

Story Grammar Elements of African American English Speaking Preschoolers

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Introduction

Narratives include self-generated stories; telling of familiar tales; retelling of books, movies, or television shows; and recounting of personal experiences. Story telling is a predictor for how children will perform academically (Gillam and Gillam, 2016). Language and narrative assessment are used by SLP's to gather a language sample for assessment. Narratives are important teaching strategies for all children to benefit academically.

Typical milestones of 3 to 5 year olds include:

- * conversational skills within immediate context
- * limited turn taking
- * presupposition of listener knowledge
- * use of different registers for different speaker roles
- * limited number of utterances on an established topic

Mean length of utterance (MLU) is used to analyze language complexity. The following average MLU values are expected: 3.0-3.5 (35-37 months), 3.5-3.75 (38-40 months), 3.75-4.5 (41-46 months), 4.5+ (47+ months) (Owens, 2016).

African American children have been labeled as having a learning disability and often excluded from traditional learning opportunities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Use of dialect is one factor that has created inaccurate labeling because SAE delayed speech patterns are similar to the characteristics of AAE (Wilson, 2012). The stories told by African American children may be falsely identified as demonstrating a language problem due to the similarities to children with language disabilities, (Gillam and Gillam, 2016).

Purpose

To describe the story grammar elements and language structure of AAE speaking preschoolers in two contexts:

1. When retelling a story to the person who told the story
2. When retelling a story to a peer who has not heard the story

Participants and Setting

36 children ages of 3 to 5 years.

- 16 produced a story retell to an adult.
- 11 produced a story retell to a peer.
- 30 of these children produced a retell of a self-generated picture book to an adult.



Procedure

The examiner gathered language samples using two different conditions: 1. She told a story to the child using a wordless picture book, *Frog Where Are You?* 2. The child and examiner created a picture book about a story of the child's interests.

Audio files of 36 children's story retells and self-generated stories were transcribed in accordance with SALT conventions and encoded into the SALT data base (Miller, Andriacchi & Nockerts, 2012). Total utterances, MLU in words and morphemes, total number of words, number of different words, and type token ratio were analyzed.

We examined the ability to organize a story using the Index of Narrative Complexity (INC) coding (Peterson, Gillam & Gillam, 2008).

Table 1: Number of story grammar elements used by each child and mean number of different elements per child.

INC Elements: Story Grammar Elements (8) and Narrative Features (5)	# of children using each INC Element once
Character	46
Setting	12
Initiating Event	40
Internal Response	15
Plan	6
Action/Attempt	31
Complication	32
Consequence	19
Formulaic Markers	23
Temporal Markers	23
Causal Adverbial Clause	0
Knowledge of Dialogue	23
Narrator Evaluations	20
Mean # of Different Elements/Child	5.09

Table 2: Mean score for each SALT microstructure element in each story retell condition.

SALT	Mean Score (Adult) *16 files	Mean Score (Peer) *10 files	Mean Score (SGPB) *30 files
TU	23.375	31.8	26.767
CU	19.375	24.9	22.533
AWM	131.625	162	129.3
MLUW	5.240625	5.183	4.553
MLUM	5.68125	5.643	4.983
NTW	106.1875	126.6	105.233
NDW	49.9375	55.8	46.767
TTR	0.52375	0.468	0.544

Results

Table 1 shows the number of story grammar elements used by each child and mean number of different elements per child. The following elements were used by 30 or more children, in order from most to least number of children: character, followed by initiating event, complication, attempt. The following were used by 19 or fewer children: consequence, internal response, setting, and plan. All narrative features except causal adverbial clauses (which was not used by any children) were used by 20-23 children. Tale 2 show the SALT microstructure elements. The data were similar across story retell conditions.

Discussion

Use of story grammar elements demonstrates what a child knows about telling a story. Essentially all of the children named a character and initiating event in their story. A number of children indirectly referred to the setting by pointing but did not state it. Very few children appeared to understand the use of a plan in their story.

Use of narrative features demonstrates understanding of how to tell a fluid story and help the listener understand it. Approximately 2/3 of the children used narrative features. There was almost no difference among the number of children who used four of the narrative features (20-23). No children used causal adverbial clauses.

The mean MLUW of the children ranged from 4.55 to 5.24; the MLUM ranged from 4.98 to 5.68. These values exceeded the expectation for their age group.

Conclusions

The children in this study met age expectations for the macrostructure story grammar elements and narrative features as well as microstructure elements. The story telling condition did not appear to influence macrostructure or microstructure.

Future Research

The story telling samples collected from these African American children contained some AAE dialectical features. Future research can examine the children's use of dialect when telling or retelling to peers, family members and educators. The results of specifically prompting children to state less used story grammar elements and narrative features may be investigated.

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