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Socio-cultural environment and preschool children's narrative skills

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Abstract

Understanding cross-cultural differences in narratives, especially among young children from diverse cultural backgrounds, can assist teachers to appreciate these normal narrative variations. This study examines the similarities and differences in micro-macro-structural elements of young children's narrative from various cultural backgrounds. Our annotations indicate similarities across children's narratives in the developmental profile of each age group and narratives' structure around the theme of the story (topic-centered stories) whereas differences were found in the use of macrostructural elements, such as character development and references to the relationships between the characters of the story around the central theme of interest. Concerns arise about the influence of the educational environment in shaping children's emergent narrative discourse.

Keywords: cultural differences, preschool, narrative, microstructure, macrostructure

Introduction

Stories play a crucial role in cultural integration, serving as battlegrounds for symbolic conflicts where groups establish criteria for inclusion and exclusion, ultimately shaping feelings of belonging and animosity. Additionally, these narratives allow for deeper reflection on how society manages issues of boundary-crossing, such as the differences between open and closed borders (Muller & Mirza, 2016). Adopting a sociocultural viewpoint that emphasizes the relationship between culture and cognition, as well as the connection between individual experiences and shared meanings, we analyzed children's narratives from a multi-ethnic environment (Bruner, 2006).

It is widely acknowledged that effective narrative skills don't emerge instantly, they evolve gradually and necessitate advanced language and cognitive abilities. Typically, children start by discussing what is directly observable and then progress to recounting past or future events or referencing objects that are not immediately present. This shift encourages the growth of decontextualized language, which is spoken language that is independent of the immediate context and marked by greater structural and linguistic complexity (Piasta et al. 2018; Lepola et al. 2012). Furthermore, the enhancement of narrative skills in children aids in bridging their oral and written language capabilities. Consequently, narrative skills serve as a significant indicator of future language and literacy development (Spencer & Petersen, 2020; Vretudaki, 2022). Young children's narrative ability develops predominantly within two contexts/environments: the familial one as well as the broader social environment (Kelly & Bailey, 2012).

Literature Review

Through their narratives, not only do children mention what happened to them but they also mention how they felt, what they were thinking, how they reacted etc. (Reese et al., 1993). The length of narration, the way various emotions are expressed, the critical evaluations made about the events, not only reflect the subjective viewpoint of lived experience but also the child's perspective about the world in its entirety (Chang, 2004). Such a perspective is heavily influenced by the culture and cultural context in which the child lives and develops his/her own value system (Mäkinen et al., 2020).

Differences in children's narratives across the world

Children's narratives from India and China and all the way to Canada and Peru are characterized by significant differences; however, such differences do not indicate poor and rich linguistic codes or oral and literate narratives (Schick et al., 2017). Instead, they showcase a quality of narrative "shades" through which the history as well as the social and cultural heritage of the people of each country are delineated (Minami, 2008).

The *content* as well as the *structural organization* of the narrative varies among and within various cultural groups (Brown, 1986; McGregor, 2000). Content refers to the ideas, goals, as well as the themes that children develop in a narrative (Gorman, Fiestas, Peña, & Clarkc, 2011). Children gradually learn how to narrate various events through their social interactions, from which they acquire the necessary conventions as well as the methods for managing the content of the narrative (Jalongo, Fennimore, & Stamp, 2004). In the *content* of the narrative, significant socio-cultural ideas are delineated while the themes that recur in children's narratives reflect various perspectives which have been shaped, to a certain extent, and determined by the culture of the individual storyteller (Méndez et al., 2023). For example, children's narratives from China, focus more on social, ethical and political issues in comparison to children's narratives from America (Wang & Leichtman, 2000). Additionally, children's narratives from China include examples of characters who help and support one another during a given difficult moment, while their stories culminate in a happy ending which confirms the positive relationships between the characters

with the protagonist's actions in the story being characterized by integrity and ethics. In other words, their themes are characterized by a collective orientation (collectivism) as opposed to the individual one (individualism) that dominates the "Western world" where children's stories focus on the protagonist's profile, his/her needs, desires, emotions, preferences as well as dislikes (Gorman et al., 2011).

The *content* of narratives produced by preschool children in Latin America (Mexico and South America) also possesses a collective character, as the stories typically focus on family-related issues as well as on relationship issues that emerge within the members of the family (Uccelli, 2008). As a result, their narratives revolve around naming family members which are present in a family event as well as showcasing the types of behavior that the members exhibit in specific situations (McCabe & Bliss, 2005). In addition, apart from character descriptions, frequent references are made to place and time facilitating the representation of events by the listeners who are in most cases members of the extended family (Gorman et al., 2011).

The *structural organization* refers to the flow of structural elements, at the macrostructural level of the story, while the *function* focuses on the aim and intention of the narrative (Berman & Slobin, 1994). The structural organization or the macrostructure of a personal or fictional narrative refers to the presence of specific structural elements within the body of narration and includes the context of reference (where, when, who), the principal theme of the narration or the initial event (why it is worth mentioning or what important events occurred), a resolution and a conclusion that wraps up the narrated story (Bowles et al., 2020; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991). In case of a personal narrative, there is additionally a *culmination point* (high point) as well as comments/critical evaluations (evaluation devices) related to the narrator's subjective perspective as far as the events of the plot of the narrative are concerned (Heilmann et al., 2010; Labov, 1972).

The *structural organization* of the narration is influenced by the *content* as well as the cultural context of each group. The content influences the structural diversity that is observed in various types of narratives. In other words, personal narratives are more relaxed and less restricted regarding their content and structure, while stories focus on a principal theme and include a succession of particular structural elements (Allen et al., 1994). Children of Afro-American descent produce narratives which are organized around a series of episodes that are indirectly associated with a person or a theme (topic-associating), (Gorman et al., 2011). The events they narrate possess a social – collectivist perspective while they adopt an interactive mode of presentation. In contrast, children of Caucasian descent produce narratives strictly focused on a topic (topic-centered) and narrate the evens of the story in the order they occur (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

The analysis of the events constitutes a "rewarding journey" through which the opportunity is given to understand the convictions, values and the role models that children adopt in different cultural environments (McGregor, 2000). As the stories that children choose to narrate reflect the context in which they themselves have been socialized, their narration therefore becomes a window through which an understanding can be gained of every socio-cultural or/and educational process that has taken place (Gee, 1991). For example, some communities encourage children to talk about their everyday experiences during group gatherings with adults, whereas other communities, on the contrary, discourage such an act and for some others, it is completely forbidden (Lai, Lee, & Lee, 2010). In addition, in some communities, experienced adults openly discuss the current issues that preoccupy them contemplating potential solutions through hypothetical scenarios, whereas others operate with greater caution in situations in which real problems need to be solved in front of children (Heath, 1986).

In Japan, the stories that children narrate are characterized by a tendency to stay on topic (topic-maintenance) as they prefer narrating a series of events related to the same theme as opposed to an individual event (Minami & McCabe, 1995). In the storytelling of Japanese children, there is a notable scarcity of information, with a clear tendency toward conciseness. Japanese mothers often promote brevity by interrupting their children, reinforcing the idea that short speaking turns are preferable. While events are sequenced, the number of actions described is limited. Additionally, pronouns are frequently omitted, as they can be inferred from the context, allowing for succinct communication. Similar trends of multiple experiences and conciseness are found in the narratives of children from Chinese and Korean backgrounds

(Bliss & McCabe, 2008). Children who speak Chinese tend to create narratives often merging several experiences into a single story. On the other hand, Korean children include notably fewer explicit evaluations in their narratives. Both Korean and Chinese narratives necessitate similar adjustments as those required for speakers from Japan (Minami, 1996). The *topic - maintenance* profile is evident as children weave together two related experiences into one narrative, as is customary in their culture. The narratives are sufficiently informative, like many other Asian cultures, Japanese speakers prefer concise communication that avoids overwhelming listeners with unnecessary details (Chang, 2004). The narratives also adequately include key microstructural elements such as descriptions, and evaluations, which contribute to their overall informativeness (McCabe & Bliss, 2005). Children from China, Japan and Korea use less sophisticated language (expression of feelings, thoughts) in their narratives in comparison to children from European countries (Minami & McCabe, 1991). In addition, these children's narrations adopt as a theme elements from other people's lives instead of their own, in an effort to minimize self-projection and avoid placing emphasis on social issues. This happens because within the cultural context of children from Asian cultures, great emphasis is placed on the individual's social dependence as well as the need to conform to social norms (Lai et al., 2010).

In addition, children from Peru in South Africa produce peculiar narrations that do not possess the characteristics of event sequencing and unified structure, which can be observed in the narratives produced by children in North America and Europe (Gutierrez-Clellen, Peña, & Quinn, 1995). Such narrations contain the element of structural evaluation which can be expressed in two forms: a) functional deviation from the chronological order of actual events and b) a series of independent stories that are linked within the boundaries of a unified narrative (Uccelli, 2008). Such strategies are utilized by new narrators placing emphasis on specific points in the narrative so as to "disrupt" the temporal organization and episodic structure of the events in the narrated story. Deviation from the sequence of events in the narration perhaps indicates a pathology for children in the Western world, especially when it manifests itself during the late school years (McCabe, 1997). However, in children's narratives from the Andes, deviation from the chronological sequence of the story serves a rhetorical function that results in more complex narrative language (Uccelli, 2008). As a result, a different type of approach is needed – analysis of children's narratives that stem from countries outside of the "Western civilization". Despite the fact that research in the field of narration focuses on cultural and linguistic differences, it continues to be governed by an Anglo-centric perspective when it comes to narrative progression and development (Muñoz et al., 2003**;** Uccelli, 2008).

In a similar vein, Spanish-speaking children do not necessarily follow the linear arrangement of events in their narratives (Muñoz et al., 2003). The observed omissions of elements from the narrative framework of the story are not related to the child's knowledge of its structure, but primarily to the way through which the child perceives the complete narrative (Gutierrez-Clellen et al., 1995). The profile of *topic-maintenance* was noted in Spanish storytelling. To keep the conversation continuing, children talk about family members and routine activities rather than eliciting discourse about specific historical incidents. Some listeners from outside the community may find these linkages between family members and events to be incidental, but they are an essential component of a speaker's narrative experience. In view of the current understanding of Spanish narration, informativeness needs to be reassessed (Melzi, 2000). An outsider could think that important details are missing, yet the purpose of a story told by a Spanish narrator may not be to retell events but rather to inform listeners about the narrators' family. Because parents do not stress event sequencing while sharing stories with their children, it may not be evident when storytelling is affected by Latino culture. Instead of discussing particular previous events, some speakers mention routine or background activity. Because using previously specified agents of sentences is optional in Spanish, referencing may differ (Minami, 1996; Minami & McCabe, 1995).

In contrast to Spanish-speaking children, Anglophone children, at the age of 5-6, seem to be in a position to narrate stories that are governed by a correct sequence of chronologically ordered events/

experiences (Gutierrez-Clellen et al., 1995). In general, the plot structure in European and Eastern narratives often reveals different styles. Stories from Europe generally adhere to a linear format, commonly using a three-act structure. This straightforward method focuses on a sequence of events that build up to a climax and resolution, often illustrating a journey or transformation (Souto-Manning, 2014). On the other hand, Eastern narratives tend to use cyclical or non-linear frameworks (shift back and forth in time), intertwining various subplots within a broader, cyclical narrative context. This method aligns with Eastern philosophical views on time and life cycles. Likewise, narratives from China and Japan frequently blend myths and folklore into their storytelling, creating intricate layers of narratives within narratives (Cui, 2023; Khawar Aziz, 2023).

In the following table, the distinctive characteristics of children's narratives from different cultural environments are presented. It should be noted that such characteristics are not necessarily present in all children's narratives. Furthermore, it goes without saying that all situational, cognitive and social factors play an important role in the content and structural organization of the narrative.

Table1 *Sample Narrative Characteristics of Children from a Variety of Backgrounds (Cheatham & Jimenez-Sil, 2011 p. 263)*

Child's Background	Typical Narrative Characteristics
Latino/Hispanic	Less emphasis on event sequencing, highlights extended family relationships to point out relationships to the child narrator, emphasis on description, including description of what is typically considered tangential, emphasizes engaging others in conversation rather than using a story-focused monologue, and give emphasis on background or habitual activities rather than past events.
African American	Narratives may be lengthy, use of exaggeration, jokes, refrains, slang, and metaphor to tell an entertaining story, involves "topic-associating" (talk is connected to a single theme that may not be made explicit) rather than centering on a single topic and frequent teasing as story component.
Asian/Asian American	Succinct stories, fewer evaluative comments, pronoun deletion and use reference for implying rather than explaining.
Native American	Children may be reluctant to "perform" stories for others, references to people and objects may appear ambiguous narratives structured in a "meandering style," which may not explicitly get to the point, spatially rather than chronologically organized and narratives are lengthy and complex.
European American	Narration of a single experience, description of a goal or problem and narratives are linear, succinct, chronologically sequenced.

Similarities in children's narratives across the world

Despite the interesting diversity of narratives due to cultural and individual differences, under which different personal needs and social peculiarities lie, generally, children's narratives across the world clearly indicate certain similarities at the level of content, structural organization and function.

In more detail, in a cross-linguistic study comparing the narrative development of children from 5 countries (England, Germany, Israel, Spain and Turkey), researchers, Berman και Slobin (1994), established many similarities in the developmental profile of each age group. More specifically, they report that the narrative discourse of children aged 3 is primarily descriptive, with a key characteristic being the act of naming the faces and objects depicted. The narrative discourse of children aged 5 is more complete syntactically and generally, children make use of suitable linguistic tools so as to verbally capture

the chronological sequence of events in the story. Although children are able to arrange the main events of the story chronologically, they still struggle with identifying their causal relationships, that is to say, they experience difficulty stating the possible causes that triggered such events or their consequences. As a result, the narrative occurs at a surface level. On the other hand, the narrative discourse of children aged 9 predominantly focuses on the causal connection between the events of the story through the appropriate use of linking words such as: and, then, because etc. (Berman, 1997). In addition, children gradually include supplementary information into their narratives about events that occurred before or after an episode of their story so as to create more complex and coherent narratives (Ravid & Berman, 2006). Furthermore, they make use of syntactically processed sentences so as to represent complex information as well as correct referential forms so as to introduce an entity in their narrative, showcasing in this way the limitations of the referential ambiguity which pervades much younger ages (Gutierrez-Clellen & DeCurtis, 2001).

In a study conducted by Méndez, Bitetti and Perry (2023), similarities were established in children's narratives from Spain and Caucasus at a microstructural level, including the length of narration, the vocabulary diversity, the sentence length and the grammatical complexity of the narratives. These specific parallels found in children's narratives showcase the fact that lexical and syntactic elements are less influenced by the sociocultural context in which these children live. According to researchers, this potentially occurs due to the fact that the cultural background of children does not appear to have a significant influence on the way preschool and school establishments use language and educate children in its individual structure and function.

On the other hand, researchers claim that through social interaction and participation in social institutions such as the school, details of cultural norms and conventions are transmitted and reinforced (Tudge & Rogoff, 1999). Children learn which convictions and manners of conduct are appreciated and under which conditions. What may be considered common and acceptable in one culture, may not be in another. As a result, development is considered to be culturally-specific as opposed to universal (Khimji & Maunder, 2012). Through the use of representations or "mediating tools", individuals express their own behaviors and convictions by drawing on the value and belief systems of their community. In that sense, children's thinking processes as well as their actions are therefore the product of their sociocultural environment (O'Toole & de Abreu, 2005).

In another study, Gorman, Fiestas, Peña and Clark (2011) did not establish any significant cultural differences, as it would have been normally expected, in the way the content of the narratives was organized among children of Caucasian, Central American and African descent. More specifically, the narrative axis was structured around the principal theme of the story (topic-centered stories) and this technique was adopted by all children, irrespective of nationality. The aforementioned finding is opposed to a study conducted by Michaels (1981), many years ago, which had established that in their narratives children of Afro American descent placed more emphasis on the episodic structure of the story and less emphasis on the topic or the main character of the narrative (topic associated stories). The study also found some general differences as well. For instance, children of Afro American descent produced more imaginative stories in comparison to children of the other two nationalities. Latin American children, as it has been previously mentioned, focused more on naming the characters in their narratives, while children of Caucasian descent produced narratives with more references to the relationships between the characters of the story around the central theme of interest (Hyon & Sulzby, 1994).

The concluding summary of the aforementioned researchers, Gorman, Fiestas, Peña, and Clark (2011), partly justifies the uniformity in the narratives of the children who participated in their study as far as the influence of the school/educational environment/program is concerned. This means that the children in the study, that attended an elementary school, had received training around the structure of the narrative texts, which potentially played a decisive role in the way they organized their narratives, assimilating in this way any natural cultural influences from their social and family context.

Conclusion

Generally, children of preschool age aged 5 and 6 located in large geographical areas in the contemporary Western and Eastern world (North America, Europe, Japan, China) are able to produce complete and well-structured narratives (Chang, 2004). Children in all the aforementioned cultures present similar developmental trajectories enriching in a gradual way their narratives with more details and critical evaluations, thus increasingly forming clear, informative and processed narratives (Chang, 2004; Fivush et al., 1995). In addition, what can be observed at a cross-cultural level is that the ability to produce a more organized narrative as well as handle a more semantically complete narrative develops concurrently as children get older, which confirms that the ability to produce a structurally and linguistically processed narrative is related not only to the cognitive structures and processes but also related to the level of linguistic ability in a specific language. (Kupersmitt & Berman, 2001). For this reason, preschool children's narrative skills are used as a predictive indicator for a series of linguistic and cognitive skills that are related to children's literacy at school (Spencer et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2019).

The universality of narration as a means of socialization is based on something beyond its ability to classify and evaluate the experience in accordance with many different value systems. The narration of stories is a human activity deeply ingrained, that transcends differences in socio-cultural traditions and it flourishes even if there is not a specific narrative model to imitate and reproduce (Van Deusen-Phillips, Goldin-Meadow, & Miller, 2001).

It is important to understand that a "good" story can be long, descriptive and full of details or short with general references. A "good" story can focus on exact experiences or connect exact experiences with information that is implied. It can move towards the resolution of the issue/problem or end up without a resolution of its central theme, seeking solutions. A "good" story can reveal many things about the person who narrates it or the narrator can remain in the background. A "good" story can trigger someone's interest, evoke sadness, inform, warn or entertain. A "good" story can have a clear beginning, middle and end or it may have no end at all. There may be no clear chronological sequence or cause-and-effect relationship in the events, but they are co-articulated on a common basis of meaning, as if they coexisted within the same context (McCabe, 1997). Such multicultural shades add weight and value to the function of narration and for this reason, it is important for educators to acknowledge, appreciate and respect their students' cultural background (Klefstad & Martinez, 2013). This can be achieved through the avoidance of stereotyping and the conscious acceptance of difference on the part of educators (Beneke & Cheatham, 2019), the inclusion of a wide range of books from global children's literature as well as the provision of time and space in the classroom for narrations "inside and outside" the teaching of individual subjects forming a shared culture that recognizes the uniqueness of each individual in a quietly inclusive education, oriented towards the 21st century citizen.

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