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Narrative skills in Swedish children with language impairment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the development of narrative skills in Swedish children with language impairment between age 5 and age 10. Seventeen children with LI and two control groups of age peers with typical development participated in a picture elicited story telling task. Analyses included measures of story content, cohesion and grammar. Our subjects showed development in different areas from age 5 to 10, but they did not perform at the level of the controls at age 10 on number of different verbs used and percent grammatically correct C-units. We conclude that preschool children with LI develop in their narrative skills over time, but not to the level of their age-peers at age 10.

Learning outcomes: The reader will be able to describe areas of vulnerability in Swedish-speaking children with language impairment in general, and related to narration in particular. Furthermore, the reader will be able to describe similarities in narrative skills between Swedish-speaking and English-speaking children with language impairment.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we explore narrative skills in Swedish children with language impairment (LI) at age 5 and age 10 in comparison with chronological age controls. We focus on narrative content, linguistic structure and cohesion. Many studies have found that narration is a particularly vulnerable level of language production in children with language impairment (LI) and that preschool oral narrative skills are useful in predicting academic achievement, particularly emergent literacy skills and later reading comprehension (Bishop & Edmundson, 1987; Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Feagans & Applebaum, 1986; McCabe & Rollins, 1994). In kindergarten and the lower grades, narratives constitute the medium for a transition from oral language skills to written language skills (e.g. Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000). Story-telling is a highly complex task placing significant processing demands on the child's cognitive and linguistic skills simultaneously.

1.1. Narrative development

Narrative skills begin to develop in the preschool years (e.g. Appelbee, 1978; Lahey, 1988) and continue to be refined throughout childhood and school-age. Development is demonstrated through the use of increased numbers of episodes and complex embedding strategies (Hedberg & Westby, 1993), but also through pragmatic features, such as the more advanced use of referencing and adjustments to the listener's needs (e.g. Lahey, 1988). The story grammar model (Stein & Glenn, 1979) has been used extensively to describe and analyze narrative content in children. Seven content units are described in Stein and Glenn's model with the setting initiating the story and a conclusion or resolution provided at the end. Stein and Albrow (1997) discuss how children's concepts of goal-directed actions and human intentionality influence their ability to manage

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content, structure and coherence in stories. According to these authors, at age 2.5 children know a great deal about human intentionality, but they also need to have some knowledge about what telling a story requires. At age 3 children tell stories about real-life events with emotional content. They include all parts of a goal-based episode, such as an initiating event and a plan of action. More complex narratives containing multiple episodes develop throughout the early school years.

Narrative production in children has been studied across languages. Berman and Slobin (1994) conducted an extensive cross-linguistic study, which used one of the Frog Stories (Mayer & Mayer, 1975) as an elicitation context. They found that children as young as 3–4 years old constructed text with the correct syntactic and grammatical structure of their target native language. Results also showed, however, that the oldest children aged 9–10 years, did not produce narratives at the level of adults in terms of content, morpho-syntax and semantics. The authors concluded that becoming a proficient speaker is a process, which extends over a long period of time.

The linguistic devices used to create cohesion in narratives are called cohesive ties or cohesive markers. Development of cohesion is the increased ability to tie sentences or units together within a narrative. Narratives have a particularly high density of cohesive markers compared to conversation (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Halliday and Hasan (1976) described five types of cohesive markers: referencing, lexical cohesion, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctive. Peterson and Dodsworth (1991) studied children aged 2–3.6 and found that the number of cohesive ties increased with age and MLU, and that most children at these ages use all of the categories identified by Halliday and Hasan. Children's semantic skills develop throughout the school years, with support from their advancing literacy skills. One of the cohesive devices commonly used by children in the Peterson and Dodsworth study was conjunction (connectives). According to Halliday and Hasan, the function of conjunctive elements in narratives is to conjoin meaning across sentences and it is independent of sentence grammar. The function of these elements is to clarify how the content expressed is logically connected to previous text, additively, temporary, causally or adversely. In their picture elicited narrative corpora from 191 French-speaking children aged 7–11 years, Vion and Colas (2005) found that temporal connectives were most common, followed by additive, causal and adversative. According to Lahey (1988) the developmental sequence in narrative production progresses from additive to temporal to causal narratives. The type of connective that is used is one of the features indicating which type of relationship exists between propositions. For example, in an additive chain, where the order of the propositions does not matter, the connective *and* is used. In an additive narrative, statements can change place without a noticeable effect on the overall story.

In Swedish narratives utterances are commonly initiated with a connective, such as a temporal adverb, e.g. “then” to create cohesion. Swedish is a verb-second language, which means that the finite verb has to appear as the second element in a sentence. The regular word-order in main clause statement is subject–verb (SV) like in English: Han äter fisk. (SVX) *He eats fish*. When an element different from the subject initiates a main clause, e.g., an adverb or a topicalized object, the word order is inverted and becomes verb–subject: Då äter han fisk. (XVS) *Then eats he fish*. or Fisk äter han inte. *Fish eats he not*. The word order will thus be XVS. Therefore, the use of a cohesive device has consequences for word order in Swedish.

1.2. Narratives in children with communication disorders

In an issue of *Topics in Language Disorders*, Johnston (2008) extends her views from her seminal paper (1982) regarding the use of narrative tools for assessment and intervention. She specifies six reasons to target narrative skills in intervention for school-aged children with language impairment: To explore processing deficits, to decontextualize language, to help kids connect, to improve listening skills, to improve reading comprehension and to reveal language learning strengths and weaknesses. Johnston also specifies four required knowledge bases for narration. One such area is content knowledge and another is familiarity with narrative frameworks. A third area is linguistic skills, i.e. the ability to use appropriate linguistic elements to express content and to create a unified text. Finally, a story-teller also needs to be sensitive to the listener's or reader's needs and be quick to make adjustments, if required. Johnston calls this area communicative adequacy.

Narrative production has been described as the most ecologically valid task for the assessment of language skills in children with communication disorders (Botting, 2002). It has been shown that the characteristics of the language elicited from narrative contexts versus conversational contexts differ significantly. In an early study by Merritt and Liles (1987) it was found that children with normal language development produced more complete episodes and more story grammar units than children with language disorders in spite of the fact that they did not produce a higher number of clauses. Furthermore, Liles (1987) found that school-aged children with TL showed better episode organization and a more well-developed use of cohesive conjunctions than children with language impairment. Children with typical development were also more sensitive and made adjustments according to changes in the listener's needs, such as in contexts with shared or non-shared content. A narrative task is thus important to include during the assessment of language skills in clinical populations.

Linguistic competence (Johnston, 2008) including the techniques children use to create cohesion in stories have been assessed through research on the micro-structure of narratives. Factors related to micro-structure have been found to be particularly useful in distinguishing school-aged children with LI from those with TD (Liles, Duffy, Merritt, & Purcell, 1995). In a longitudinal study of narrative skills in school-aged children, Fey, Catts, Proctor-Williams, Tomblin, & Zhang (2004) found that school-aged children with typical language development (TL) produced “stronger” narratives than children with language impairment and the measure that yielded the largest difference between groups was a measure of grammatical accuracy. Children with TL produced stories with higher level of lexical variation, more advanced grammatical complexity and fewer errors than children with language impairment both in second and fourth grade. Children with a kindergarten

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