The Connection between Oral Narrative and Reading Problems: What’s the Story?

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Narratives are a particular type of discourse in which one provides information to others about past, present, and future events and experiences. Narratives are considered a type of discourse, because information is weaved through two or more utterances. Narratives are different than conversations, the other major type of discourse, because narratives require one person to carry the entire conversational load as they relay information. Narratives emerge early in life, as shown in this narrative relayed by 3-year-old Desiree:

James and Max. Max is her very best dog. He likes to stand up and roll over. One day, um, they went to the park. They liked it because lot of room in the park. Then Max changes his mind. He wants to play in the mud puddle.

Narratives are typically organized in a temporal sequence, in which events unfold over time, or in a causal sequence, in which events unfold following cause-and-effect. The above narrative, consistent with those produced by many preschoolers, does not yet display a true temporal or causal sequence, and rather unfolds as a series of descriptions. Over the next few years, this child’s narrative will begin to be organized using a series of temporal ties (e.g., after, then, next, after that) or causal ties (because, so, then). Also, this child’s narrative will likely begin to display a more traditional story grammar structure, exhibiting a clear beginning, middle, and end with an episodic structure. Episodic structure describes the core event in traditional narrative frameworks in which a problem or initiating event (e.g., and we stumbled upon a fire-breathing dragon) stimulates a plan, an action, and finally a resolution. Encompassing many different types, from the recount of a personal event or experience to the creation of a fictional story, the production of narrative requires sophisticated knowledge about discourse frameworks as well as strong oral language abilities. In producing a narrative, one must not only utilize appropriate grammatical and vocabulary conventions and constraints, but also must create connections within and across sentences and propositions, differentiate main and subordinate ideas, order information in a cohesive and meaningful way, attend to the background and changing needs of the listener, and differentiate information that is shared by the speaker and listener from information that is not shared (e.g., Baltaxe & D’Angiola, 1992; Liles, 1985, 1987). In this regard, the narrative should be viewed as one of the most complex language acts: in producing a good narrative, children must conform to customary organizational schemes for narratives (e.g., providing a clear beginning, middle, and ending) and also must weave the smaller units of the narrative (sentences, clauses, words) together in a cohesive sequence.

When studying children’s narratives, two levels of analysis are customary. One level, macrostructural analysis, studies children’s narrative abilities from the perspective of overall organization, or the molar content and organization of the narrative. This examines children’s use of story grammar components and episode structure. In analyzing the macrostructure of a narrative, one might count the number of episodes (i.e., segments that include a goal, attempt, and consequence) or identify the number of story grammar units contained in the narrative. The other level, microstructural analysis, focuses more locally on the internal linguistic organization of the narrative, such as how children use conjunctions between sentences to create cohesion within the narrative itself. Microstructural analysis usually studies productivity (the amount of language produced in the narrative) and complexity (the lexical and grammatical sophistication of the narrative). For instance, in examining the microstructural quality of a child’s narrative, one might count the number of sentences, count the total number of words, count the number of different words, count the number of sentences containing grammatical errors, and count the number of conjunctions used. Discriminant analysis shows that macro- and microstructural variables represent two distinct and unique underlying areas of narrative competence (Liles, Duffy, Merritt, &
Purcell, 1995). When examining a child’s narratives - either spoken or written - we should study both the macro- and micro- structural aspects of the narrative to get a good sense of the child's abilities.

Given the complex macro- and micro-level demands associated with producing narrative, it is not surprising that children with underlying language weaknesses language impairment demonstrate persistent difficulty with narrative at both micro- and macro-levels. Narrative problems with children with oral language difficulties transcend the preschool period (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000) and continue well into school age (Feagans & Short, 1984; Roth & Spekman, 1986). Of interest to those of us who are concerned about children who struggle with reading development are studies showing connections between children’s spoken narratives and reading problems. Children with reading difficulties are more likely to produce spoken narratives that are shorter in length, contain fewer words, display an under-developed story grammar, that display weaknesses in organizational cohesion, and that contain more grammatical errors compared to children who do not have reading problems (e.g., Roth & Spekman, 1986). These narrative weaknesses are exhibited in children who do not show other overt signs of oral language difficulties, although they do have identified reading disabilities. These narrative weaknesses seen in oral language are also reflected in children’s written narratives at both micro- and macro-levels. Children with reading problems produce written narratives that are under-developed compared to other children. These problems in written narrative should not be construed as a writing problem per se but rather as a language/narrative problem that transcends both oral and written discourse.

Difficulties in narrative by the child with reading difficulties, transcending micro- and macro-levels of performance -represent what Feagans and Short (1984) refer to as a “compromised flexibility” in the child’s ability to use linguistic knowledge within the constraints of narrative structure. This compromised flexibility results in a narrative that appears disorganized, is not cohesive, and is not very specific. In turn, these characteristics place high demands on the listener and create a circumstance in which communication breakdowns are likely to occur. Given the complexities of narrative and its impact on diverse aspects of the child’s academic functioning, a collaborative approach for intervention is needed. Supporting narrative improvements in children with reading problems requires the collaborative involvement of many constituents, including the reading specialist, the classroom teacher, special educators, and speech-language pathologists.

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References