

This study demonstrated the efficacy of a brief narrative intervention. There are several noteworthy implications of this finding. First, given the limited resources in preschools, interventions that are efficient and cost-effective are in great demand. This intervention lasted only 10-15 minutes a day for about five weeks and addressed critical language skills of four children at a time, making it quite efficient. Second, storytelling is considered an authentic instructional activity because it occurs naturally throughout the day and is part of every culture. Because the stories used during the intervention were relevant to young children and fun, interventionists could capitalize on children’s natural motivation to share their own stories. Third, story structure is included in most states’ early learning objectives, but it is not always taught intentionally in preschools. Typically, children learn story structure implicitly through storybook reading. However, this approach alone is not likely to be sufficient for children with developmental disabilities. Children with disabilities may need an explicit approach to teaching story structure, which could enhance their potential to learn through subsequent storybook reading.

Best Available Evidence

This study provides strong research support for narrative intervention considering its experimental design and replication across five children. However, this is only one study. In a recent systematic review, Petersen (2011) found that all narrative intervention studies reviewed with children with language impairments had positive effects, but most employed less effective research designs. Poor research methods is problematic because such methods could not eliminate the possibility that something other than the intervention was responsible for observed changes. This prevents narrative intervention to be considered

an empirically supported intervention, at this time. However, the featured study and another narrative intervention study (Petersen, Gillam, Spencer, & Gillam, 2010) with schoolage children with language impairments used high quality research methods and both found positive effects. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that narrative intervention is a promising intervention and that more high quality experimental research is warranted.

Professional Judgment, Client, and Context

Given the evidence in support of narrative intervention is just emerging, a great deal of professional judgment will be required to make evidence-based decisions about its use. For example, shared storybook reading has a larger evidence base for improving language of young children (WWC, 2006). However, it is a long-term instructional approach that does not explicitly target story structure in an efficient manner. Practitioners should use judgment to determine whether their real world clients need explicit teaching of story structure, in which case narrative intervention would be the best option. If, however, general oral language improvement is the desired outcome, then narrative intervention is one of many options. In addition, several language teaching approaches could be combined to address children’s comprehensive language needs. It will be important for practitioners to consider the context in which they practice and the needs of their clients with disabilities when making an evidence-based selection.

References

- Bishop, D. V. M., & Edmundson, A. (1987). Language-impaired 4-year-olds: Distinguishing transient from persistent impairment. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 52, 156-173.
- Collozzo, P., Gillam, R. B., Wood, M., Schnell, R. D., & Johnston, J. R. (2011). Content and form in the narratives of children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 54, 1609-1627.
- Petersen, D. B., Gillam, S. L., Spencer, T. D., & Gillam, R. B. (2010). The effects of literate narrative intervention on children with neurologically based language impairments: An early stage study. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 53, 961-981.

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[Petersen, D. B. \(2011\).](#)

[Spencer & Slocum \(2010\).](#)

[What Works Clearinghouse. \(2006\).](#)