

Kappe (Frog) is Missing: Lessons for the Classroom Using Oral Narrative Telling

Sharoon Sunny

Abstract

Preschool and early school learners benefit from fictional oral narratives in building oral language competence, a cornerstone for literacy and academic success (Biteti & Hammer, 2016). This three-year study explored the potential of using oral narrative telling with bilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in Bengaluru, India. Five learners, who attended a dual language, after school support programme were supported in building fictional oral narrative telling in their L1 to develop narrative macrostructure. Additionally, they were taught L2 vocabulary as part of the dual language learning programme. The study explored two key questions: 1) Does fictional oral narrative telling facilitate the development of narrative macrostructure skills in bilingual learners? 2) Can learners integrate newly acquired L2 vocabulary into their oral narratives? The Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) assessed learners' narrative macrostructure ability, and the study analysed the intervention's impact on both macrostructure and L2 vocabulary integration. The findings from the study aims to inform more effective language learning strategies for a population often underserved in terms of educational opportunities. The findings have the potential to bridge the gap in our understanding of how narrative-based interventions can unlock language competencies, paving the way for improved academic and literacy outcomes for bilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: Bilingual strategies, fictional narratives, oral language development

Introduction

Fictional narrative language has proven valuable in providing insights into understanding how it supports decontextualized language use especially in preschool and early school learners. Unlike the dynamic give-and-take of everyday conversation, narration necessitates a predominantly monologic discourse, demanding a broader range of advanced language and cognitive abilities. A comprehensive and well-structured story, requires the child to understand cause-and-effect relationships, construct coherent and cohesive utterances, and employ explicit linguistic markers to guide the narrative without relying on extralinguistic cues. Therefore, narrative production not only showcases a child's mastery of the target language's lexicon and morpho-syntax, but also reveals their cognitive-linguistic interface skills in producing the essential components and events of a cohesive story (Licandro, 2016, pp. 25-52).

Fictional narratives reflect how children use language in real-world situations, providing insights into specific language forms (microstructure), story organization (macrostructure), evaluative language, and the speech production processes. ESL studies on language acquisition in bilingual learners are limited (Squires et al., 2014) particularly those that examine the use of L1 fictional narratives to strengthen oral narrative skills in both L1 and L2. Within this area of research, fewer studies have examined how fictional oral narrative telling in L1 supported learners' growth for narrative macrostructure and vocabulary acquisition in L2 in bilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Bilingual Learners and Language Teaching in India

The National Educational Policy (2020) emphasizes the adoption of a bilingual approach in teaching students whose native language is different from the language used for instruction (p. 17). Similarly, the National Focus Group Position Paper (2006) supports the use of students' native languages to learn and teach English in regional medium schools. However, decisions regarding the language(s) of instruction in India are mainly influenced by the Three Language Formula, which is the national language in education policy. According to this formula, children should be taught in their native language during primary school, and a second

Indian language, along with English, should be introduced at a later stage. In practice, primary schools predominantly use the state language as the medium of instruction, and the introduction of additional languages varies across different regions of the country.

However, within the Indian context, using bilingual and multilingual approaches in education has posed challenges. Mohanty's research findings (2019) are particularly noteworthy in this regard as his work reveals that children from marginalized communities are being excluded from school because teachers are specifically instructed not to use the students' home language. Mohanty emphasizes that learners from tribal and marginalized communities require a multilingual approach to teaching, but the strong emphasis on English instruction makes it very challenging for both teachers and students and hence remain with limited access to schools.

Indians are bilingual if not multilingual, but in Indian classrooms, teachers often use the dominant language for administrative and classroom communication. However, they do not typically use it intentionally as a resource to help students understand English content, tap into their cognitive abilities, or improve their English proficiency levels (Durairajan, 2016, p. 10). Instead, they may use the dominant language to translate text or provide explanations. Durairajan (2016) argues that teachers should use the dominant language as a scaffold or support to enable higher-order skills (p. 11).

In programmes where students are encouraged to use multiple languages for learning, the focus should be on prioritizing active and critical meaning-making (García & Li, 2014). Programmes that create a dichotomy between English and the home languages do not support the goal of meaning-making in language learning. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of language learning should include the creation of resources that facilitate meaning-making and affirm the identity of minority language speakers, as these factors can significantly impact learning and engagement. In that regard, oral narrative telling forms the bridge in building several important language and other related competencies for learners.

Fictional Oral Narrative Development

There is a strong correlation between reading, vocabulary and oral

narrative skills leading to reading comprehension in later years (Suggate et al., 2018). Strong oral storytelling requires a rich vocabulary base. Understanding what we read relies on this, and effective comprehension further depends on not just a vast lexicon, but also deeply interconnected networks of knowledge within it (Anderson & Freebody, 1985; Kintsch, 1998). Building deep word knowledge, unlike shallow learning, takes time (Bloom, 2002; Bolger et al., 2008). Thus, deliberate efforts to cultivate this knowledge in education should start early. Studies (Alario et al., 2004; Barry et al., 2006; Juhasz, 2005) show faster and more accurate word identification, production, and reading for those learned early (Izura et al., 2011). Therefore, strong oral storytelling hinges on both deep vocabulary knowledge and early exposure.

However, if a learner is unable to tell complete episodes, it is helpful to support them in telling and retelling basic stories (Spencer & Petersen, 2020, p. 1085) first. This planned intervention is necessary to ensure learners “develop a cognitive schema related to story grammar to reduce frustration of children with extremely limited language skills, by gradually increasing the cognitive and linguistic demands” (Ibid.). Once achieved, learners can progress towards acquiring target vocabulary words (Gardner & Spencer, 2016; Gillam et al., 2014).

A comprehensive and well-structured story, requires the child to understand cause-and-effect relationships, construct coherent and cohesive utterances, and employ explicit linguistic markers to guide the narrative without relying on extralinguistic cues. Done this way, it aligns with abstract universal story features, optimized for listener comprehension.

The fictional narrative mode is a valuable tool to understand language development in bilingual children during preschool and early school years, particularly for populations often underrepresented in research (Norbury et al., 2014; Lucero, 2018). The majority of research on narrative development focuses on monolingual children from affluent socio-economic backgrounds or learners in Westernized contexts, and that leaves a significant gap in terms of how researchers and teachers understand how children in multilingual and socio-economically disadvantaged environments use narrative skills to build certain language competencies (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016).

Bilingual language studies exploring narrative skills reveal how

languages intertwine and skills transfer between them (Uccelli & Páez, 2007). Strong storytelling in a first language (L1) boosts L2 narrative quality, showing narrative skills learned in one language can benefit the other. While research exists for Spanish-English, German-English, and other bilingual pairs, studies on Kannada or Hindi L1s learning English are scarce. One unpublished study explored the impact of home literacy environment on English and Tamil narrative skills in Tamil kindergartners (Bhuvaneshwari, 2017).

Bilingual research in early and middle school grades remains limited, particularly in India. Even within this limited scope, studies investigating the use of fictional oral narrative telling in L1 to support narrative macrostructure and L2 vocabulary acquisition among disadvantaged bilingual learners are scarce. This study addresses this critical gap by focusing on three key aspects: 1) It examined the changes in learners' use of narrative macrostructure via the use of fictional narrative telling in L1. 2) Specifically focused on bilingual children from disadvantaged backgrounds, a group often underrepresented in language acquisition research. 3) Explicitly examined whether taught L2 vocabulary can be embedded into the learner's repertoire for oral narrative development.

The current study then answers the following two questions:

1. To what extent does fictional oral narrative telling in the L1 facilitate the development of narrative macrostructure skills in bilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in an after school programme?
2. To what extent can bilingual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds appropriately integrate newly acquired L2 vocabulary into their fictional oral narratives when prompted?

The Study

Before learners attempted the scored narration, they were introduced to vocabulary words in English through a wordlist from their daily routines, jobs based on what their parents did and words from their textbooks were used to create this bilingual word list. These words were translated from their home languages into English. Therefore, every word that was written in the L1 was translated into English in the adjacent column.

Participants Profile

Learners: This study focused on five children between 10 and 12 years old because research suggests that children can demonstrate story grammar by age 7 (Berman & Slobin, 1994). These selected participants were all registered in a state-run, regional medium school and had begun formal schooling only by age 6 and received their initial education in their L1. The learners' L1 was adequately developed in speaking, but many of them were beginning to build competencies in reading and writing in their L1. However, due to the exposure and adequate motivation in their home and school environments, these learners were able to build strong literacies in the majority language (in this case, Kannada and Hindi) allowing them the needed time to learn in the majority language.

Additionally, English was introduced only in Class 5, resulting in limited exposure and vocabulary development.

Volunteer-Teachers: Bilingual volunteers, including pre-service teacher trainees at a city university formed the group of teachers. All teachers were familiar with English and Hindi. In terms of competence in Kannada and Tamil, they were split. A few knew Kannada and a few Tamil. The volunteers were mentored and trained by one lead ESL teacher in the teaching and use of developmentally appropriate English language materials.

Methodology

Intervention

Students were familiarized with the mode of narrative telling prior to scoring their oral reproduction of stories. The teacher would narrate stories in small groups and have learners retell these stories back to the group. There were several stories from the *Story Weaver* website that were accessible for free in various languages. Level-1 and 2 books that were available in Kannada and English. *Mouse in the House* (ಮನೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಇಲಿ), *Rani's First Day at School* (ಶಾಲೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ರಾಣಿಯ ಮೊದಲ ದಿನ), *Angry Akku* (ಸಿಟ್ಟಿನ ಅಕ್ಕು) were used during these sessions.

These stories were read aloud to learners during interactions, and in small groups, they were asked to retell the stories. Teachers encouraged students to narrate incidents from their own lives that reflected the character's thoughts and feelings. In selecting stories, a few things

were agreed upon by the teachers to ensure the growth of learners–selected stories included ample chances to deduce information about the characters’ relationships, thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

Narrative Oral Retelling

To assess narrative skills, learners individually retold from the digital book *Let’s Count Legs* by Asia Foundation (2018). In a quiet space with a teacher, they silently explored the animal-themed book on an iPad, then shared the content in their own words based on the illustrations. Encouraged to draw connections with their L1 animal knowledge, they attempted the retelling in English. Since each page presented a single image, the focus was on telling the teacher about the image. Interestingly, some learners ventured into microstructure elements, showcasing their developing language skills.

A sample retelling is given below:

Name	Age	Spoken Utterances
Sindhu	9	Kannada: ಇದು ಹಕ್ಕಿ. ಇದಕ್ಕೆ ಎರಡು ಕಾಲುಗಳಿವೆ. (Idu hakki. Idakke eradu kaalugalive.) (<i>This is a bird. It has two legs</i>) Teacher: Can you try this in English? English: This bird. Two legs.
Sujatha	10	English: This is bird. ಇದಕ್ಕೆ two legs ive. (<i>It has two legs.</i>) A combination of Kannada and English.
Bhagya	10	This is a bird. It has two legs.

The learners encountered two novel words *cicada* and *octopus*, which none of them knew since it was not in the wordlist nor in their immediate environments. They were unable to decode, not even with the help of phonics.

Tool

Narrative quality was assessed using the Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) (Heilmann et al., 2010). This developmentally sensitive measure breaks narratives into seven components: story grammar (introduction, conflict resolution, conclusion), literate language (mental states, character development), and cohesion (referencing, logical sequence). Each component is scored based on specific criteria outlined in the NSS

manual, providing a comprehensive and nuanced picture of storytelling abilities.

Procedure

Mayer's "Frog, Where Are You?" (1969) was chosen for its effectiveness with multilingual children (Berman & Slobin, 1994). The book's 24 captivating images (Appendix 1) provided a visual storytelling platform, allowing students to interpret and express the story in their own words. Similar to the *Let's Count Legs* book, learners first silently explored the book. Then, clear instructions in Kannada were given:

I want to understand how you tell stories. Remember how I tell you stories in class and then you retell the same story to your classmates? I want you to do the same with this picture book. Look at it and once you have looked at all the pictures, then tell me the story.

Learners' responses were audio recorded by teachers onto an excel sheet. I transcribed the responses to ensure there was reliability across samples. These responses were then coded for elements of narrative macrostructure. In the analysis process, the study measured learners' ability for using narrative macrostructure. Using the Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS), each narrative element was scored on a scale of 0-5, with 5 signifying proficiency and 0 indicating refusal, incorrect story, or unintelligible narration.

Sample of NSS Measures in the Oral Narrative Retelling

a. Story-structure elements:

Reading page by page, students listed and described what they saw in their L1. Most detailed the scene: boy, dog, frog in a bottle, nighttime, moon, bedroom with bed. For example, S1 said: *There is a boy, a dog and frog. The frog is in a bottle. It is night time. We can see the moon. They are in a bedroom with a bed. The boy and dog are looking at the frog.* Most of the students approached the picture book the same way except for one student.

b. High-level narrative competence:

While some students could identify characters' emotions (e.g., sadness when the frog disappears), their retellings often remained page-by-page listings, lacking overall narrative flow and logical sequencing. References ("the boy"/"he") were inconsistent, and cohesive transitions were absent.

c. Character development and Referencing:

Three learners were able to demonstrate character development but the remaining two learners were often confused between the dog and the frog. Referencing was not consistent throughout the telling. The students went back and forth between using “the boy” and “he”.

d. Cohesion:

Since they were using each page to list out what they saw on that page, identifying a logical sequence to the telling of the story was not present.

e. Use of vocabulary words in L2:

Only one learner in the group was able to code-switch without losing the narrative macrostructure. She recalled familiar words from her English wordlist and used them throughout the story. The other students were unable to use L2 English words unless prompted.

Results

The answer to the first research question is that bilingual children from disadvantaged backgrounds in an after-school programme struggled with narrative macrostructure in oral fictional narrative retelling. Despite understanding elements like character emotions, they presented a disjointed list of story details, failing to connect them into a cohesive whole. Small-group retelling after teacher modelling allowed memorization, but not true comprehension. Individual “Frog, Where Are You?” retellings exposed this reliance on memory, revealing a lack of story grammar mastery. However, peer assistance and prompting within small groups showed promise in facilitating narrative development for these learners.

The answer to the second research question about L2 vocabulary integration in oral narratives proved elusive for most learners. Prompted by the teacher, they could use newly learned words, but spontaneous integration remained rare. The challenge stemmed from their less developed English lexical microstructure compared to their L1, hindering overall narrative coherence. Feeling overwhelmed by English, four out of five learners struggled to incorporate vocabulary, even with prompting. Only one learner, benefiting from a supportive home environment with sibling help, English reading, and extra tuition, navigated the English retelling successfully. This highlights the need for

longer interventions and additional support from both school and home environments to overcome the challenges of L2 vocabulary integration in oral narratives.

Discussion

While fictional oral narratives can nurture crucial skills like self-awareness, memory, and reasoning, starting as early as age three (Kao, 2015), its absence in formal schooling for six-year-olds, coupled with low literacy and limited support, could create lasting language difficulties. In India, fictional oral narratives often remain an extracurricular activity instead of a tool for academic and social development.

This study, despite boosting learners' confidence, revealed struggles with narrative structure using the NSS framework. Interestingly, they effectively narrated familiar stories, suggesting rote memorization instead of comprehension. The intervention might have been insufficient to build an understanding of universal story features.

Limitations

The small sample size (n=5) and potential age-outlier participants limit the generalizability of these findings. In future studies, including a larger population of participants and from within the age ranges that NSS typically measures will afford a more robust set of findings. Future research could benefit from larger and more representative samples. Since this study was undertaken in an afterschool support programme, the structure and approach to teaching was different from the ones learners were used to in their regular school, which could affect how learners responded to the intervention and the elicitation.

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Appendix 1

<https://www.saltsoftware.com/resources/elicaids/frogstories>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwDc3aOb-E0>

Sharoon Sunny is a teacher of English and a teacher educator.
sharoon.sunny@gmail.com