Enhancing Young Children Narrative Skills: The Effects of a Self-regulated Instructional Strategy

Hellen Vretudaki*

University of Crete, Greece

*Corresponding author: evretudaki@edc.uoc.gr

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Abstract In spite of the constantly increasing children’s needs mainly concerning their social-emotional competencies, the necessity to reinforce their oral skills is considered of high importance. Also, despite the openly acknowledged agony of researchers to find modern, effective instructional methods, in practice very few studies suggest means, procedures and techniques that can productively “meet” the differentiated levels of preschool children’s oral and written language comprehension and production. Given that narrative takes a dominant place in children’s oral skills, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a self-regulated instructional strategy on kindergarten children's narrative skills development. The sample consisted of 98 children aged 5-6 attending 10 kindergarten in a local school. In the experimental group a training program was implemented over eight weeks. The results showed that training in narrating fictional stories helped children assimilate story structure and enabled them to apply it effectively when they were asked to create a fictional story. In addition, children in the experimental group had significant higher performance than those in the control group. The significant effect of the training program in young children’s narrative skills remained even after they entered primary school.

Keywords: narrative skills, fictional stories, Kindergarten, Self-Regulated instructional strategy, training program

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1. Introduction

Narratives are temporal sequences of events connected by causal relationships [1]. Narratives are developmental procedures with cognitive and linguistic demands. Research findings have shown that children's ability to produce stories starts before the beginning of reading instruction [2] approximately from the age of two. Their first attempts are characterized by a total lack of structure and coherence. Along the way, they learn to connect characters’ actions with simple types of causal relationships [3]. By the age of five, children try to connect story events with causal and temporal conjunctions, and after the age of around eight years children’s narratives include complex episodic structures which are resolved by the main character’s intentional efforts [4,5]. However, the significant effect of kindergarten children’s narrative skills on their later school success and literacy development has been highlighted by many researchers [6,7]. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance their narrative skills during their early years.

However, young children face difficulties in this task due to cognitive and psycholinguistic factors [8], and to the weakness of their working memory which prevents them from efficiently processing a large amount of information [9]. Fictional narratives are stories produced in decontextualized discourse with imaginary characters and events, either life-like or fantastic [10]. Fictional narratives are considered the most difficult narrative genre, because young children need to have some knowledge about stories’ conventions, their structural coherence, about evaluating language features and linguistic devices that are necessary to put story events in a causal and temporal order [11].

Evidence suggests that children comprehend a narrative text when it is organized into a story grammar [12]. Story grammar includes elements such as a formal beginning and the setting information (time, place, characters), an initiating event/problem, the main characters’ goal-directed actions/attempts and obstacles to achieving the intended goal, a resolution of the problem and a formal ending [13]. Story grammar elements are helpful since they provide an overall structure for enhancing young children’s comprehension of story structure particularly when these story elements are used in combination with characters’ perspectives and story predictions [14]. Although young children may be cognizant of story grammar elements, they face difficulties both in cognitively processing, as well as verbally expressing relevant information during the narration of a fictional story [2]. Thus, children need to have a deep understanding of explicit and implicit information (verbal or written) of each narrative condition [15]. Therefore,
educators and adults should use a series of mediators and instructional techniques to activate children cognitively and linguistically, formulating an interactive instructional context where children may meet their actual abilities [5,16].

2. Literature Review

Children’s ability to retell and narrate fictional stories is not just a function of age, it also depends on the experiences they have that promote the development of their narrative skills [17]. Adults (teachers and/or parents) can enhance children’s narrative skills through dialogue about the story features and story grammar elements, through questioning techniques, modeling or by using various visual aids. Through a meta-analysis of a number of experimental studies fostering preschool and kindergarten children’s narrative skills Pesco and Gagne [10] argued that verbal scaffolding, namely children’s engagement in dialogue before, after, or during read-aloud, and children’s engagement in retelling, summarizing and discussing stories, was the predominant teaching approach to foster young children’s narrative skills.

The power of verbal scaffolding techniques has been demonstrated in many studies. When teachers use the question-answering task they provide children with a guide of what is valued and what must be included within the story. As Silva, Strasser and Cain [18] argue it might not be a surprise that children’s narrative productions, when completed after answering a set of questions about narrative components, are more coherent and of higher structural quality than those produced before this task.

Studies have also shown that displaying either a wordless book, or a series of cards that depict situations of fictional and/or real events, or cards with symbols that represent the structural elements of the stories seems to help children narrate their fictional stories [19,20,21,22,23]. Furthermore, combining verbal scaffolding techniques and visual mediators results in narratives that are more advanced structurally and linguistically.

An interactive-dialogic reading condition, when used as a narrative instructional strategy (utilizing verbal and visual mediators), also seems to enhance children’s understanding of the story structure and enables them to include more references in their narratives about the characters’ psychological situation, as well as their dialogues [24,25]. It seems that by developing a dialogue during and after dialogic reading and asking open-ended questions about the story events, children enrich their narratives with judgments, personal comments and references to the character’s mental state and dialogues.

Varied instructional techniques including combined verbal and visual mediators have been proposed by Stadler and Ward [26,27] to enrich children’s narrative structure. The instructional techniques they suggest are: a) modeling, b) guided activities, c) questions and dialogue and d) reading aloud or shared reading activities.

An effective multilevel instructional strategy named Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) enhancing primary age children’s narrative skills was suggested by Harris and Graham (1996). This strategy is based on the Cognitive apprenticeship method [28,29] by which children step by step internalize critical information, media and mental tools in order to create their written narratives. It emphasizes self-regulation and meta-cognitive processes during planning, organizing and writing. In this strategy, thinking aloud, reduced guidance, modeling techniques and a series of visual mediators can be used to enhance children’s efforts to reach their potential abilities. Although this strategy was used to enhance primary-school children’s narrative skills, it would be interesting to use it with younger ones.

Results from the aforementioned studies suggest that young children’s ability to narrate fictional stories can be enhanced by a range of materials and instructional techniques. However, to our knowledge, fictional stories production procedures has been mostly used as evaluation tool and not as tool for enhancing young children’s narrative skills. Moreover, there is any relevant study to suggest in preschool children’s training program self-regulation and metacognitive procedures.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine:

a) The impact of an instructional strategy on kindergarten children’s narrative skills.

b) To determine whether the impact of the instructional strategy on preschoolers’ narrative skills remain in the long term.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were from 10 kindergartens in a local school in Crete, Greece. The kindergartens were selected by convenience sample procedures because it is needed to had a separate room near the classroom to test the children. From a total of 150, 98 children (48 boys & 50 girls) aged 5-6 years ($M=64.45$, $SD=2.57$) were selected as the sample. Only Greek-speaking children aged 5-6 who did not have language delays were included in the sample. All children were from working to middle class families. According statistical procedures (ANOVA) the existed classes (as a whole) where divided into two groups, one experimental and one control group.

2.2. Measures

A battery of cognitive, verbal and narrative measures were used to evaluate the group’s equivalency and examine the effects of the intervention program in enhancing the children’s narrative abilities.

2.2.1. Non-verbal Cognitive Ability

Children’s non-verbal cognitive ability was measured by the Colored Progressive Matrices standardized into Greek by Sideridis Antoniou, Mouzaki and Simos [30]. The test reliability coefficient of the Cronbach $a$ was 0.87 and the concurrent validity 0.97.

2.2.2. Verbal Ability

Children’s verbal ability was assessed using two subtests, Vocabulary and Verbal Analogies of the Athena Diagnostic Test of Learning Disabilities, a Greek standardized test [31]. Kuder– Richardson & Cronbach’s a
2.2.3. Narrating Fictional Stories Measures

The children’s ability to narrate fictional stories was assessed by the Index of Narrative Complexity story coding of Petersen, Gillam & Gillam [32]. This Index includes categories for rating the complexity of characters, setting, initiating events, internal response, plans, actions, complications and consequences, formulaic markers, temporal markers, casual adverbial clauses, knowledge of dialogues and narrator evaluations. The scores range from 0 to 3. On this scale 0 corresponds to the absence of the element, 1 to its mere presence, and 2 or 3 to partial or complete reference of the structural element with all necessary details. The INC Content sampling reliability was assessed by computing inter-correlations between five story elicitation contexts. The correlations ranged between \( r = .604 \) and \( r = .898 \). Inter-rater reliability also assessed by three raters who scored stories and discussed their scoring decisions together until they were 90% reliable for scoring each individual story element.

Children’s narration of fictional stories was assessed using: a) a wordless book and b) five illustrated cards. In narrating fictional stories using a wordless book child initially leafed through the book to see the pictures and then the researcher mentioned the title of the story. Then she closed the book and put it in front of the child asking him/her to narrate the story by looking at the pictures. If children omitted a picture, she came back to it and helped the child with a prompt: e.g. “What did the frog do?”

To narrate fictional stories using cards, five cards were used as a visual aid. The five cards were photocopied book illustrations (size 15x10 cm²) from a selected list of books. The cards depicted basic story elements (characters, initial problem, two story plot events, resolution). The researcher put these cards in front of each child so that he/she could narrate a complete and understandable story. She prompted the child only by saying: “Do you have something else to say about the story?”.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Books

Two wordless books were used to have the children narrate two fictional stories at the pre- and post-test. In addition, five illustrations from three different books were selected to assess children’s ability at the pre, post and second post-phase to narrate fictional stories using cards. During the intervention program eight books were read to the children. All the books were commercially available and matched the following criteria: (a) the text was interesting and appealing, (b) the story content was unknown, (c) the story plot was understandable and age appropriate, and (d) the story pictures corresponded to the text. The books had almost the same number of pages (13) and about 700 words.

2.3.2. Structural Elements Cards

Seven cards with seven words were used for the training program. The seven words functioned as key-words and reminded the children of the story's structural elements. The first two cards were labeled with the key-words “WHEN” and “WHERE” and referred to the story setting. The third card with the word “WHO” referred to the main character, the fourth card with the word “WHICH” referred to the initial problem/issue of the story, the fifth card with the word “WHAT” referred to the episodes, namely what was happening in the story. The sixth card was labeled with the word “HOW” referring to the story’s resolution and the last card with the word “END” referring to the end of the story.

2.4. Procedure

2.4.1. Intervention Program

The intervention program lasted eight weeks. Children were trained once a week for about 40-45 minutes. During the intervention eight books (one book each time) were read to the whole class.

2.4.2. Experimental Group Training Program

In the experimental group, the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) proposed by Harris and Graham [33] was used because it was considered an effective strategy involving important techniques that substantially assist children’s understanding. In particular, the six levels of the SRSD help children to: a) develop and discuss their background knowledge, b) give teachers the chance to “think aloud” and share their ideas about the story elements, c) help children remember what they have just learned and d) finally produce a fictional story, applying all the structural elements. The SRSD includes six levels used as a beginning framework for instruction. It was adapted for kindergarten children and developed into five levels of practice with the corresponding verbal, visual and procedural facilities. In the first level, before the story reading, the researcher presented the cards with the seven key-words and explained them to the children. In the second level, she held an interactive discussion with the children about how a well-structured story can be created. In the third level, she functioned as a model reading the story to the children with the interactive-dialogic reading approach, and as she referred to each story element, she placed the corresponding photocopied book illustration under each card. She also commented aloud about the story structure. For instance, she stopped the reading at times and commented, as if thinking aloud, about what structural element of the story had just been read, or what should be done. In the fourth level, by retelling the story the children confirmed that the story that was read to them had the appropriate structure. The story illustrations were removed, whereas the cards remained to function as a mnemonic rule/cue. In the last stage, instead of individual writing, collaborative writing procedures were implemented. This gave the children the opportunity to interact and thus foster their high-level thinking and metacognitive skills. In this stage children were divided in groups of four or five, and each group was given a big
piece of paper divided into seven columns. One of the seven key words was written at the top of each column. Additionally, the five illustrated pictures from a story were given to the children as an aid to help them create their own story. The children looked at the cards very carefully, discussed them among themselves, and tried to create a story with all the structural elements. At this stage, children interacted with each other by adjusting, modifying and controlling their initial thoughts in their efforts to manage these challenging procedures sufficiently. These metacognitive procedures firstly “demand” focalization of their attention, self-controlling and self-regulation processes. The researcher reinforced their trails by reminding them of the task goal and discussing their processes. The researcher intervened mainly to emotional reinforced children’s tries and controlling their initial thoughts in their efforts to create a story with all the structural elements. The researcher reinforced their trials by reminding them of the task goal and discussing their processes. The researcher intervened mainly to emotional reinforced children’s tries or to clearly spelling the desired words.

2.4.3. Control Group

In the control group the same story books were read to the children, but they didn’t receive any specific training. Before the story reading the researcher gave them some information about the book (the title, author, illustrator), she read the story without interruptions, and then led brief discussion about the interesting points of the story.

2.4.4. First Post-test

When the intervention program was completed the children were individually tested in narrating a fictional story using a wordless book and then using cards.

2.4.5. Second Post-test

Five months later when children were attending the first grade of primary school, they were individually re-assessed in narrating a fictional story using only cards in order to examine the intervention program’s post-term effect. We have chosen this task because is considered more challenging task from the narration by wordless book in which children mostly describe what they just seen rather than produce an original story.

4. Results

4.1. Equivalency of the Groups

According to the results, one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between groups, before the intervention phase, on any of the following measures: age ($F(2.98)=1.00, p>.05$), non-verbal ability ($F(2.98)=.59, p>.05$), verbal ability -vocabulary ($F(2.98)=.76, p>.05$) and verbal analogies ($F(2.98)=.20, p>.05$), narrating fictional stories using a wordless book ($F(2.98)=.92, p>.05$) and narrating fictional stories using cards ($F(2.98)=.95, p>.05$).

4.2. Impact of the Instructional Strategy on Narrative Skills

The main goal of the present study was to examine and compare the impact of the instructional strategy on children’s narrative skills. One way repeated-measures ANOVA (Table 1) were conducted with the condition as a between subject variable (experimental and control group) and pre-test–post-test (time of assessment) as a within subject variable. With regard to improvement in narrating fictional stories using wordless books, the results demonstrated significant differences between pre-test and post-test measures $F(1.98)=512.265, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.826$. The main effect of the participation group $F(3.98)=15.771, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.305$ was significant too, as the interaction of the participation group and the children’s improvement before and after the intervention program $F(3.98)=42.589, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.542$. The results concerning the children’s improvement in narrating fictional stories using cards showed significant differences between the two evaluations before and after the intervention program $F(1.98)=167.587, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.608$. The main effect of the participation group $F(3.98)=6.138, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.146$ was also significant, as well as the interaction of the participation group and the children’s improvement from pre-test to post-test measures $F(3.98)=12.802, p<.01$, partial $\eta^2=.262$.

Despite the fact of these overall results, some interesting differences arose between the children’s performance of the experimental and control group in the additional elements (beyond the story structure) of the: dialogues $F(3.98)=9.49, p<0.05$, narrator evaluations $F(3.98)=7.52, p<0.05$ and connectors (temporal, causal) $F(3.98)=8.65, p<0.05$, in the post-test phase in narrating fictional stories.

| Time of assessment | Wordless book M | SD | Cards M | SD |
|--------------------|-----------------|----|---------|----|
| Pre-test           | 6.67            | .91| 5.00    | .52|
| Post-test          | 12.24           | .85| 8.96    | 1.46|

**Experimental group**

| Time of assessment | Wordless book M | SD | Cards M | SD |
|--------------------|-----------------|----|---------|----|
| Pre-test           | 6.10            | .49| 5.32    | .46|
| Post-test          | 6.75            | 1.03| 5.46    | 1.33|

ANOVA $F(3.98)=46.62, p<.01$ $F(3.98)=16.58, p<.01$

4.3. Delayed Post-test in Narrating Fictional Stories by Cards

One-way ANOVA repeated measures showed that six months later children in the experimental group
maintained their high performance in narrating fictional stories using cards. Consequently, the observed mean differences between the two post-test measurements in narrating fictional stories using cards were non-statistically significant: first post-test measures $M=8.96, SD=1.46$ and second post-test measures $M=8.43, SD=2.37, F(3.98)=.65, p>.05$.

5. Discussion-Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of an instructional strategy on kindergarten children’s narrative skills. It is also examined whether the differences in children’s narrative skills were maintained in the long term. The results showed that training in narrating fictional stories helped children assimilate the story structure and enabled them to apply it effectively when asked to create a fictional one. Children in the experimental group produced more organized and coherent narratives than those in the control group.

Children in the experimental group acquired significant benefits in producing fictional stories. The majority of the children responded effectively to the researcher's modeling and thinking aloud techniques, as these increased their concentration and improved understanding of the story elements. These techniques constituted fundamental parts of the Cognitive apprenticeship theory [28,29]. The necessity of using modeling techniques to help children acquire complex knowledge and skills has been demonstrated by studies aiming to help primary school children with behavioral and/or cognitive disabilities in planning and writing texts [34]. Additionally, implementing collaborative writing procedures in the last stage of the SRSD strategy seemed to enhance children’s high level of thinking and metacognitive skills since they had to create meaningful fictional stories by controlling and revising the whole process [35].

Cards with story structural elements used in previous studies had drawings, symbols, sketches, black and white images [36,37] and were used only with primary school children [22,28,29]. However, the results of the present study showed that the cards with written key-words seem to were very operational as mediators, in preschool children.

It is also important to discuss the significant groups’ differences between children’s performance on the specific story elements of the dialogues, the narrator’s evaluations and usage of connectors. Children in the experimental group made hard efforts to interpret the illustrated cards from the story, to connect each other in a logical sequence and to verbally express these ideas in a comprehensive manner. In this way, children (after the long practice) spent much time to the organization of the story and then to think about: “what do I have to say” and “what can I say better” adding dialogues, comments and more appropriate connectors in their narratives. Thus, an instructional strategy needs to utilize scaffolding techniques and be based on the Cognitive apprenticeship method in which children learn complex and demanding mental processes [29,33].

With regard to the long-term effects of the instructional strategy on children’s narrative skills, the children’s scores in the second post-test phase in narrating fictional stories by cards showed that they retained their high performance. These results converge with the ideas of Varsamidou and Spandidakis [40] who argue that when children are exposed for a long time to well-organized training programs which utilize dynamic learning environments, they learn to regulate and control their thoughts and behavioral patterns by achieving more permanent results.

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