

The effects of story task on results in narrative research

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How stories are presented to children will affect the quality of the stories that they tell. This review summarizes research on the relation between stimulus, task or other aspects of story presentation and the ways children perform on story tasks, as well as gaps that remain in the literature



Studies showing affects of task presentation

Degree of Structure

- Story tasks presented with even a minimum of structure, such as story stems, result in better stories from children than unstructured, "tell me a story" tasks (Merritt & Liles, 1987).
- Story stems and single pictures can differ in the amount of structure they can provide, e.g., setting information versus story outcome; this difference has not been explored.

Personal versus Fictional Narratives

- Personal narratives: those presenting events as having happened to the speaker or someone s/he knows.
Fictional narratives: those presenting events as not having really happened.
Reported differences:
- Personal develop earlier, may be easier for younger children (McCabe & Rollins, 1994) and children with language impairments (McCabe et al., 2008).
 - There is more evaluation in personal narratives for young children, but more in fictional narratives for older ones (Shiro, 2003).
 - Training in fictional narratives has been reported anecdotally to be used spontaneously by children to tell personal narratives (Hayward & Schneider, 2000; Schneider & Watkins, 1996).
 - Stylistic differences are evident, with fictional narratives appearing to be closer to a 'literate' style (Westby, 1999).

Retell versus generation from pictures

- Children tell stories differently after hearing an oral version than when generating a story from pictures (Schneider, 1996; Schneider & Dubé, 1997, 2005).
Stories told after oral versions:
- have more story information.
 - have better reference to characters and objects.
- However, when comparing oral retells with and without pictures (McConnell, 2011), children retold better stories with picture support in terms of:
- amount of story information.
 - evaluation.
 - number of words/different words, number of C-units, MLU.

Shared versus unshared context

- Younger children do not reliably differentiate stories told to listeners not sharing mutual knowledge (those told to listeners who cannot see the pictures from which the child is generating a story; Kail & Hickmann, 1992; Schneider & Dubé, 2005).
Older children (9 and older) do differentiate their stories based on mutual knowledge, e.g., provide more indefinite determiners to introduce referents (Kail & Hickmann, 1992).

Studies showing no effects of task presentation

Animation versus still pictures (story generation)

- One study (Rice & Roudebush, 1989) contrasted full animation with stills taken from the animation and found that 5-year-olds used more words, sentences, and conjunctions with animations.
In contrast, Anderson et al. (2011) used animation in which only limited animation occurred to highlight key actions; animation and still versions thus had the same number of scenes. Children did not differ in variables examined in the previous study or in amount of story information.
Differences found in the Rice & Roudebush studies may have been due to the greater duration of the animation.
When duration is controlled, 5 year olds do not appear to tell different stories with animation than still pictures.

Generation from colour versus black and white pictures

- Four- and-five-year-old children told stories that were very similar in terms of story information and lexical amount and variety when looking at story pictures in colour and in black and white (Schneider, Rivard, & Debreuil, 2011).
Children were asked for their preference of story; they did not exhibit a greater preference for stories presented in colour, and their reasons for preferences were in most cases due to characteristics other than colour.

Conclusions: The nature of a story task will generally make a difference in the length and quality of the stories that children tell. Thus, to obtain a complete picture of a child's knowledge about stories and the child's ability to understand and tell stories, it is important to use a variety of tasks. Future research should examine skills related to storytelling, such as working memory, as well as the interrelationships among story tasks and their ability to predict later linguistic and academic abilities.

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