
Downloaded from: http://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3825/
Fiction reading experience predicts narrative production skills in 9- to 12-year-old children

Hamilton, L.G. & Cutting N.
York St John University

BACKGROUND

Producing fictional narratives draws on a host of advanced linguistic, cognitive and social cognitive skills (Rushton & Shapiro, 1991). Previous research indicates that by the age of 9 years, nearly all typically developing children can provide an adult-like global structure for narratives (Berman & Slobin, 1994); however, substantial individual differences remain in the linguistic complexity, cohesion, and evocative devices (e.g., references to characters’ mental states) utilized in narrative production (Bambarg & Derryl-Frye, 1991; Nurit & Bishop, 2003). Narrative competence has been linked to the development of social and language (Marshak & Roscorla, 2002; language and cognitive skills (Acor, Gaetaniotti & Pinto, 2014; Riggs & Casady, 2009) and reading comprehension (Cari, 2003).

Recreational reading (i.e., reading outside the school curriculum or work) has been associated with positive developmental outcomes, most notably gains in vocabulary (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). The direction of causation has been suggested to be reciprocal, such that children with more advanced verbal skills are more likely to read for pleasure, which in turn facilitates the growth of language skills (Mus & Bus, 2015). However, a recent study using data from a large sample of 7-year-old twins tested a number of explanatory models for the correlation between print exposure and reading competence, finding that reading skills predicted print exposure but not vice versa (Van Bergen et al., 2018). Thus, recreational reading should not be viewed as a pure measure of “environment,” but is likely to reflect underlying gene-environment correlation mechanisms (Hugl, Hulme, Hamiliton, & Snowling, 2017).

In addition to links with language and reading skills, recreational reading (and particularly engagement with fiction) has been associated with mentalising skills (e.g., the ability to infer others’ thoughts, beliefs, desires and emotions; Bateman, Mul., & Jolles, 2017; Mar, Tackett, & Mosore, 2010). Oakley (2016) argues that fiction provides a unique simulation of the social world, allowing readers to practice mentalising skills as they interpret and predict the behaviour of characters. Experience of inferring mental states of fictional characters while reading may also facilitate children’s sophisticated narrative skills (e.g., the use of mental state terms).

125 children (49% males; mean age 10.6 (i.e. 12.43 months)) completed a battery of tests assessing aspects of language, reading, and mentalising ability.

Fiction Reading Experience

The current study aimed to examine the relationship between 9- to 12-year-old children’s engagement of reading fiction and a range of narrative production skills, using concurrent data from Phase 1 of an ongoing longitudinal study. The study addressed two key research questions:

- How can individual differences in narrative production skills during middle childhood be characterized?
- Do children who have more experience of fiction reading show more sophisticated narrative skills?

OBJECTIVES

- It is possible that linguistic, discourse, and social-cognitive aspects of narrative production cluster together as a single factor, or these skills may be dissociable.
- If children with more experience of fiction reading show more sophisticated narrative skills, this is explained by individual differences in vocabulary, word reading, and mentalising?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The eight narrative production variables were selected from Principal Components Analysis, using an maximum likelihood extraction with direct oblimin rotation (since all were derived from a single narration episode, and the factor scores were expected to be inter-related) in order to examine the underlying factor structure of the coded variables.

RESULTS

Table 1: Raw correlation (above diagonal) and partial correlations, controlling for child age (below diagonal) between eight construct production variables

Characterising Children’s Narratives

An ordinal regression model predicting children’s fictionale belief episode narration

An ordinal regression model predicting children’s false belief episode narration

REFERENCES

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Isabelé OLItahun, Jess Edge, Jess Brown and Alex Chamberlain for assistance with data collection.

For further information, please contact: l.hamilton@yorksj.ac.uk