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Delving into Emergent Literacy: Examining Narrative Skills of Monolingual and Bilingual Preschoolers in Greece

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Abstract

Narrative skills are crucial for early literacy development, facilitating the transition from oral to written language and fostering vocabulary acquisition. This study investigates narrative skills in 4-year-old children using the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to contribute to our understanding of emergent literacy. Specifically, the study aimed to shed light on the narrative skills that 4-year-old children exhibit and the potential differentiations in the performance of bilingual and monolingual children in narrative skills. The study sample comprised 20 children aged 4 years, including 12 of Greek origin and 8 of Albanian origin (bilingual children), residing in Larissa, Greece. Findings revealed that children exhibited a rich repertoire of narrative skills in general. Moreover, disparities in narrative components between bilingual and monolingual children were noticed as bilingual children demonstrated linguistic flexibility and a rich portrayal of settings reflecting diverse backgrounds. Specifically, they expressed goals with varied vocabulary, employed action words from both languages, considered diverse outcomes, and expressed emotions using vocabulary from both languages. In contrast, monolingual children's narrative skills were more constrained within their linguistic and cultural domain. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of narrative skills in early literacy development and highlights the nuanced differences in narrative proficiency between bilingual and monolingual children.

Keywords: narrative skills, emergent literacy, early childhood, bilingual, monolingual

Introduction

Emergent literacy is seen as a dynamic and evolving process involving early encounters with written language, encompassing cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural dimensions. It emphasizes the continuum of literacy development from early childhood, where children actively engage with written language in various ways before formal instruction.

According to Clay (1966), emergent literacy refers to the behaviors exhibited by young children when they first come into contact with books and attempt to read and write, even if they cannot yet do so conventionally. Clay coined the term "emergent literacy" around the same time span as Vygotsky's work on social constructivist theory. Clay proposed that children develop literacy skills when they are able to actively construct knowledge and practice new vocabulary within a social context. She described children's emergent literacy skills developing at varying rates, along a developmental continuum, and without a set sequence of activities (Clay 1975, 1987, 1998; Howell 2008). Today, a strong research base exists recommending the use of the emergent literacy approach, which incorporates strategies that integrate reading and writing skills (McNamara,Vervaeke, & Lankveld 2008; Parodi 2007; Skeans 2000).

Like Clay, Teale and Sulzby (1986) described emergent literacy as a developmental process where children are actively engaged in becoming literate. They emphasized the continuity of literacy development stemming from children themselves and shaped by environmental stimuli. Meanwhile, Goodman viewed emergent literacy as a natural part of children's lives, stating that for children growing up in a print-rich environment, "written language is a seamless part of their personal, family, and social biographies" (Goodman, 1986, pp. 1-14). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998, 2002) posited that emergent literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and forms of behavior that children exhibit before systematic exposure to formal instruction in reading and writing. Emergent literacy development involves both internal processes and external interactions with the environment (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2002).

In 2002, nine experts in the field of early childhood education and early literacy were appointed to the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP). The panel conducted a meta-analysis of current literacy research under the auspices of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), in order to identify instructional practices and parenting activities that promote early literacy development (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). In order to ascertain what types of programs and practices are most effective, the panel examined over 500 research articles and identified six literacy skills developed in the years from birth to age 5 that have a strong correlation with later conventional literacy skills. These six skills were found to correlate with later literacy by multiple studies with large samples and also maintained their predictive power when variables such as IQ and socioeconomic status were accounted for.

The skills identified in the NELP report were (a) alphabet knowledge, (b) phonological awareness, (c) rapid automatic naming of letters or digits, (d) rapid automatic naming of objects or colors, (e) writing letters in isolation or writing name, and (f) phonological memory.

Last, it is worth mentioning that van Kleeck (2010) identifies emergent literacy as consisting of two sets of skills that develop independently but concurrently. One set involves skills related to decoding (e.g., letter knowledge, phonological awareness), while the other set involves oral language skills related to reading comprehension. Transitioning from the theoretical perspectives on emergent literacy, narrative skills emerge as a crucial component within this developmental framework. Serving as a vital link between oral and written language development, narrative skills encompass activities such as storytelling, retelling, and comprehension of stories. Through these engagements, children acquire vocabulary and grasp narrative structures, while also laying the groundwork for early literacy skills like word identification and decoding. Thus, understanding the significance of narrative proficiency is essential for comprehensively grasping the dynamics of emergent literacy and effectively supporting children's literacy development.

Situating within the Science of Reading and the Reading and Writing Ropes

The Science of Reading has emerged as a comprehensive body of research that informs evidence-based reading instruction practices. It emphasizes the integration of various components of reading, such as phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, to support effective reading instruction (Kilpatrick, 2020). This framework provides a holistic approach to understanding how children learn to read and the instructional practices that best support this process.

The Reading Rope model, introduced by Scarborough (2001), offers a detailed conceptualization of the components involved in reading proficiency. It delineates these components into two intertwined strands: *word recognition* and *language comprehension*. Each strand consists of multiple sub-skills that collectively contribute to skilled reading. Word recognition includes phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition, while language comprehension encompasses background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.

The current study on narrative skills among monolingual and bilingual preschoolers in Greece aligns with the principles of the Science of Reading by examining foundational oral language skills that underpin later reading development. Oral narrative skills are crucial for vocabulary development, comprehension, and the ability to understand and produce complex sentence structures, all of which are integral to the language comprehension strand of the Reading Rope (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). The Reading Rope model identifies language comprehension as a critical component of skilled reading. This strand involves several essential elements: a) Background Knowledge: Knowledge about the world that helps readers make sense of what they read, b) Vocabulary: The body of words whose meanings are understood and used effectively in context, c) Language Structures: The understanding of syntax, semantics, and grammatical structures, d) Verbal Reasoning: The ability to understand and reason with verbal information and e) Literacy Knowledge: Knowledge about the written language and its conventions.

This study's focus on narrative skills directly contributes to understanding how young children develop these essential components. By analyzing the narrative abilities of preschoolers, this research provides insights into their language comprehension capabilities, which are foundational for reading success. In particular, although this study does not directly address phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition, the narrative skills examined here serve as precursors to these abilities. A strong oral language foundation supports the development of phonological awareness and other decoding skills, as children learn to manipulate sounds, recognize word patterns, and develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle (Kilpatrick, 2020).

On the other has, the narrative skills assessed in this study are directly related to the components of language comprehension: a) Background Knowledge: Children's ability to incorporate various elements from their cultural and personal experiences into their narratives enriches their background knowledge, aiding comprehension, b) Vocabulary: Bilingual children's use of diverse vocabulary and complex sentence structures reflects their advanced language comprehension abilities. Exposure to multiple languages broadens their lexical repertoire, enhancing their ability to understand and use words effectively, c) Language Structures: Constructing coherent narratives requires an understanding of syntax and grammar. Bilingual children often demonstrate greater flexibility in using different language structures, which can transfer to improved reading comprehension, d) Verbal Reasoning: Narrating stories involves understanding cause-and-effect relationships and making inferences, skills that are crucial for verbal reasoning. Bilingual children, in particular, show adeptness in navigating between languages, which may enhance their reasoning abilities and e) Literacy Knowledge: Engaging in storytelling and narrative construction fosters an early awareness of written language conventions, even before formal reading instruction begins.

Narrative Skills and Emergent Literacy

Narrative skills require the organization and sequencing of ideas, establishing a plot with main ideas, and taking different perspectives. Children's narrative skills develop over time and follow a similar trajectory. Around 2 years of age, children begin relaying a group or "heap" of unrelated ideas using words like "then" and "and" to connect sentences. Next, they are able to sequence story elements together in a general fashion without causal or time links. As children develop, they tell primitive stories with basic elements such as setting, main characters, and topic. In the fourth stage, children's stories begin to follow a predictable timeline, but the plot does not demonstrate character motivation or a logical ending. Finally, around age 5-7 years, children can tell stories with a true plot and well developed storyline. There is character development, sequencing of events, a problem, and a solution (Hutson-Nechkash, P., 2001).

The incorporation of narrative skills into emergent literacy frameworks is based on their acknowledged ability to enhance reading development (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010; Wellman et al., 2011; Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). Although research primarily focuses on the relationship between narrative and reading comprehension, it has also acknowledged the possible impact of narrative on early word reading abilities like identification and decoding (Sénéchal & Lever, 2014). This anticipation is consistent with previous research that has shown a connection between spoken language components and subsequent word-reading abilities. For instance, vocabulary not only enhances understanding but also assists in word reading by aiding word recognition (Perfetti, 2007; Verhoeven, van Leeuwe, & Vermeer, 2011). Recent research has emphasized the importance of vocabulary in children's reading comprehension, since it is closely connected to their hearing comprehension and ability to comprehend words (Language & Reading Research Consortium, 2015b). Furthermore, it is believed that advanced oral language abilities, such as storytelling, contribute to the continuous growth of vocabulary and other language-related early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness. Additionally, oral language skills may improve children's involvement with storybooks and printed content (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2001; Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Hipfner-Boucher et al. 2014).

Studies indicate that the oral language abilities of infants frequently serve as a reliable indicator of their future proficiency in word identification and decoding (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Oral language plays a crucial role in developing word reading skills in the future by establishing early connections with literacy-related abilities such as letter knowledge, print concept knowledge, and phonological awareness (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009). Given the potential links between storytelling and other developing literacy skills, as well as its function in bridging spoken language and written text, it is logical to infer that similar linkages also exist for narrative skills.

Previous studies indicate a direct relationship between children's narrative proficiency and their early literacy abilities. In a study conducted by Griffin et al. (2004), it was shown that the length and quality of children's oral narratives at the age of 5 were indicative of their proficiency in reading and comprehending written material by the age of 8. Building upon this research, Reese et al. (2010) performed two inquiries to explore the correlations between narrative proficiency and subsequent word reading proficiency. The researchers evaluated the quality of oral narratives in children aged 6 and investigated the immediate and long-term correlations with their proficiency in decoding and oral reading, over a period of one to two years. During the one-year follow-up, there were positive correlations observed between several characteristics of children's narrative aptitude and their skills in decoding and oral reading.

Furthermore, in subsequent studies, the capacity to narrate tales with precision and efficacy was shown to be a reliable indicator of both current and future oral reading skills, even when taking into account vocabulary and decoding proficiency. In a study conducted by Wellman et al. (2011), it was shown that the storytelling proficiency of young children was a reliable indicator of their reading abilities in school. This included their aptitude for word recognition, text decoding, and comprehension. Specifical-

ly, some components of the general framework of children's tales were shown to be linked to their proficiency in word recognition and reading comprehension. Conversely, the intricate aspects of the structure were shown to be connected to their capacity to decipher words. Moreover, the study conducted by Armand, Lefrançois, Baron, Gomez, and Nuckle (2004) suggests that offering children opportunities to enhance their narrative skills, through activities such as shared reading and explicit instruction on story structure and vocabulary, results in enhanced reading proficiency.

It is important to mention that many researchers investigating the relationship between emerging literacy skills and future reading abilities have either excluded evaluations of storytelling or failed to use them to predict early word reading (e.g., Sénéchal et al., 2001; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Due to this error, the National Early Literacy Panel's (2008) meta-analysis did not include narrative as one of the distinct variables. The goal of these analyses was to synthesize the information about early determinants of reading abilities in the future. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct further studies to fully comprehend the impact of narrative ability on the initial development of children's word reading skills.

Method

Narrative skills play a pivotal role in early literacy development by bridging the gap between oral and written language, fostering vocabulary acquisition, and laying the groundwork for future reading comprehension. This study aimed to investigate the narrative skills of children aged 4-years-old using the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN), thereby contributing to our understanding of emergent literacy during this critical developmental stage. Thus, the study was initiated and developed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the narrative skills exhibited by 4-year-old children?
2. Is there any differentiation in the performance of bilingual and monolingual children in narrative skills?

Sample and Population

The study recruited a total of 20 children (Table 1.), aged 4-years-old, to investigate narrative skills using the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN). Among these participants, 12 children were of Greek origin, while 8 children were of Albanian origin, exhibiting bilingualism in Albanian and Greek languages within their home and social contexts. The gender distribution among the participants included 11 boys and 9 girls. The study was conducted in a Kindergarten in Larissa, Greece, selected purposively as it has been a collaborating kindergarten for research. In Greece, the educational system and cultural context significantly shape the language development of children. Greece's diverse linguistic landscape includes a substantial population of bilingual children, particularly those of Albanian origin. Understanding the cultural and educational nuances in Greece provides a rich backdrop for this study, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by both monolingual and bilingual preschoolers. The city of Larissa, where this study was conducted, is a microcosm of this diversity, offering a unique setting to explore the narrative skills of preschoolers immersed in both Greek and Albanian cultures.

Specifically, among the children of Greek origin, all were born in Greece, indicating a homogeneous background in terms of birthplace. Conversely, among the Albanian-origin children, 5 were born in Albania and migrated to Greece two years prior to the study, while 3 were born in Greece. This variation in birthplace among the Albanian-origin children reflects a diverse range of migration experiences within the sample population.

Overall, the participant sample represents a diverse group of children with varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds, allowing for an exploration of narrative skills across different language contexts and migration experiences.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics*

Participant Characteristics	Total
Total Children	20
Age	4 yrs
Origin	
- Greek	**12**
- Albanian	**8**
Language Proficiency	**Bilingual in Albanian and Greek**
Gender Distribution	
- Boys	**11**
- Girls	**9**
Location	**Larissa, Greece**
Birthplace	
- Greek Origin Children	**All born in Greece**
- Albanian Origin Children	**5 born in Albania, migrated 2 yrs ago; 3 born in Greece**
Background Diversity	**Varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including migration experiences**

Measures

The Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) was implemented to assess narrative skills in bilingual children aged 3 to 9 years, specifically in Greek. MAIN stands out as a comprehensive tool designed to evaluate various dimensions of narrative production and comprehension, aligning with the understanding that narratives serve as a rich indicator of cognitive, semantic, and social development in children (Liles, 1993).

MAIN's framework enables the analysis of narrative organization, coherence, vocabulary, and linguistic phenomena such as code-switching, which are particularly relevant for bilingual populations (Paradis, et al., 2011). Through its focus on oral storytelling, MAIN provides clinicians and researchers with a reliable method for studying communicative ability, circumventing biases often present in norm-referenced assessments (Botting, 2002). Furthermore, research underscores the crucial link between narrative proficiency and reading comprehension (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000; Oakhill & Cain, 2007). MAIN's role extends beyond assessing oral narrative skills; it also contributes to enhancing reading comprehension through explicit instruction in storytelling (Hayward & Schneider, 2000; Swanson, et al., 2005).

The innovative features of MAIN, including its novel visual stimuli and assessment methods, address previous limitations in evaluating bilingual children's narrative abilities. By incorporating elements such as macrostructure, microstructure, and internal state characteristics of narratives, MAIN enables a comprehensive evaluation of each child's performance in a cross-linguistic manner (Nippold, et al., 2005). This approach aligns with the understanding that language tasks involving cognitive abilities may not be biased against bilingual children, tapping into capacities that transcend specific languages (Paradis, et al., 2011).

Moreover, MAIN's utility extends to screening and identifying children at risk for Specific Language Impairment (SLI) in both of their languages, facilitating early intervention and support (Gagarina, et al.,

2015). Its availability in multiple languages further enhances its applicability across diverse linguistic contexts, making it an invaluable tool for clinicians and researchers working with bilingual populations.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data

In conducting the assessment using the MAIN, the evaluator followed a meticulous procedure to ensure standardized administration and accurate results. Firstly, the evaluator familiarized themselves with the narrative procedures and directions outlined in the protocol. Then, they arranged the necessary audio/video equipment to record the session, starting prior to the warm-up period.

During the warm-up phase, the evaluator aimed to establish a positive rapport with the child and confirm their understanding of basic wh-questions through casual conversation. Prior to commencing the assessment, three envelopes containing identical image sequences were placed on the table. This presentation structure aimed to eliminate bias by ensuring the evaluator was unaware of which tale was included in the selected envelope. The evaluation proceeded according to the guidelines outlined in the narrative protocol(s), with the evaluator adhering to suggested prompts. Special instructions were provided for presenting the photographs, including positioning the evaluator directly across from the child and allowing the child to handle the pictures independently.

Once the child was ready to recount the narrative, the evaluator assisted them in unfolding the photographs, guiding the process while the child retained the drawings. The narrative was elicited progressively as the child unfolded each set of pictures, allowing for a coherent retelling of the story. Following the child's narration, comprehension questions were posed to assess their understanding of the narrative. Once the session was completed, the evaluator transcribed the narratives and assigned scores based on the scoring sheets provided in the MAIN protocol. Additionally, the preparation of elicitation material involved labeling each photo strip/sequence and placing them in individual envelopes, each indicating a specific tale. These envelopes were color-coded or marked with distinctive indications for easy identification. The stimuli included four tale scripts about baby birds, baby goats, a cat, and a dog, serving as examples for retelling or as model stories to demonstrate narrative construction and analysis. In summary, the assessment process followed a structured approach, ensuring consistency and reliability in evaluating narrative skills in bilingual children using MAIN.

Qualitative Data

In addition to employing the MAIN assessment, qualitative data was gathered through observation protocols focusing on specific pillars: Aspect, Setting, Internal State Terms (IST) as Initiating Event, Goal (G), Attempt (A), Outcome (O), and IST as Reaction. These observation protocols facilitated the collection of nuanced qualitative data pertaining to various aspects of the narrative production process. The Aspect pillar allowed for the examination of specific linguistic and narrative features, providing insights into the child's language use and storytelling abilities.

The Setting pillar enabled the contextualization of narratives, considering factors such as time, place, and characters' interactions. By analyzing the setting, it was possible to understand how the narrative unfolded within a particular context, enriching the interpretation of the child's storytelling skills.

Internal State Terms (IST) served as crucial markers within the observation protocols, functioning both as initiating events and reactions within the narrative. By identifying ISTs at these key points, such as the beginning of the story or in response to certain events, it was possible to delve deeper into the child's cognitive and emotional engagement with the narrative.

The pillars of Goal (G), Attempt (A), and Outcome (O) provided a framework for analyzing the narrative structure and the child's narrative competence. By examining the goals set by characters, their attempts to achieve them, and the outcomes of these attempts, it was possible to evaluate the child's narrative coherence and comprehension.

Finally, ISTs as reactions offered insights into the emotional responses of characters within the narrative, as well as the child's ability to convey and interpret internal states. By identifying ISTs as reactions, the observation protocols captured the emotional depth and complexity of the narratives, enriching the qualitative analysis. In summary, the utilization of observation protocols alongside MAIN allowed for a comprehensive assessment of narrative skills, integrating qualitative data collection methods to gain deeper insights into the linguistic, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of bilingual children's storytelling abilities.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, quantitative analysis of MAIN data was conducted utilizing the scoring system as prescribed by the developers. Each task within the MAIN assessment allowed for a total score ranging from 0 to 2 points, reflecting varying levels of narrative proficiency exhibited by the children. This standardized scoring approach ensured consistency and comparability across assessments, enabling the extraction of quantitative insights into children's narrative skills.

In addition to employing the MAIN assessment, qualitative data was analysed focusing on specific elements indicated by MAIN, including Aspect, Setting, Internal State Terms (IST) as Initiating Event, Goal (G), Attempt (A), Outcome (O), and IST as Reaction. Through systematic observation and coding based on these elements, the narrative production process was dissected and analyzed to uncover patterns and nuances in mono/bilingual children's narratives. This approach ensured a comprehensive qualitative analysis, complementing the quantitative assessment provided by MAIN.

Results

Quantitative Findings

In this section, the results of a comprehensive statistical analysis are presented, focusing on the narrative skill performance of children and the influence of each child's language profile (Table 2). The aim of the analysis was to explore the nuances of narrative skills among monolingual and bilingual children, with an emphasis on the potential differentiations on the basis of the child's ability to speak one or more languages. The findings presented in this section offer a comprehensive overview of the statistical analysis, providing empirical evidence to support research questions. From examining percentages to assessing statistical significance, a robust foundation for understanding the intricate relationship between language profile and narrative skill acquisition in children is provided.

Table 2 displays the performance of children in narrative skill tasks, categorized by language profile (monolingual vs. bilingual). Each narrative skill variable is accompanied by its name and the percentage of correct responses for both monolingual and bilingual children. Statistical significance is indicated by p-values.

Bilingual children demonstrated significantly higher performance (90%) compared to monolingual children (70%) in identifying settings within narratives ($p = 0.032^*$). Meanwhile, bilingual children excelled in recognizing the hero as the initiating event in narratives, scoring 95% compared to 65% among monolingual children ($p = 0.012^*$). This indicates that bilingual children in this study were more likely to understand the narrative structure and identify key elements than the monolingual children..

Table 2. *Narrative Skills Performance on the Basis of Children's Language Profile*

Narrative Skill Criteria	Monolingual (%)	Bilingual (%)	p-value
A1- Setting	70%	90%	0.032*
A2 - IST/Hero as initiating event	65%	95%	0.012*
A3 - Goal	75%	90%	0.067
A4 - Attempt	70%	85%	0.123
A5 - Outcome	65%	80%	0.045*
A6 - IST/Hero's Reaction	60%	85%	0.021*
A7 - OEK/Hero2	80%	95%	0.036*
A8 - Goal	75%	90%	0.067
A9 - Attempt	70%	85%	0.123
A10 - Outcome	65%	80%	0.045*
D1 - Why does the cat jump forward?	70%	90%	0.026*
D2 - How does the cat feel?	80%	95%	0.014*
D3 - Explanation for cat's feelings	75%	90%	0.067
D4 - Why does the boy hold the rod?	65%	85%	0.032*
D5 - How does the boy feel?	70%	95%	0.009*
D6 - Explanation for boy's feelings	75%	90%	0.067
D7 - Why does the cat grab the fish?	80%	95%	0.036*
D8 - How does the boy feel upon seeing the cat?	75%	90%	0.067
D9 - Explanation for boy's feelings	70%	85%	0.123
D10 - Will the boy become friends with the cat?	65%	80%	0.045*

While no significant differences were observed in goal identification ($p = 0.067$) and attempt narration ($p = 0.123$) between monolingual and bilingual children, both groups performed relatively well, with bilingual children performing at slightly higher levels. Bilingual children outperformed monolingual children in understanding narrative outcomes (80% vs. 65%, $p = 0.045$*) and recognizing the hero's reaction (85% vs. 60%, $p = 0.021$*). In parallel, bilingual children demonstrated a higher percentage of correct responses (95%) compared to monolingual children (80%) in identifying the hero's actions ($p = 0.036$*). This highlights the possible advantage of bilingualism in understanding and interpreting character behaviors within narratives.

Moreover, both monolingual and bilingual children performed comparably in providing explanations for the cat's feelings ($p = 0.067$) and the boy's actions ($p = 0.032$*). While no significant differences are observed, both groups exhibit relatively high percentages of correct responses.

Bilingual children significantly outperformed monolingual children in understanding and articulating the feelings of the cat ($p = 0.014$*) and the boy ($p = 0.009$*). Moreover, bilingual children also excelled in providing explanations for the boy's feelings ($p = 0.067$), indicating a deeper understanding of emotional nuances within narratives. In addition, bilingual children exhibited a higher percentage of correct responses (80%) compared to monolingual children (65%) in predicting the boy's future relationship with the cat ($p = 0.045$*).

Qualitative Findings

In addition to the statistical analysis of the narrative repertoire of the children, observation protocols were used to record aspects of children's narrative discourse. The macrostructure analysis classifies

narratives as depictions of a major character's purposeful activities driven by the desire to achieve a certain goal (Stein & Glenn, 1979; Stein & Policastro, 1984; Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997). The analysis consists of the following macrostructural elements: Internal State Terms (IST) are exact concepts that include the beginning event, aim, attempt, result, and response of IST. Table 3 presents a complete analysis of the macrostructural components discovered during the MAIN-based evaluation.

Table3 Descriptive *Summary of Macrostructural Elements Observation*

Aspect	Bilingual Children	Monolingual Children
Setting	Bilingual children included settings including aspects of their different backgrounds, showing exposure to various cultural contexts.	Monolingual children mainly used settings related to their national/local context and related to their primary language.
IST (Internal State Terms) as Initiating Event	**Bilingual children introduced events using words from both languages and/or gestures.**	**Monolingual children usually described events only in their primary language and using gestures.**
Goal (G)	**Bilingual children expressed goals using different words, displaying adaptability in planning.**	**Monolingual children's goals were more limiting in the goals description.**
Attempt (A)	**Bilingual children used action words from both languages, showing flexibility in language.**	**Monolingual children's attempts mainly included words familiar to them.**
Outcome (O)	**Bilingual children referring to the event(s) following the attempt linking it a variety of alternative outcomes.**	**Monolingual children's expression of outcome was restricted to the actual depicted one.**
IST as Reaction	**Bilingual children expressed reactions using emotional words from both languages, showing emotional understanding.**	**Monolingual children's reactions were primarily expressed using emotional words they commonly use.**

The research findings highlight notable disparities in narrative components between bilingual and monolingual children, shedding light on the intricate interplay between language proficiency, cultural exposure, and storytelling proficiency. In terms of setting portrayal, bilingual children demonstrated a rich tapestry of settings reflecting their diverse backgrounds and cultural experiences. Their narratives encapsulated aspects of various cultural contexts, suggesting a nuanced understanding and exposure to multiple linguistic and cultural environments. For example, a bilingual child said, "*Once there was a fisherman with a basket and fishing rod. He went to the sea where the water was like the lakes in Albania and Greece.*" This shows their exposure to various cultural contexts. In contrast, monolingual children predominantly anchored their settings within their national or local context, tethered closely to their primary language and cultural milieu, such as, "*A fisherman went to the Greek sea with his basket and fishing rod.*"

Internal State Terms (IST) served as pivotal elements in initiating events within narratives. Bilingual children exhibited a dynamic approach, initiating events by seamlessly integrating words from both languages and incorporating gestures. This fluidity in language usage points to their proficiency in navigating and blending linguistic resources to construct narratives. An example is, "*The fisherman felt χαρούμενος (happy) because he wanted to catch fish. He said, 'I want to catch big fish!'*" This demonstrates their use of internal state terms from both languages.Conversely, monolingual children tended to confine their descriptions of initiating events to their primary language, accompanied by gestures, indicating a narrower linguistic repertoire in initiating narrative sequences , such as, "*The fisherman was happy because he wanted to catch fish.*"

When articulating goals, bilingual children displayed a remarkable adaptability in planning, expressing goals with varied vocabulary drawn from their bilingual repertoire. This linguistic versatility suggests an enhanced cognitive flexibility in goal-setting processes. For instance, a bilingual child might say, "*The fisherman wanted to catch many ψάρια (fish) for dinner.*" In contrast, monolingual children's expressions of goals were characterized by a more limited vocabulary, potentially reflecting a narrower scope of linguistic resources available for goal articulation , such as, "*The fisherman wanted to catch fish to eat.*"

In narrating attempts to achieve goals, bilingual children exhibited linguistic flexibility by employing action words from both languages, underscoring their ability to seamlessly switch between linguistic codes. This linguistic dexterity enables them to articulate attempts with precision and fluency. An example is, "*He threw his fishing line into the νερό (water) and waited*". Conversely, monolingual children's attempts were primarily composed of words familiar to them within their linguistic domain, reflecting a reliance on a narrower range of linguistic resources for narrative construction , like, "*He threw his fishing line in the water and waited.*"

In discussing outcomes following attempts, bilingual children demonstrated a propensity to consider various alternative outcomes, thereby enriching the narrative with diverse possibilities. This capacity for divergent thinking and imaginative exploration enhances the depth and complexity of their storytelling. For example, "*He caught fish and put them in the καλάθι (basket). Then a cat came and started eating the fish. Both the fisherman and the cat were surprised.*" This shows a variety of simple alternative conclusions. In contrast, monolingual children's portrayal of outcomes tended to be confined to the actual outcome depicted, reflecting a more linear and constrained narrative structure, such as, "*He caught fish and put them in the basket. Then a cat came and ate the fish. They were surprised.*"

Finally, in expressing reactions, bilingual children exhibited emotional understanding and linguistic proficiency by incorporating emotional vocabulary from both languages. This multidimensional expression of emotions enriches the narrative with layers of complexity and cultural nuance. An example is, "*The fisherman was έκπληκτος (surprised) and laughed when he saw the cat eating his fish.*" In contrast, monolingual children predominantly expressed reactions using emotional words commonly used within their linguistic community, potentially reflecting a more culturally bound emotional expression, like, "*The fisherman was surprised and laughed when he saw the cat eating his fish.*"

Ethical Considerations

Emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct throughout the research process is crucial, especially when working with young children. In this study, various ethical considerations were thoroughly taken into account to ensure the participants' well-being and rights were protected.

Before the study began, the parents or legal guardians of all the children involved were asked for their informed consent. Participants were given comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, methods, possible drawbacks, and advantages, and their voluntary involvement was encouraged. In addition, the study provided children with information in a way that was suitable for their age, and their agreement was obtained before moving forward. Meanwhile, steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants' information. All data collected, including narratives, observation notes, and demographic details, were treated with utmost care to ensure privacy and security. Participants were given identification codes to maintain their privacy in any reports or publications that may arise from the study.

Throughout the research process, great care was taken to respect the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the participants. Efforts were made to ensure that assessment tools and procedures were considerate of the participants' diverse backgrounds and cultural contexts. In addition, translators were used as needed to ensure effective communication with participants and their families.

The current study followed ethical guidelines and principles as outlined in relevant institutional policies and regulatory frameworks. Through maintaining these ethical standards, the research sought to provide valuable insights into the narrative abilities of bilingual children while prioritizing the participants' rights and well-being.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study offers valuable insights into the narrative skills of 4-year-old children, it is important to acknowledge a few limitations. Specifically, the sample size of 20 children, while adequate for a qualitative analysis, might restrict the applicability of the findings to a larger population. Future studies that include a wider range of participants from different backgrounds would improve the overall validity of the findings. Additionally, it is important to consider that the study was conducted in a single kindergarten in Larissa, Greece. This may limit the applicability of the findings to different cultural contexts or educational settings. Kindergartens and educational institutions may have different teaching approaches, resources, and student demographics, which can impact children's narrative skills.

In addition, it is important to consider the individual developmental differences that exist among 4-year-old children when emphasizing narrative skills. It is fascinating to observe how children's narrative abilities can continue to develop even after the age of 4. Conducting longitudinal studies to track their narrative development over time would provide valuable insights into how they acquire literacy skills. Furthermore, the study primarily examined children who were bilingual and monolingual, with Greek and Albanian backgrounds. Although this provided an opportunity to examine narrative abilities in various language settings, it might not fully consider the perspectives of children from different linguistic backgrounds. Future research could consider including a wider range of participants, such as children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This would help to create a more comprehensive understanding of narrative development that is inclusive of diverse experiences.

Despite its limitations, this study adds to the current body of literature by providing insights into the narrative abilities of young children and how their language profile can impact these abilities. Exploring these limitations in future research endeavors would enhance our comprehension of early literacy development and provide valuable insights for educational practices focused on improving narrative proficiency among young learners.

Discussion

The current study exploring narrative skills among 4-year-old children provides valuable insights into early literacy development, elucidating the intricate interplay between language acquisition, cognitive abilities, and socio-cultural factors. This study corroborates existing literature by highlighting the richness and complexity of narrative expression at this developmental stage. For instance, Smith et al. (2018) demonstrated the importance of socio-cultural context in shaping narrative competence among young children, while Jones and Brown (2016) emphasized the role of cognitive development in facilitating coherent storytelling. Furthermore, the work of Garcia and Nguyen (2019) underscores the richness and complexity of narrative expression in preschool-aged children, echoing the findings of the current study. Thus, our research adds depth to the existing literature by reaffirming the multifaceted nature of narrative development during this critical developmental stage.

The children in this study demonstrated an impressive range of narrative abilities, which span several facets of storytelling expertise. They demonstrated the capacity to organize cohesive narrative sequences, skillfully interconnecting events and characters in a rational and significant way (Reese et al., 2010; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). This ability entails arranging narrative components, such as the environment,

characters, issue, actions, and conclusion, into a coherent plot. It illuminates the participants' evolving comprehension of narrative structure and sequencing, aligning with findings from Reese et al. (2010) and reinforcing the importance of cognitive development in narrative understanding, as discussed by Jones and Brown (2016) and Smith et al. (2018).

In addition, the children in this study demonstrated a high level of skill in using descriptive language to enhance their storytelling. They skillfully used adjectives, adverbs, and other descriptive components to create vivid mental pictures and elicit sensory sensations for the audience or reader (Rowe, 2012; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). This language proficiency boosts the intricacy and profundity of their narrative, aiding involvement and understanding.

Furthermore, children at this age showed a developing capacity to express the goals and feelings of characters in their stories. They demonstrated an increasing comprehension of character development by depicting characters with clear-cut identities, motives, and emotional states (Haden et al., 2016; Reese et al., 2010). This skill requires the ability to understand other perspectives and show empathy. Children imagined themselves as the characters and expressed their ideas, emotions, and behaviors.

These results support longitudinal developmental theories that highlight the crucial importance of narrative competence in promoting the acquisition and understanding of literacy (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner's narrative theory posits that storytelling functions as a scaffolding mechanism for cognitive growth by aiding in the organizing and integration of new information and experiences (Bruner, 1986). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the significance of narrative speech in facilitating children's comprehension of the world and their cultural surroundings (Vygotsky, 1978). Through participation in story activities, children not only cultivate their language proficiency but also bolster their cognitive aptitude, socio-emotional proficiency, and cultural consciousness.

Of particular interest is the discernible difference found in narrative performance between bilingual and monolingual children. Bilingual children in our study exhibited a notably more enriched performance in narrative skills compared to their monolingual counterparts. This finding resonates with research suggesting cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism, including enhanced executive function and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001; 2015). The linguistic dexterity and cognitive flexibility inherent in navigating multiple languages may contribute to the advanced narrative competency observed in bilingual children. Moreover, bilingualism fosters exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, which has been proved to enrich children's storytelling abilities by broadening their narrative repertoire and fostering socio-cultural understanding (Genesee, 2008; Nicoladis & Genesee, 1997; Paradis, 2011).

However, it is imperative to interpret these findings within the broader context of bilingual language development and literacy acquisition. While our study highlights the narrative advantages of bilingualism, it is essential to recognize the nuanced nature of bilingual language proficiency. Factors such as language dominance, proficiency levels in each language, and the extent of exposure to each language influence children's narrative skills (Cummins, 2000; Hoff, 2013). Additionally, socio-economic status, parental education, and home literacy environment play pivotal roles in shaping language and literacy development in both bilingual and monolingual children (Hoff, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Furthermore, our findings prompt critical reflection on the potential implications for educational practice and policy. Given the narrative advantages demonstrated by bilingual children, educators and policymakers should recognize and capitalize on the linguistic diversity present in early childhood classrooms. Strategies that promote bilingualism and multiculturalism, such as bilingual education programs and culturally responsive pedagogy, can foster inclusive learning environments that celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity (García, 2009; Nieto, 2000). Moreover, efforts to support language minority children in maintaining and developing proficiency in their heritage languages can enhance their academic success and socio-emotional well-being (Oller & Eilers, 2002; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

In conclusion, the findings of our study underscore the importance of narrative proficiency in early literacy development and highlight the differential performance observed between bilingual and mono-

lingual children. By critically examining the complexities of bilingual language development and narrative expression, this research contributes to our understanding of emergent literacy and informs evidence-based practices aimed at promoting equitable educational opportunities for all children.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the narrative oral skills of monolingual and bilingual preschoolers in Greece, emphasizing the critical role of oral language in early literacy development. The findings suggest that bilingual children demonstrate notable advantages in narrative proficiency, which may be attributed to their enhanced cognitive flexibility and exposure to diverse linguistic contexts (Bialystok & Craik, 2020), while it is underlined that the ability to construct and convey narratives orally supports various aspects of literacy, including vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and the ability to understand and produce complex sentence structures (Snow, 2020).

Given the results of this study, educators and policymakers should consider various aspects with regard to the early childhood education in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. In particular, bilingual education programs can provide significant cognitive and linguistic benefits. Incorporating both languages in early childhood education settings can foster better narrative skills and overall language proficiency (Espinosa, 2020) while recognizing and valuing the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students can enhance their engagement and learning outcomes. Culturally responsive teaching strategies should be integrated into the curriculum to support the diverse needs of both monolingual and bilingual children (Gay, 2020).

Meanwhile, early childhood educators should emphasize the development of oral narrative skills through activities such as storytelling, role-playing, and interactive read-aloud sessions. These activities can help children develop a richer vocabulary and a deeper understanding of narrative structures (Paris & Paris, 2020). Towards that, encouraging parents to engage in storytelling and other oral language activities at home can reinforce the skills children learn in school. Providing resources and guidance to parents on how to support their children's language development can be beneficial (Hoff, 2021).

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of bilingualism on narrative skills and overall literacy development. Studies with larger and more diverse samples can provide a broader understanding of how different linguistic backgrounds influence language development. Additionally, investigating the specific strategies that most effectively support the development of narrative skills in bilingual children can inform best practices in early childhood education (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2020).

In summary, this study highlights the importance of narrative oral skills in early literacy development and underscores the advantages of bilingualism. By adopting educational practices that support the development of these skills, educators can help all children build a strong foundation for future academic success.

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