

HOW GENDER RELATE TO NARRATIVE SKILLS

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to compare the narrative skills of female and male first grade elementary students. In order to achieve this aim, the present study focuses on narratives produced by female and male students using Mercer Mayer's (1969) wordless picture-book "Frog, where are you?". This study compares those narratives with special attention to how emergence of story structure, the narrative length and inclusion of evaluative devices differ depending on their gender in their orally collected narratives. Participants are 32 female first grade elementary students and 24 male first grade elementary students. The results of the study indicate no differences between narratives of female and male students.

Keywords: Story grammar, early childhood education, evaluative device

INTRODUCTION

A narrative is any verbal description of a past experience or an event (Umiker-Sebeok, 1976). The ability to narrate develops during the early childhood years. It is both a cognitive and a social process. That is; beginning from the second year of life, children not only begin to create narratives, but also express and communicate them (Perroni, 1993; Peterson and McCabe, 1994). They organize their experiences in the form of narratives in order to give meaning to events, make predictions about how situations will evolve, and guide their actions (Salvatore, Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004).

Narratives enable us to access people's identity and personality because verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their

experiences are essential components of learning the inner world of people (McAdams, 1996). A story is told, created, revised and retold throughout life and it becomes one's identity. Stories are not only a rehearsal of life and a reflection of an inner reality to the outside world, but they shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality. Through the stories we tell, we familiarize, explore and express ourselves to others (Lieblich, et al, 1998). Narratives are used in order to interpret a set of phenomena by referring to a set of rules such as structures, scripts, frames, or metaphors. In some way, narratives encapsulate generalized knowledge in that it links the unknown to the known. Viewed this way, narratives are both models of the world and models of the self. In other words, we ourselves construct a part of our world through our stories (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997). Therefore, narratives, as a research topic, have attracted growing attention by different disciplines including religion, history, literature, ethnography, cognitive science, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, psychology, and theology (Quasthoff, 1997).

It is generally acknowledged that children's narrative skills emerge in social interaction with adults because children grow up with conversational narratives told around them by adults and older children all the time (Quasthoff, 1997; Kyratzis, 2005; Standler & Ward, 2005). Nevertheless, parents' conversation with their children is found to be affected by gender of children (Alexander, Harkins & Michel, 1993). Not only parents, but also teachers interact with children on the bases of gender stereotypes (Sugavara, Burt & Ruder, 2000). As a result, girls outperform boys in language development (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). These differential interaction may create difference between narrative skills of girls and boys since acquisition of narrative skills is also a form of language development (Alexander et al, 1993). However, although there has been extensive research on narratives and narrative development, there is little information on gender differences on narrative development.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the differences and similarities in the narrative development of female and male first grade elementary students by focusing

on how emergence of a story structure, narrative length and evaluative devices differ relative to their gender. Independent Sample T-test was conducted to compare the story length produced by female and male students. Chi-square test was used to examine if there were any differences between the story grammar components used by female and male students. Mann Whitney U Test was used to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of the types of evaluative devices that they integrated into their oral narratives.

METHOD

2.1. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 32 female first grade elementary students and 24 male first grade elementary students. All of the students have no known or suspected sensory, intellectual, speech, language, hearing or learning disorders and coming from middle and high socio-economic status.

2.2. Data Collection Material

In this study Mercer Mayer's (1969) wordless book, *Frog Where Are You?*, was used in the data collection process owing to its popularity. Almost 150 different researchers studying 50 different languages referred this book in their studies (Berman & Slobin, 1994 cited in Hoff-Ginsberg, 1997a); there is also a term "frog-story" in literature (Serratrice, 2006). In order to, provide a comparable story-telling experience for all children, Mercer Mayer's wordless picture book was used as a stimulus. The main protagonists of the story are a boy, a dog, and a frog. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were asked whether they would like to participate even if their parents' consent is obtained. The participants who did not want to tell a story were omitted from the study. The data were collected in the library of the school since children needed silence and comfort to narrate the story and the library fulfilled this need. Before narrating the story, each children was

allowed to investigate the whole book “Frog where are you?”. Children did not receive any probing questions during the story telling task. The researcher avoided directing the children’s narrative.

2.3. Framework for Data Analysis

Focusing on this framework, the independent variable is gender, and the dependent variables are narrative length, narrative structure and evaluative devices that students integrate into their narratives.

2.3.1. Story Grammar, Length and Evaluative Devices Analyses

Narrative length: Stories told by children were separated into clauses and narrative length was measured by counting the number of clauses included in the stories. Because the study was based on Labov’s (1972) story grammar, his definition of clause was used while dividing each narrative into clauses. Labov (1972) defined clause as an expression combining at least one stated subject and a verb. This definition of clause is also applicable to Turkish. For example, the sentence “When the boy woke up, he could not see the frog in the jar” is divided as (Özcan, 2004 p.30):

When the boy woke up
He could not see the frog in the jar

As the next step, independent-sample t-test was conducted to measure if there was a difference between female and male students in terms of their use of clause.

Narrative structure: After separated into main and subordinate clauses, the stories were exposed to a story grammar analysis using Labov’s (1972) story grammar models. Every utterance was considered if it met the criteria of the six story grammar elements described by Labov (1972). Story grammar elements and their components were represented both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Labov (1972) identified story grammar elements which are identified as characteristics of well-developed narrative by previous studies:

Abstract: Labov (1972) stated that summarizing the whole story with one or two clauses is common for narrators. When listener hears the abstract, he is able to recapitulate the point of the story. In actual fact, it gives information about what is to come for listeners. A speech act seeking permission to narrate can be taken by the occurrence of an abstract within an ongoing dialogue (Romaine, 1985 cited in McCabe & Peterson, 1991).

Example:

(An answer to one of the researcher's questions)

I talked a man out of Old Doc Simon I talked him out of pulling the trigger.

Orientation: Orientation is essential to identify the time, place, persons or their activity or the situation (Labov, 1972). That is, it provides contextual embedding for the listener. In this part, the narrator wanders from the events of the narrative in order to describe character and motivation and inform the listeners about whom the participants were, where and when the events occurred to describe character and motivation (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Moreover, the narrator constructs the setting to introduce characters and some initial events which will take place before the acts begin (Özcan, 2004).

Complicating action: Complicating action is an indispensable component of a narrative. It is comprised of the chronologically described events which occurred prior to the highpoint of the narrative. As Labov (1972) maintained, minimal requirements of narrative incorporate at least two temporally ordered events, which are complicating actions and they must be included if any written or spoken presentation is to be defined as a narrative (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). In other words, a complicating action consists of series of some episodes conducted to solve the main problem.

Evaluation: Evaluation indicates the point of narrative, why it is told and what the narrator is getting at. In other words, clauses describe the narrator's point of view.

Resolution: Solution of the complicating action.

Coda: Free clauses to be found at the ends of narratives, which signals that the narrative is finished.

Evaluative devices: 9 subtypes of evaluative devices were classified by Peterson & McCabe (1983) and adapted by Kang (2003). Evaluation coding was designed to capture types of evaluative devices that occurred in the narratives. Mann Whitney U test was conducted to investigate the differences in two groups with regard to the types of evaluative devices the students integrated into their narratives. The children revealed their feelings and attitudes toward the stories they told through the following evaluative devices:

- Expressions of emotions ("The boy is angry ")
- Mental state of the characters (i.e., expressions of cognitions or character intentions, such as "The child thought that . . . ", "They decided to . . .", etc.)
- Intensifiers ("He was very angry")
- Expressions of defeat of expectation/Negatives ("but there was no answer ")
- Repetitions ("He looked again and again ")
- Hedges ("He was kind of curious ")
- Direct and indirect reported speech ("Where are you, frog?", "He asked the ground hog if he saw the frog")
- Character delineation ("the little boy")
- Adverbs (" . . . searching frantically for his frog . . . ")

Nonverbal signals involving facial expression, intonation pattern, gesture and postural adjustment are one aspect of the evaluative devices; however, these kinds of evaluative devices are not under the scope of present study.

2.3.2. Transcription

The stories told by children are transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the narrative grammar in this study is based on Labov's (1972) description of a story and orally collected data was transcribed according to his transcription technique which divides

each narrative into clauses. To ensure that the transcription is accurate and reliable, the researcher transcribed all of the 56 stories and asked another transcriber to transcribe 20% of the data once more and transcriber reliability was .99%. Eleven randomly selected narratives, which included almost 20% of the total data, were also coded by two research assistants from different disciplines as well as the researcher to measure the reliability of the coding procedure. . The agreement level between the coders ranged from 80% to 82%. The inter coder reliability for story grammar ranged from .72 to .77. In addition, the Pearson value for total number of evaluative devices and their types ranged from .88 to .82.

RESULTS

3.1. Narrative Length

The independent-sample t-test was conducted to investigate the narrative length produced female and male participants. The independent variable was the gender and the dependent variable was the total number of the clauses produced by the two groups.

Table 3.1 Mean scores and standard deviations of the total number of the clauses, comparing female and male participants.

	female (N=32)	Male (N=24)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean difference
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)				
Clause	57.72 (18.09)	61.88 (19.98)	-.898	54	.374	-4.65

Table 3.1 lists the means and standard deviations of the number of the clauses used in the narratives of female and the narratives of male. Table 3.1 also provides the t-test results for the narrative length, which indicates that there are no differences between the narratives of female and the narratives of male at a $\alpha=0.05$ level, $t(54)=-.898$ $p=.37$. On average, female produced 57.7 clauses in their narratives, whereas male produced 61.8 clauses in their narratives.

3.2. Story Structure

To test whether the production of female and male on the story grammar elements were significantly different for each story unit Chi-square test was conducted. The results of this test were given on Table 3.2.

Table 3. 2 Chi-square test statistics for the Orientation, Complicating Action (CA), and Resolution on educational background

Story Grammar Units	Female (N=32)	Male (N=24)	X2 (1)
Orientation	25	21	.307
CA	31	21	.679
Resolution	30	20	.657
Coda	25	21	.307

The results of the Chi-square test was not significant, $\chi^2 (1, N=56) = .307$, $p=.58$ for the Orientation, $\chi^2 (1, N=56) = .307$ $p=.58$ for the Coda, and was significant $\chi^2 (1, N=56) = .679$, $p=.41$ for the Resolution, $\chi^2 (1, N=56) = .657$, $p=.41$. Therefore, the Chi-square test results suggested that gender made no statistically significant difference to produced Orientation and Coda; however, made statistically significant difference to produce CA and Resolution.

3.3. Evaluative Devices

As stated earlier, producing a narrative requires complex linguistic and social-emotional knowledge and skills. Generally, a good narrative contains both information about characters and events and subjective information, such as the character's feelings towards the events, which makes the story more attractive to readers. Therefore, the analysis of narratives provides a rich context for exploring the nature of both linguistic and social-emotional abilities in children's language development (Reilly et al, 2003). Narrative element draws upon general event representation and knowledge of story structure, whereas the evaluative devices require the child to formulate an inference about specific events. Evaluation informs the audience about the actions of protagonists in the story why events occurred, and what happens through reference to feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Eaton et al, 1999). This can be explained in the protocol 3.3.1 below:

P-3.3.1

- a) köpekte kavanoza kafasını koymuş
The dog put his hand on jar
- b) onu koklamaya başlamış
He started to smell it
- c) kokusundan bulmak için
To find from its smell

In the protocol 3.3.1, the participant explained the intention of dog. Also, she made use of her previous knowledge about the dog in the narratives. In this sense, examining the inclusion of evaluation deserves importance. The following tables show the differences in the outcomes of the types of evaluation between female, as opposed to male students.

Table 3.3 The Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test Comparing the use of evaluative devices while narrating scores of female and male.

Mann-Whitney U Test							
	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Emotion	Female	32	30.20	966.50	329.000	-.92	.35
	Male	24	26.23	929.50			
Mental State	Female	32	28.42	909.50	381.5	-.04	.96
	Male	24	24.25	679.00			
Reported Speech	Female	32	26.42	845.50	317.500	-1.12	.26
	Male	24	31.27	750.50			
Hedges	Female	32	28.50	798.00	392.000	.000	1.000
	Male	24	28.50	798.00			
Expectation	Female	32	29.08	930.50	365.500	-.34	.72
	Male	24	27.73	665.50			
Repetition	Female	32	29.72	951.00	345.000	-.77	.43
	Male	24	26.88	645.00			
Character Delineation	Female	32	28.98	927.50	368.500	-.29	.77
	Male	24	27.85	608.50			
Adverbs	Female	32	29.77	952.50	343.500	-.70	.48
	Male	24	26.81	643.50			
Intensifiers	Female	32	29.33	938.50	357.5	-.76	.44
	Male	24	25.96	727.00			

The results of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed no significant difference between the use of evaluative devices while narrating scores of the female and male $z = -.92, p = .35$; for expressions of emotions; $z = -1.12, p = .26$; for direct and indirect

reported speech; $z = .000$, $p = 1.000$; for hedges; $z = -.77$, $p = .43$; for repetition; $z = -.04$, $p = .96$ for mental state of the character; $z = -.34$, $p = .72$ for expression of defeat of expectation; $z = -.29$, $p = .77$ for character delineation; $z = -.70$, $p = .48$ for adverbs; $z = -.76$, $p = .44$ for intensifiers on table 4.3.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate no differences between two groups. Although, the length of participants' narratives is commonly used to measure the language development of young children, it is not always a sensitive indicator of the developmental changes in children's narrative abilities (Muiloz, Gillam, Peña & Gulley-Faehnle, 2003). Therefore, there is a need for more reliable measure such as story grammar (setting, problems, and resolution) and evaluative devices indicating narrator's feelings about the characters and events (Labov, 1972). However, the present study does not reveal difference between female and male students in terms of structural organization and evaluative elements. These results are consistent with another study that did not find a relationship between students' gender and narrative skills. Language acquisition occurs universally in human species (Chapman, 2000). Therefore, young children acquire a particular grammatical structure in a predictable order, which is common among all children learning the same language (Gleason, 2005). This is similar for narrative development since story structure also occurs universally (Kocabaş, 2002). The reason for the similarity between these two groups is the developmental level of participants since the construction of a narrative requires a strong command of organizational skills. According to the Piagetian perspective, the production of goal oriented stories that are organized around a plotline starts at age 7 and develops during the stage of concrete operations, which covers the ages from 7 to 11. Therefore, at the age of 7, defined as the age of 'connections' by Piaget, is a turning point in narrative development (Kessen, 1983). Similarly, Ozcan (2004) emphasizes that age 7 is a turning point to produce a well-formed narrative.

Because of the pivotal role of narratives for predicting later literacy and academic achievement, teachers should know whether children require different teaching strategies and motivation to produce well-formed narratives in respect to their gender. In conclusion, although the sample size used in this study may be small, the results of this study may support that gender does not affect narrative skills of young children.

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