Educational intervention in the production of narrative texts for primary education students

Kalliopi Papoutsaki (PhD)

Laboratory Teaching Staff, Department of Medicine
National Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
Email: kpapouts@primedu.uoa.gr

&

Eleni Annopoulou (PhD)

Primary education teacher. Athens, Greece
Email: eannop@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of the present study is to investigate the degree of improvement in the writing of written narrative texts of students, with and without learning difficulties, after teaching the structural and linguistic elements of narrative that constitute the two levels of narrative, the macro- and micro-structure, respectively. 18 students of the third grade of a public primary school in Attica participated in the survey. Of the 18 students in the sample, 7 had a learning disorder or learning difficulties. The evaluation of the research subjects was conducted both before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the implementation of the educational intervention programme in order to determine its effectiveness. A variety of teaching methods and techniques and enriched multisensory materials were used to support the educational needs of all students. The evaluation of the produced narrative, initial and final, was based on the examination and co-evaluation of the structural and linguistic elements required for a coherently structured narrative. After the educational intervention, a comparison of pre-test and post-test results was conducted, which showed that all students, with and without learning difficulties, improved significantly in the production of narrative texts.

Keywords:

Narrative, macrostructure, microstructure, intervention, assessment.

Introduction

Narration is the presentation of one or a series of events in oral or written speech so that their causal relationship and their temporal development can be seen (Matsangouras, 2004; Parisis & Parisis, 2003). Narratives may refer to a fictional story or a personal experience (Westerveld, Gillon & Moran, 2008). Children's oral storytelling ability develops between the ages of 2-5 years (Stadler & Ward, 2005) and is part of their language development. It is associated with the assessment of language skills(Lever & Senechal, 2011), cognitive and emotional development (Riley & Burrell, 2007), communication skills (Spencer & Slocum, 2010) and is a predictor of later academic achievement, literacy, and reading mastery (Babayiğit, Roulstone& Wren, 2021; Brown, Garzarek& Donegan, 2014; Kendeou et al, 2008) and the production of written language (Hegsted, 2013).

Children's oral narrative ability at age 2 years is related to the reporting of an event, mainly a personal experience. At age 4 years, narratives may refer to more than 2 events but often without chronological order, while at age 5 years, chronological order is used but the narrative is interrupted, usually at the climax (Kanellou et. al., 2016). At age 5-6 years, children may produce complete stories, complete episodes, each of which includes the initial event, the action plan and the outcome of the action (Rali & Sidiropoulou, 2011). The development of cognitive processes, executive functions, skills of understanding the thoughts and feelings of others (theory of mind), speech and language contributes to the improvement of narrative skills (Jannsen et al., 2020). Narrative discourse can be seen as a bridge between spoken and written language (Hegsted, 2013). The cultivation of oral storytelling influences the development of skills in the production of written narrative texts (Gillam et al., 2023).

In the early 1970s, David Rumelhart first introduced the teaching of story grammar, which is the draft for the structure of narrative texts to enhance story comprehension (Bogaerds-Hazenberg, Evers-Vermeul& van den Bergh, 2021). An adaptation of Rumelhart's grammar also constitutes Stein & Glenn's (1979) scheme according to which each story consists of a setting and at least one episode. The setting introduces the main characters and describes the social, physical or social context of the story. The episode consists of the following structural elements: the initiating event (some random external event or action of the character that causes his reaction or change in his physiological state), the internal response (character's feelings, desires, thoughts), the internal plan (character's subgoals and knowledge of the situation), the attempt (character's actions), the direct consequence (achievement or non-achievement of the goal) and the reaction (character's feelings, thoughts or actions after the goal has been achieved).

The grammar of stories is also the basis of the model proposed by Thorndyke (1977) which includes context, theme, plot and resolution. Context refers to the characters, place and time; theme refers to the main goal of the main character; plot refers to the episodes, the action of the characters and the results of the action; and resolution refers to the achievement of the goal. In the work of Kintsch, Mandel and Kozminsky (1977), we distinguish, as elements of structural analysis, the main character of the story, minor characters and episodes, which are distinguished for their coherence, their internal structure that includes the triptych: goal, obstacle, overcoming obstacle. The goal or goals of the main character of the

story are the cause of his emotional reaction (Mar et al., 2021), while the organization of the story's time is done in a linear way (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007) and is defined as the sequence of events that succeed each other chronologically.

However, the organization, structure, story coherence, the use of story grammar, and content concern only one of the two levels of a narrative text, the macrostructure (Hall-Mills & Apel, 2015). The other level concerns the microstructure, which refers to the morphosyntax of the text, the use of appropriate conjunctions to highlight the causal relationship between the episodes and their temporal development (Heilmann et al, 2010), spelling (Kim et al., 2013), conventional writing style (Panteliadou&Patsiodimou, 2007), the number of words, the number of main clauses or main clauses with their dependent clauses, the number of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions (Justice et. al., 2006). These linguistic elements that give coherence to the text transform the events into a coherently structured narrative. Recognizing the value of both macrostructure and microstructure to more fully assess students' narrative skill, Jannsen et. al. (2020), Gillam et. al. (2017), Kanellou et. al. (2016), Tsimpli, Peristeri& Andreou (2016) have included elements of both levels in their measures.

Writing a narrative text requires cognitive skills such as knowledge of its structural elements, use of appropriate vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, ability to convey students' lived experiences and proper use of language (Samosa et al., 2021). Students usually struggle in producing narrative texts, both in the way of initiating writing and generating ideas (Al-Gharabally, 2015). Research evidence shows that the lack of systematic teaching of the macro- and micro-structure of narrative, such as the structural elements of narrative text, narrative language, and understanding of these elements, reduces the degree of effective production of narrative texts (Hall et al., 2021).

The teaching of narrative in primary education focuses on the identification of the basic structural elements of a narrative text and the production of written and spoken texts. The teacher can carry out a variety of educational interventions using a variety of techniques to help students develop narrative skills. Educational interventions may focus on retelling stories using children's books and pictures, while the technique of discussion, brainstorming, brainstorming, sharing ideas, writing ideas in the form of notes, using drafts and checklists to check the final draft effectively helps students to create their own narrative texts (Al-Gharabally, 2015).

Also, the use of teaching strategies contributes to the more effective acquisition of skills in the production of written narrative texts. The "Ask, Reflect, Text" strategy focuses on developing narrative text design skills helping even students with learning difficulties (Samosa, R. C et. al., 2021). Students ask themselves questions (Ask), "Where", "When", "Who", "What", "How" in order not to miss the main structural elements of the story, namely, the spatio-temporal context, the main character, the minor characters, the characters' emotions, their action. The students then reflect on their answers (Reflect) and create a visualized drawing, and in the final stage, based on this drawing, they produce the written text of the story (Text). This strategy is based on 6 steps: a) activation of students' prior knowledge and experiential experiences; b) learning the questions and key elements of the

strategy; c) implementation of the strategy to a selected topic; d) memorization of the strategy by recording its stages on the whiteboard; e) consolidating it; f) students' implementation of the strategy in producing written texts (Dunn et al, 2010).

The effectiveness of implementing intervention programmes in writing using various strategies has also been demonstrated for students with learning difficulties, as it enhances their language skills (Printezi& Polychronis, 2016; Rouse & Graham, 2014; Walker et al., 2006). Moreover, teaching that focuses on story structure improves the narrative ability of students with autism as well (Gillam & Gillam, 2016; Gillam et al., 2015;).

This research is a case study and focuses on systematic instruction of narrative genre in a third grade classroom. The aim of the instruction is to improve the ability to produce written narrative texts in students with and without learning difficulties, while its objectives are the understanding, identification and use of basic structural and linguistic elements using teaching techniques and strategies.

Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study are: a) Will teaching the elements of narrative at the level of macro- and micro-structure improve the narrative skills of all students? b) Will teaching the elements of narrative at the macro- and micro-structure levels help students with learning disabilities improve their narrative skills? (c) Is improving students' narrative skills related to gender?

Methodology

The present study was conducted using a pre-experimental design where participants were assessed using quantitative criteria before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the educational intervention. 18 third grade primary school students participated, of which 10 (55.6%) were boys and 8 (44.4%) were girls (Table 1). Of the subjects, 7 (38.9%) students (3 boys and 4 girls) had a learning disorder or learning difficulties. Specifically, one of the subjects was diagnosed with autism, one with ADHD and the rest with learning disabilities.

Table 1. Absolute frequencies and percentage of students in the sample by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Boys	10	55,6
Girls	8	44,4
Total	18	100,0

Students were assessed on their written narrative discourse before the intervention was implemented (pre-test) and after its completion (post-test), both at the level of macrostructure (structural elements of the narrative) and microstructure (linguistic elements).

The research evolved in three stages. In the first stage, participants were assessed in writing a story on a given topic. In the second stage, the intervention was implemented by focusing on teaching the structural and linguistic elements of narrative. In the third stage,

students were reassessed in producing written narrative text to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

The initial as well as the final evaluation - before and after the intervention, respectively - of the students' narrative texts was carried out in exactly the same way in terms of the elements to be examined, which are considered necessary for a complete story, using the same rating scale. The narrative stories were scored in terms of their use of the elements of (a) macrostructure and (b) microstructure.

The analysis of the macrostructure was based on the elements of Stein & Glenn's (1979) story grammar and the microstructure on the elements listed in Gillam et al., (2017)

A) Macrostructure: The macrostructure assessment focused on the following structural elements: 1) the setting, which refers to:the spatio-temporal context (STF), andthe main character(s)(MC) 2) the episode, which includes: a) the initiating event (IE), any change in the environment or in the character's psyche or state of mind that motivates him to action, b) the internal response (IR), the character's feelings and thoughts about the initiating event, c) the attempt (A), his actions to achieve the goal, e) the consequence (C), the result of his actions; and, f) the reaction (R), his feelings and/or thoughts after his goal is achieved.

B) Microstructure:The linguistic elements used in the microstructure analysis are: a) coordinating conjunctions (CC), b) subordinating conjunctions (SC), c) verbs indicating thought, feeling, action (VTFA), d) words/phrases denoting time, cause, result(WTCR) and e) verb tenses (VT).

The scores for each of the 7 items of the macrostructure and the 5 items of the microstructure ranged from 0 to 2 (Table 2). The highest scores for the macrostructure were 14 and 10 for the microstructure: a total of 24 points.

Table 2. Evaluation of the macro- and micro-structure

A. Macro-structure	0	1	2
1.Setting			
STF	Absence of STF	Reference to space or time	Reference to space and time
MC	Absence of MC	Vague reference to aMC	Clear reference to the MC
2.Episode			
IE	Absence of an IE	Reference to an IE without it being related to the action of the MC	The existence of an IE that motivates action
IR	Absence of reference to IR about the IE	Reference to IR not related to IE	Reference to feelings or thoughts clearly related to the IE
A	Absence of A by the character to achieve the goal	Action of the character without a clear connection to the initiating event	The action of the character is explicitly linked to the initiating event
C	Absence of reference to the result of the character's actions	Result of the character's actions not related to the initiating event	Result of the character's actions related to the initiating event
R	Absence of reference to the character's feelings and	Reference to feelings and thoughts not related to the consequence	Reference to feelings and thoughts aboutthe consequences

	thoughts after the achievement of the goal		
B.Micro-structure			
CC	Absence of CC	The existence of one or two different CC	The existence of more than two different coordinatingconjunctions
SC	Absence of SC	The existence of one or two different SC	The existence of more than two different subordinating conjunctions
VTFA	Absence of VTFA	The existence of one or two different VTFA	The existence of more than two different verbs indicating thought/feeling/action
WTCR	Absence of words/phrases denoting time/cause/result	The existence of one or two different words/phrases indicating time/cause/result	The existence of more than two different words/phrases denoting time/causes/results
VT	Incorrect use of verb tense	Partially correct use of verb tenses	Correct use of all verb tenses

Intervention program

After the initial assessment of the subjects, the intervention program of a total duration of 18 hours followed. The intervention was implemented in 3 phases, and six teaching hours were devoted to each of them, within the framework of the teaching subject of Language, utilizing also the narrative texts of the textbook, thus adding supportive/additive value to the study of narrative discourse.

In Phase 1, students were taught the elements of narrative with the help of outlines and playful activities and practiced identifying the elements of macro- and micro-structure in narrative texts through group and individual activities. Short stories were used, which were designed according to the grammar of the stories, as well as the texts and tasks in the Student's Book and Workbook.

The structural narrative elements were presented to the students in the form of interrogative words or phrases for better reception and understanding according to the "Ask, Reflect, Text" strategy. The questions asked were: When (time) / Where? (place) / Who? (character(s) / What is the event/problem? (initiating event) / What is the character thinking or feeling? (internal response) / What is he doing? (attempt) / How did the story end? (consequence) / How did the character feel? (reaction). Also, in line with the aforementioned strategy, these questions were coded using the initial letter of each of them for easier recall and to place them in the correct chronological order (3W (setting), 3W, 2H).

In addition, rhyming lyrics (Table 3) were devised as a mnemonic rule for the memorization of the macrostructure items and for placing them in the correct time order.

Then, they became familiar with the linguistic elements of the narrative by linking events in time and causally using the corresponding linking words/phrases and by placing the verbs in the appropriate time each time. The discussion, interaction and exchange of views helped in understanding the use of microstructural elements.

In Phase 2, through the "Ask, Reflect, Text" strategy, students learned to reflect on their answers (Reflect) and create a visualized drawing. They then used this drawing to produce their own written narrative stories (Text). They worked in pairs and completed unfinished stories by recalling the structural elements of the narrative and building on the drawing they had created. In addition, they produced narrative texts drawing on their personal experiences.

In Phase 3, participants worked in small groups and evaluated narrative texts that had missing narrative structures, which they identified and corrected. Finally, on an individual level, they produced their own narrative texts by checking their content and completeness with respect to the narrative elements that had been taught at the macro- and micro-structural level. The students presented some of their narrative stories in theatre performances.

During the educational intervention, modern educational techniques and methods were used, such as collaborative writing, new technologies (interactive whiteboard), interactive games (word games, games to complete an incomplete story), interdisciplinary approaches (pictorial depiction of their written texts, theatrical activities to present the story). The methods and techniques were chosen in relation to the needs of the pupils, taking into account the needs of those with learning disorders or difficulties in the context of inclusive education.

After the educational intervention, a comparison of the pre-test and post-test assessment results was carried out in order to answer the research questions.

Results

The table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, median and minimum/maximum values of the pre- and post-test scores of all students, students with and without learning disabilities, and boys and girls. Students were assessed on the macro-structure (structural elements of narrative) the micro-structure (linguistic elements) and the narrative text (macro- and micro-structure overall). According to the table, the mean scores of all overall students and all subgroups (students with and without difficulties, boys and girls) increased after the intervention and standard deviations decreased in the majority of cases. Only standard deviations increased for pupils with learning difficulties in microstructure and narrative text and for girls in microstructure. In the latter category, there was no increase in the narrative text as well, because the increase at the microstructure level was minimal.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, median, minimum/maximum values of scores on the pre- and post-test

Macrostructure		Microstructure		Narrative text (macro- and micro-structure)	
Pre-test	**Post-test**	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**
$\bar{\chi}$ sd	$\bar{\chi}$ sd	$\bar{\chi}$ sd	$\bar{\chi}$ sd	$\bar{\chi}$ sd	$\bar{\chi}$ sd
medium	**medium**	**medium**	**medium**	**medium**	**medium**
min max	**min max**	**min max**	**min max**	**min max**	**min max**

Pupils without L.D. **N=11**	12,82 2,86 14,00 7 16	15,18 1,60 16,00 12 16	6,82 1,94 7,00 4 10	8,73 1,35 9,00 7 10	19,64 4,46 21,00 12 26	23,91 2,74 25,00 19 26
Pupils with L.D. **N=7**	7,57 2,99 8,00 3 11	11,57 2,88 11,00 7 16	4,29 1,38 4,00 3 7	6,71 1,60 7,00 4 8	11,86 3,58 13,00 7 16	18,29 3,90 19,00 11 24
Boys **N=10**	10.10 3,70 9,5 4 16	13,90 2,59 15,5 10 16	5,70 2,06 5.00 3 10	8,00 1,16 8,00 7 10	15,80 5,53 15,00 7 26	21,90 3,38 23,00 17 26
Girls **N=8**	11,63 4,14 11,5 3 16	13,63 3,20 15,00 7 16	6.00 2,33 6,00 3 10	7,88 2,36 8,50 4 10	17,63 5,90 18,5 7 26	21,50 5,32 21,50 11 26
Total Pupils **N=18**	10,78 3,85 11.00 3 16	13,78 2,77 15,00 7 16	5,83 2,12 5,50 3 10	7,94 1,73 8.00 4 10	16,61 5,60 16.00 7 26	21,72 4,21 23,00 11 26

The statistical criteria chosen in the statistical analysis were non-parametric, as the control of quantitative variables did not follow the normal distribution.The statistical analysis of the performance of all students in the pre-test and post-test in terms of macrostructure (Spearman, r=0.549, p value=0.018<0.05) and microstructure (Spearman r=0.574, p value=0.013<0.05) showed that there is a positive correlation between the two variables. Therefore, an increase in students' performance in each of the two levels of narrative in the pre-test implies an increase in their performance in the post-test.

The comparison of the performance of the two groups, students with and without learning difficulties, before and after the intervention, was done using the Mann Whitney statistical criterion. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in macrostructure, microstructure and overall narrative text production between the two groups at both the pre- and post-test (Table 4). However, as shown in Table 3, students without L.D. performed better.

Table 4. Statistical analysis of the performance of students with and without learning disabilities on macrostructure, microstructure and narrative text

	Performance of pupils with and without L.D.	U	p-value
Pre-test	Macrostructure	7,5	0,005*
	Microstructure	10	0,009*
	Narrative text	7	0,004*
Post-test	Macrostructure	10	0,006*
	Microstructure	15	0,028*
	Narrative text	8	0,005*

However, a statistically significant difference was also observed between students in the individual groups (without L.D. /with L.D.) and among all students (Table 5). The statistical analysis of their initial (pre-test) and final (post-test) performance on the produced narrative

text, as well as on the two levels of narrative separately, performed with the Wilcoxon statistical criterion, showed that, with the exception of the students with L.D. at the macrostructure level, in all other parameters, there was a statistically significant difference.

Table 5. Statistical analysis of the performance of students with and without learning disabilities on the pre- and post-test in terms of macrostructure, microstructure and narrative text

Test	Pre- and post-test performance	z	p-value
Students without L.D.	Macrostructure	-2,692	0,012*
	Microstructure	-2,508	0.007*
	Narrative text	-2,539	0,011*
Studentswith L.D.	Macrostructure	-1,612	0,157
	Microstructure	-2,041	0.041*
	Narrative text	-1,947	0,050*
	Macrostructure	-2,959	,003*
Total number of students	Microstructure	-3,234	,001*
	Narrative text	-3,100	,002*

The test of the effect of gender on the improvement of narrative skills in the pre-test and post-test at the level of macrostructure, microstructure and the narrative text as a whole was performed with the Mann Whitney statistical criterion (Table 6). Boys' performance is statistically significant in all parameters, while girls' performance is statistically significant at the microstructure level. Therefore, boys' performance improved significantly after the intervention, while in girls the improvement was significant only at the microstructure level.

Table 6. Statistical analysis of students' performance on the Pre-test Post-test by gender

	Evaluation of the pre- and post-test	U	p-value
Boys	Macrostructure	-2,689	,007*
	Microstructure	-2,536	,011*
	Narrative text	-2,670	,008
Girls	Macrostructure	-1,543	,123
	Microstructure	-2,020	,043*
	Narrative text	-1,782	,075

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to improve students' written narrative skills through the implementation of an educational intervention program. This intervention utilized multisensory methods, techniques and teaching strategies to assist all students in consolidating narrative elements. The research questions that were posed were answered through the analysis of the results. Teaching the structural elements (macrostructure) and linguistic elements (microstructure) of the story contributes to the enhancement of the written narrative discourse of students with and without learning disabilities. However, students with learning difficulties at the macrostructure level did not show significant improvement. Presumably, these students need more time to consolidate the structural elements of the narrative so that they can recall and apply them in writing.

Furthermore, unlike the boys who showed improvement in narrative production overall and at each of the two levels, the girls improved significantly only at the microstructure level. This may be due to the fact that 50% of the sampled girls had learning difficulties.

The results of the study are consistent with relevant findings of other research, which report that focusing on story structure improves the narrative skills of students, as well as students with learning disabilities (Printezi& Polychronis, 2016; Rouse & Graham, 2014; Walker et al., 2006;) and autism (Gillam & Gillam, 2016; Gillam et al., 2015).

The conclusions of our study cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. Further research with a larger sample will help to generalize the results. Future research can focus on developing writing production skills in other genres, such as description and argumentation, in order for students to improve their skills in these genres of writing as well.

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