

An Exploratory Study on Young Children's Spoken and Written Narratives of Personal Experience

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Abstract

This study investigated how young children respond when asked to create spoken and written narratives. To examine aspects of 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives about their personal experiences, the level of narrative, developmental stage of writing, and use of cohesive devices were analyzed. The results showed two relationships between the spoken and written narratives. For some children, the same level was found for both spoken and written narratives. But for other children, levels of spoken and written narratives differed. There were more children with a higher level of written narrative compared to spoken narrative than children with a lower level of written narrative compared to spoken narrative. Further analysis of the correlations between the level of written narratives and developmental stage of writing showed statistical significance. Therefore, the result of this study suggests that a child's developmental stage of writing could affect the level of 5-year-olds' written narratives. Second, there were significant differences in 5-year-olds' usage of cohesive devices when relating their personal experiences in their spoken and written narratives. The sum of conjunction and anaphoric references (i.e., cohesive devices) was higher in spoken narrative expressions than in written narrative expressions. In spoken narrative, children expressed de-contextualized language with cohesive devices to give additional explanation, considering the listener who had no knowledge of the event the child was relating. Further research about this aspect is proposed.

Keywords : narratives on personal experience, spoken narrative, written narrative, cohesive narrative

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Introduction

Young children express their experiences and feelings to others through language. Narrative ability (i.e., ability to produce accounts of events) is an integral part of pragmatic skills. One way to understand the fundamental nature of narratives is to consider the nature of human memory (Gee, 1991). “In producing a personal narrative, the narrator draws primarily on a memory of a single episode, although more general information can be included as background material” (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991, p.91.). In addition to using narrative language for communication, it also “provides a foundation for school achievement” (Huttunen & Ryder, 2012, p.823).

To express personal narratives, narrative skills are required. These include organizing multiple sentences, both thematically and sequentially, and including evaluative information that makes the narrative comprehensible to listeners who did not share the related experiences (Lee, Lee, & Schickedanz, 2011). Asking children to relate personal narratives is an important tool for facilitating children’s development of story-construction, their memory of experiences, and the use of de-contextualized language.

According to Peterson and McCabe (1983), European American children progress from using less developed narrative forms at age 4 to more developed forms of “end of high point” and classic from ages 5 to 9 years. The study of Nielsen and Friesen (2012) showed that the children who had rich language experiences at home and preschool had higher scores on measures of the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge and facility with de-contextualized language. Depending on young children’s use of decontextualized language, their narrative expression can be diversified in content and structure.

Some researchers have found a correlation between narrative skills measured at age 5 and the quality of children’s written narratives at age 8 (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004). In research by Griffin et al. (2004), “children’s skill at imposing a plot structure ... and plot elaboration on their play narrative at age 5” was positively associated with 8-year-old performance on the written narrative task (p.135). Creating a narrative requires a child to produce a de-contextualized description of events (Currenton & Lucas, 2007). “By age 4, children should be using their grammatical prowess to generate narratives that connect sentences in story lines.” (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, Newcombe, & Devilliers, 2005, p.6). Both

writing (Kalvaitis & Monhardt, 2012) and picture drawing (Berninger, Nagy, & Beers, 2011) are often used by young children to express their personal narratives.

The style and use of words in spoken language differ from written language (Lee, 2010). In spoken language, facial expression, gestures, and intonation help convey meaning. For spoken narratives, children are engaged in face-to-face verbal discourse in monologic pattern, and the message is transient and cannot be reviewed. On the other hand, writing has a permanence which, unless destroyed, can be reviewed (Sulzby, 1986). Moreover, the sentence structure of written language is more precise than the structure of spoken language. Suddarth, Plante and Vance (2012) stated that written language is particularly challenging because it requires integration of all aspects of language. Moreover, written language, as a modality, is more difficult to master than oral language. That is, written language requires a higher level of thinking than oral expression.

Levy (2003) used 'coherence' to refer to a description of events that has a 'systematic connectedness' and is governed by logical principles. Cohesion describes the linguistic relationships between those clauses, that is, how the surface linguistic elements of a text are linked to each other in order to create a cohesive whole (Peterson & McCabe, 1991, p.30). For the production of well formed narratives, use of connectives is obligatory. Sentential connectives facilitate semantic coherence (Peterson & McCabe, 1988). According to Peterson and McCabe (1991), connectives that frequently occur in narratives are 'then (temporal marker)', 'because' and 'so' (causal relationship), 'but (adversive)', 'and (coordinating)', etc. "The strength of a narrator's presence in a narrative could be considered as a variable that affects narrative's coherence" (Hargood, Millard, & Weal, 2011, p.2). Peterson (1986) suggested that there are significant improvements between 3 and 9 years of age in the correct use of adversative conjunctions, such as but.

In the process of written narratives, young children's use of cohesive devices might differ depending on their handwriting level, because correct spelling and handwriting skills, rather than the expression of ideas, are emphasized (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Specifically, skill in using cohesive devices in the emergent literacy stage might have some effect on children's written narratives, given that "transcription involves the sub-word level (handwriting) and word level (spelling) of written language, whereas syntax is a level of language that provides structure for organizing multiple words" (Berninger, Nagy, & Beers, 2011, p.152).

According to previous studies of personal narratives, using self-created drawings and written narratives about nature, it appears that some children just focused on one meaningful experience they had, or would have liked to have, in nature even in the drawing situation (Kalvaitis & Monhardt, 2012). Scott and Windsor (2000) measured general language performance in spoken and written narrative and expository discourses of school-age children with language learning disabilities and found that written summaries were shorter and had more errors than spoken language. Scott and Winsor suggested that language performance in naturalistic context can be measured by fluency, lexical diversity, and grammatical complexity and accuracy. Some other studies suggested using spoken narratives of personal experiences for the measurement of children's language development and the effects of activities befitting young children's personal narrative development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2005; Reese, Haden, Baker-Ward, Bauer, Fivush, & Ornstein, 2011). Children's language performance can be affected whether language is spoken or written. But, there are few studies to compare the aspects between spoken narratives and written narratives, and differences about coherence between spoken narratives and written narratives.

This study examined how young children responded to the request to create spoken or written narratives. Specifically, the purposes of this study were to:

- 1) Examine the development and aspects of 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives about their personal experiences.
- 2) Examine the relation between level of written narratives and developmental stage of writing.
- 3) Examine cohesive devices used by 5-year-olds' in spoken and written narratives.

Methods

Participants

The children participating in this study were 22 Korean 5-year-olds attending two private kindergartens in the Seoul area. Both kindergartens used a curriculum based on constructivism.

Procedure

Children's personal narratives were collected through two individual interviews conducted during the 2012 fall semester. The two interviews were separated by one week. Since children's talking about their past experiences differs depending on whether they are reminiscing and recounting, the interviewer didn't give any cue to the children (Reese & Brown, 2000). For collecting each child's spoken narrative of personal experience, the interviewer interacted with the individual child in the separate room of the kindergarten by asking, "What did you do yesterday after kindergarten? Can you tell me about it?" After the

Table 1. *Definitions of Narrative Levels.*

Level	Definition
Level 1. No structure	Narratives about something other than personal experience.
Level 2. One-event narratives	Narratives involving a single event.
Level 3. Two-or three event Narratives	Narratives involving two(or three) proposition about an event or the recounting of two(or three)events.
Level 4. Leapfrog narratives	Narratives containing more than two or three events that are linked in a jumbled order without a clear sequence.
Level 5. Sequential event narratives without either a high point or an ending	Events are linked in a chronological fashion, but there is no high point or coda.
Level 6. Sequential event narratives without a high point but with an ending	Same as Level 5 but with a coda.
Level 7. End-at-the-high-point Narratives	Narratives that are sequenced in a timely order and that have a high point but do not provide any resolution.
Level 8. Classic narratives	Narratives beginning with an abstract that is a succinct statement of what the narrative is about. The series of events are related, culminating in a high point of some type. Resolution, evaluation, and a coda are also included in these narratives.

child expressed his/her personal experience in spoken narrative, the interviewer asked, “Is there anything more you want to tell?” The process was audio-taped and later transcribed. The time required to express spoken narratives of personal experience ranged from 40 seconds to 7 minutes and 15 seconds.

In collecting each child’s written narrative, the researcher interacted with the child first by asking, “What did you do yesterday after kindergarten? Can you write it down on this paper?” Then, the researcher allowed the child to write about the personal narrative. The child was given enough time to tell or write the narrative. When a child had finished writing, the interviewer asked, “Is there anything more you want to write?” The characteristics of the child’s responses for writing are described in detail. The time required to express written narratives of personal experience ranged from 2 minutes and 23 seconds to 10 minutes and 15 seconds.

Each transcribed narrative was analyzed by two people who judged their level and the cohesive devices used. In order to compare the children’s spoken and written narrative levels, McCabe and Peterson’s high point analysis was used (Lai, Lee, & Lee, 2010; McCabe, 1997; Peterson & McCabe, 1983) (See Table 1).

The definitions for each level (Lai, Lee, & Lee, 2010) are as follows.

In order to examine the correlation between the children’s level of written narratives and their developmental stages of writing, the written narrative levels by McCabe and Peterson (1997) and the developmental stages of writing suggested by Lee (2010) were used. The Developmental Stages of Writing Scale (Lee, 2010) has 6 stages. For this study, the 5th and 6th stages were divided into sub-stages, considering the age of subjects in this study.

- 5th stage: Word writing stage
 - 5-1 stage: word writing with partly wrong letters
 - 5-2 stage: complete word writing
- 6th stage: Sentence writing stage
 - 6-1 stage: trying to write sentences
 - 6-2 stage: writing sentences with partly wrong words
 - 6-3 stage: complete sentence writing

To examine the cohesive devices in 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives, two types of cohesive devices used by John-Steiner and Panofsky (1987), and Hudson and Shapiro (1991) were coded. In this study, cohesive devices could be identified as tools to create logical coherence of linguistic elements in narratives by using conjunctions and anaphoric reference. "Conjunctions were broken down into 4 types: (a) simple conjunction (and), (b) temporal conjunction (then, and then, next, first, before, after), and (c) adversative (but, except, sometimes, usually, always, or, though) and (d) causal conjunction (because, so, if). Anaphoric reference included using pronouns for previously specified objects (it), definite reference (the cake, that girl) referring to previously specified information, and various anaphoric expressions, such as the other, another, more, both, and there" (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991, p.110).

Data Analysis

For the aspects of 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives about their personal experiences, researchers used the SPSS 17.0 program for descriptive analysis and correlations. To analyze the differences in the cohesive devices used by 5-year-olds in their spoken and written narratives, researchers used the t-test. The inter-rater reliability agreement ratio was 90.0% for narrative level, 95.5% for children's writing stage, and 90.0% for cohesive devices.

Results

Relations between the Levels of Spoken and Written Narratives

The results from examining aspects by the level of children's spoken and written narratives about their personal experiences show the percentage of children corresponding to each aspect as Table 2.

Table 2 shows 2 types of aspects. One type shows the same level between spoken and written narratives ($N=7$, 33.3 %); another type shows different levels between the level of spoken and written narratives ($N=14$, 66.6%).

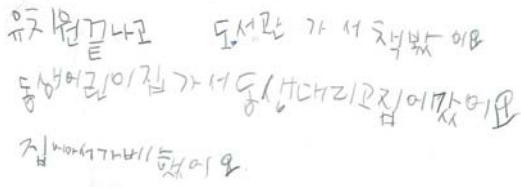
Table 2. *The Percentage of Children Correspond to Aspects Sorted by their Level of Spoken and Written Narratives.* Total N=21

Spoken Narrative Level	Written narrative level			
	Level 3 n(%)	Level 4 n(%)	Level 5 n(%)	Level 6 n(%)
Level 3	2(9.52%)	1(4.76%)	3(14.3%)	
Level 4	1(4.76%)	2(9.52%)	2(9.52%)	
Level 5		1(4.76%)	1(4.76%)	3(14.33%)
Level 6			1(4.76%)	2(9.52%)
Level 7		2(9.09%)		

In the case of difference between the level of spoken and written narratives, 9 children's level of written narrative (42.9%) was higher than their level of spoken narrative. Five children's level of written narrative (23.8%) was lower than their level of spoken narrative.

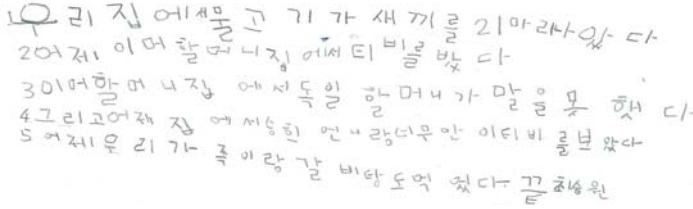
Examples are used to illustrate (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. *Example of a Child's Narratives with Higher Level of Written Narrative and Low Level of Spoken Narrative.*

Transcription of spoken narrative	C: Went to grandmother house. Saw TV... played. I can't think of anything more.
Transcription of written narrative	 After kindergarten class is over, went to the library, read a book. Went to brother's child-care center, took my younger brother, went home. Went to home, ...Played GABE.

In the example in Table 3, a 5-year-old girl's level of written narrative was 6, while the level of her spoken narrative was 3.

Table 4. *Example of a Child's Narratives with Lower Level of Written Narrative and High Level of Spoken Narrative.*

Transcription Of Spoken Narrative	C: Went to swimming pool for play. And on a couple of days ago, went to swimming pool for learn to swim. And yesterday, saw cousin. Saw cousin, went to zoo. And went to children's park. With aunt from America bought something in mart. Saw a book also in there. Saw the horrible movie. And Seung-hee, my sister went nearby. Sitting in the cart. And my sister, stayed continuously in mart. Sister want to buy something. Pushed cart, Missed mom, aunt, grandmother But meet again. As soon as evening comes, I started sleep. Sister...., I slept continuously and didn't wake up. I didn't get off car. Continuously I was in the car continuously. And then, Mother woke me up. I didn't wake up. With one more noisy sounds, I woke up. So met old friends. When went to old friends of child care center... Seung-hee my sister didn't meet my friends. She didn't come to mom. lolly. So, Seung-hee, my sister annoyed mom. She told me to down from the cart. She wanted to go first. She had everything in cart that hope to buy. Didn't pay and proceeded to go. Secretly. So, Mom scolded her. Next, can't think further.
Transcription Of written narrative	1. In my house, the fish bring forth twenty-one young fish. 2. Yesterday, in great aunt's house, (I) saw the TV. 3. In great aunt's house, grandmother from Germany couldn't say. 4. A nd yesterday at home, with sister Seoung-Hee, saw TV too much. 5. Yesterday with our family, (I) ate galbitang (beef rib soup). The end. 

In the example provided in Table 4, another 5-year-old girl showed the notable feature of writing the number for distinguishing each event in order. But she took much time in writing and showed the power of concentration in the writing itself. She was less fluent in expressing her personal experience by writing than by speaking because of her relatively low developmental stage of writing.

The results from examining the percentage of children whose level of written narrative corresponded to each developmental stage of writing are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. *The percentage of children by level of written narrative and developmental stage of writing.*

Total N=21

The Developmental stage of writing	Written narrative level			
	Level 3 n(%)	Level 4 n(%)	Level 5 n(%)	Level 6 n(%)
5-1 Stage	1(4.76 %)			
5-2 Stage				
6-1 Stage	1(4.76 %)	1(4.76%)	1(4.76%)	1(4.76 %)
6-2 Stage	1(4.76 %)	3(14.29%)	5(23.81%)	5(23.81%)
6-3 Stage			1(4.76 %)	1(4.76 %)

Table 5 shows that all children, except one, participating in this study were in the sentence writing stage. Among 21 children participating, 14 children's (66.67%) writing stage was 6-2 (writing sentences with partly wrong words). The number (percentage) of children who are in the stage of writing sentences with partly wrong and level 5 and level 6 of written narratives was 5 (23.81%) each. Fourteen children had written narrative levels at 5 and 6 (66.67%). Two children at writing stage 6-3 (complete sentence writing stage) had written narratives at level 5 and level 6.

Further analysis of the correlation between the level of written narrative and the developmental stage of writing were statistically significant ($r=.469$, $p<.05$).

Comparison of Cohesive Devices Used in Spoken and Written Narratives

Cohesive devices in the level of spoken and written personal experience narratives were compared. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 shows the T-test results for cohesive devices used between spoken and written narratives. The sum of conjunctions in the spoken narratives ($M=4.05$, $SD=4.25$) was significantly higher than found in the written narratives ($M(SD)=.59(1.01)$, $t=3.79$), and the sum of anaphoric references in the spoken narratives ($M=1.50$, $SD=2.02$) was significantly higher than in the written narratives ($M(SD)=2.27(.70)$, $t=2.69$). As a result, the sum of the use of conjunction and anaphoric devices to achieve cohesion was higher for spoken narratives than for written narratives.

Table 6. *T-test of Cohesive Devices used between Spoken and Written Narratives.*

Cohesive device	<i>N</i>	Spoken narratives <i>M(SD)</i>	Written narratives <i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Conjunction	22	4.05(4.16)	.59(1.01)	3.79***
Anaphoric reference	22	1.50(2.02)	.27(.70)	2.69*

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

This study investigated how young children respond when asked to create spoken and written narratives. To examine 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives of personal experience, they were analyzed for development level and cohesive devices.

The results showed that, for 7 children, narrative levels were the same for both the written and spoken conditions, but for 14 children, the levels of the spoken and written narratives differed. Within the 14 children with different spoken and written narrative levels, more children had the characteristic of a higher level of written narrative compared to their level of spoken narratives (42.9%) than had the characteristic of a lower level of written narrative compared to their level of spoken narratives (23.8%).

Nine children showed a higher level of written narrative than spoken narrative level (42.9%). For this result, the researchers postulated first that since children were allowed enough time to express their personal experiences for both written and spoken narratives it would be due to the characteristics of written narratives. For written narratives, children can read the line written over by sight whereas for spoken language it is rather hard to go over, as has been suggested by Sulzby (1986). With enough time for thinking, written language could be expressed more precisely than spoken language. The second hypothesis about the reason is that children's developmental stage of writing had an impact. The average stage of children's writing in this study was the 6th stage. The children in this study had few difficulties in writing to express their personal experiences. Thus, further study would be necessary to examine the aspects and differences between written narratives and spoken narratives with younger children who have a lower stage of writing. In other words, the findings in this study might be typical only of children with a certain threshold of writing skill. That is, children involved in

this study had the ability to write sentences readable for their written narratives, although some words they wrote were missing a consonant placed under a vowel, or were based on phoneme, combined with orthographic, information. Some children also wrote sentences without spacing words or without using correct punctuation.

The analysis of the relationship between the level of written narrative and developmental stage of writing showed a statistically significant correlation. There was a case in which a child expressed difficulty in writing down what he wanted to write after writing one sentence, and asked the interviewer to write down dictation of what he wanted to express. This case was dropped from the data analysis, because this child did not do his own writing. We can assume, then, that the stage of writing skill had some effect on the written narrative level of 5-year-olds whose data remained in the analyses for the study.

The result also showed that there were statistically significant differences in cohesive devices of 5-year-olds' spoken and written narratives about their personal experiences. The sum of conjunction and anaphora of cohesive devices was higher in spoken narrative expressions than in written narrative expressions. In spoken narratives, children expressed de-contextualized language to give the additional explanation considering the listener. And they expressed de-contextualized language involving cohesive devices. Both spoken and written narratives are about children's personal experiences in which the interviewer was not involved. Therefore, for both cases, children had to make statements to be understood by the listener or reader. Considering this situation, we can presume children are more conscious to the person listening to their spoken narrative of personal experience and therefore, used more decontextualized language.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations because of the small number of participants involved, and because of the lack of diversity in their geographic location and home backgrounds.

Additionally, this study only included conjunctions and anaphoric reference as cohesive devices, not prepositional phrases and relative clauses as used by John-Steiner and Panofsky (1987). Further study with a larger number of participants is necessary to see more detail in the relationship between effective variables of written narratives and cohesive devices.

Suggestions for Further Study

This study obtained different responses from children in producing written narratives than had been found in previous research. Specifically, the children in this study did not appear to be uncomfortable in the writing situation, as had been reported by Kalvaitis and Monhardt (2012) with elementary and middle school children. That is, the subjects of this study showed expression of enjoyment when relating their personal experiences through both speaking and writing. Therefore, further study can proceed in such conditions that children can express very different ways of expressing their own experiences naturally using various kinds of media and materials.

Children used cohesive devices more for spoken narratives than for written narratives. Thus, it would be worthwhile to examine the reasons. For example, is it because of a low developmental stage of writing or the characteristics of written narratives? It is also important to conduct a similar study with more subjects from kindergartens in different geographic areas and to include children from a variety of different home backgrounds. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether early narrative development is related to later school achievement, when natural opportunities and training are provided for spoken and written narrative creation in the kindergarten classroom. In further studies with the children with a low developmental stage of writing, we may be able to see different patterns of differences between spoken and written narratives by asking them to write with their own writing method even in scribbling and to read what they have written. It would also be interesting to see the differences of mothers' or teachers' narrative elaboration style between spoken and written narrative situations, when mothers assist children as they create their narratives.

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