A conversational intervention procedure as a tool for improving and evaluating narrative skills: A study of 5-to-8 years old French children

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Measures of Narrative Content

1. Overall coherence score for a story of misunderstanding

A score of 0 to 20 points was attributed for: narrative structure (max. 3 pts), explanation of key events (max. 2x4=8 pts), expression of False Belief and of its rectification (max. 4x3=7 pts) and expression of all the main elements (max. 2 pts).

2. Causal explanation of the 4 key events: pushing, pushing back, showing the stone, picking up the partner

Examples of causal explanation (translated from French): 1) pushing: ‘He has stumbled on a stone and has pushed the other one. 2) pushing back: ‘He pushes back because he thought he had pushed him on purpose. 3) showing the stone: ‘He shows the stone to say that it wasn’t his fault; 4) picking up the partner: ‘He explains to him and the child then helps him to get up.

3. References to the characters’ intentional and epistemic states: intentional: does/doesn’t do it on purpose; epistemic: believe, know...

4. False belief expression (FB score: from 0 to 4): For the higher scores (3 and 4, children

- express the unintentional and/or physical cause of the first push: ‘it’s a tribulcim sur une pierre ‘he stumbled on a stone’. AND

- attribute to one of the characters the belief that the push was intentional: ‘l’autre croit qu’il la fait exprès ‘the other one believes he did it on purpose’

5. Rectification of the false belief expression (RREC score: from 0 to 6): For the higher scores, children

- have P1 explain the physical cause of the first push AND

- have P2 understand and clear the misunderstanding: ‘et il disait que c’est à cause de ce caillou que je t’ai poussé... ’and he said that is because of this stone that I pushed you ‘believe

6. Post-hoc comparisons show that second, stability and generalization narratives have a higher score than the first narrative, and, for the most part, are not statistically different among themselves.

RESULTS

For all measures and in all groups, a major effect of causal-oriented conversation is found on all subsequent narratives. Post-hoc comparisons show that second, stability and generalization narratives have a higher score than the first narrative, and, for the most part, are not statistically different among themselves.

METHOD

Participants

50 4-year-olds speaking children between the ages of 5.6 and 6.8 years

28 children per school level:

- Kindergarten: 5.6 to 6.4 years

- First grade: 6.4 to 7.2 years

- Second grade: 7.3 to 8.1 years

Procedure

1. Each child was presented with five wordless pictures (the "stone story") a story of a misunderstanding between two depicted characters, see below) presented sequentially. Once the pictures were removed the child was asked to tell the experimenter what he/she had understood of the story (First Narrative)

2. Then, the experimenter engaged in a conversation with the child soliciting causal explanations of the events.

3. Children were asked to tell the story again (Second Narrative).

4. Procedure: each task went through the same procedure as in 1 (Stability Narrative)

5. Some procedure with an analogous story the Bicycle story (Generalization story)

The interviews were video-recorded, transcribed verbatim in CHAT and linked to the video.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The findings of earlier studies are validated. A causal-oriented conversation has a major effect on the content of all children’s subsequent narratives: Increase in overall score of coherence, explanation of events, expression of epistemic states, false belief and rectification of misunderstanding. The effect is stronger for children for 4 years old than for 5-6 yrs. 2. This effect persists one week later (stability narrative) and 3. Is generalizable for all measures (excepted epistemic states and RFB in 5-6 year olds). 4. Children who express the FB in at least one of the four narratives tend to be those who have good mastery of ToM FB tasks. Results confirm the importance of the conversational procedure for improving young children’s narrative functioning and its usefulness in the assessment of children’s narrative competencies.