

The Role of Gender in the Narrative Production of Primary School Students

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Abstract

Communication is one of the important functions of language. From a sociolinguistic point of view, speakers transfer meaning and intention through linguistic interactions. Narrative ability is considered as a part of language communicative proficiency and by examining this ability some aspects of communicative function can be tested too. In Iranian educational system, teaching and practicing the ability to narrate have somehow been neglected and no significant improvement is seen in primary school students through their school career.

In this article, the total narrative ability is divided into two categories: Narrative Style and Grammatical Accuracy. Narrative Style includes such features as narrative coherence, core plot components, and engagement, while Grammatical Accuracy entails such items as using appropriate conjunctions, dominant aspect, and relevant lexical items. The instrument used to produce the story is Mercer Mayor's book (1960), known as "The Frog Story". It is a wordless story which consists of 24 pictures. In this article, some students of both genders at Ilam primary schools (2nd and 4th graders) are compared from a communicative standpoint.

The results show that female students seem to be more proficient in narrating the story than their male counterparts. In other words, the story produced by female students is more coherent; besides, the lexical items used by female students seem to be more relevant. This shows that gender has a profound impact on the students' narrative skill.

Keywords: *Communicative function, Narrative ability, Narrative style, Grammatical accuracy.*

1. Introduction

The attention to gender and particularly women's language originated from women's movement in the late 1960s (Ehrlich, 2004; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1983). These studies concentrated on the language role in maintaining women in a "disadvantageous position in

society" (Fasold, 1990, p. 89). The first paces in this area were focused on lexical, phonological, and morphological forms that were used predominantly by one gender. More recently, "gender is investigated as an independent variable related to other variables such as social status, age, style, and ethnicity" (ibid., p. 89). Since the feminist movement, hundreds of essays pointed to the different ways in which language aided excluding women. For example, women are defined by their relations to men (e.g., Miss/Mrs., or Harold's widow).

The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast- to different degrees- in all speech communities. There are other ways too in which the linguistic behavior of women and men differs. It is claimed women are more linguistically polite than men, for instance, and that women and men emphasize different speech functions (Holmes, 2008, p. 157). An extreme example of this case can be seen in some Indian tribes where a man may marry a woman from a different tribe. In this community, males and females use different languages (Fasold, 1987; Nemati & Bayer, 2007; Wardhaugh, 1990). A less dramatic case may happen in communities where men and women speak the same language, but they use different linguistic features. For example, there are two different words with the same meaning which are used by men and women (Nemati & Bayer, 2007).

The effect of gender on language use can be varied from accent variation to the choice of words and syntactic structures (Stockwell, 2002). In this article, the effect of gender on storytelling ability will be highlighted. Indeed, we try to show to what extent language (especially narrative skill) is affected by gender, and which gender is linguistically more talented to narrate a pictorial story. Theoretically, this task is based on Berman and Slobin's views (1994) and their developmental-crosslinguistic approach to narrating events in a story. The tool used for story production is a wordless book known as "The Frog Story". This book was designed by Mecer Mayor(1969) and as Berman and Slobin (1994) have stated, it has been widely used as an important research tool in the rest of the globe.

In this article, a set of features are used for assessing the participants' ability in narrating a story or their storytelling proficiency. These features are defined below:

2. Narrative Style

Core Plot Component: The story used in this article consists of three parts: beginning, middle and the end. The beginning part should be the starting point for coming events. For instance,

discovering the fact that “the frog is lost” would be the starting point for some other events. The middle of the story includes the events happening throughout the story, and the ending part of the story is the climax, and here it refers to the fact that “the frog is found”.

Story Features: When speakers start a story they usually use some clichés like: “once upon a time”, “once there was a...”, etc. They use these expressions to inform the addressee(s) a story is about to be narrated.

Engagement: Speakers with more ability to narrate are expected to use some items which seem to be literary and aesthetic in nature; in the case of “The Frog Story”, “to embrace” can be considered as an example.

Tense And aspect: Since the events in a story follow a specific sequence, speakers should try to express each event in its own place to show they are able to set the events orderly. Another point is that the main event of the story should be expressed in the form of background sentence. This event is usually accompanied with a minor event or situation which is expressed in the form of foregrounding. For example, the background and foreground sentences in Picture 9 of The Frog Story can be as follows:



Figure 1. “The boy is looking for the frog, he cannot find it though (backgrounding), meanwhile the dog is playing with the bees (foregrounding).”

Similarly, Picture 6 refers to two actions happening at the same time (the dog falls down/ the boy is looking at the dog), in which the narrator has to express the background by using appropriate tense and aspect. Altogether, in narrating the frog story, it is important that the subjects use some verbs with progressive or perfect aspects to express backgrounding, and non-progressive/non-perfect aspects to show foregrounding.

It is worth noting that tense in background sentence can be either simple present or simple past. So, the command of linguistic devices for grounding must be considered as part of a full account of the acquisition of grammar.

Internal Factors: If the speakers who are (re)telling a story sympathize with the story characters, they most often express their feelings like happiness, sadness, solidarity and so forth through some linguistic tools such as adjectives.

3. Grammatical style

Conjunctions: the use of appropriate conjunctions can be considered as a part of storytelling ability. When the speakers use conjunctions (such as “because”, “since”, etc), we can conclude that there is a line of reasoning in the narration.

Lexicon: lexical items are considered as one of the most important features of narrating proficiency. The use of relevant and proper words in a story leads to the conclusion that the speaker has a good command of storytelling.

Verb Endings: Narrators are expected to use grammatical sentences. For example, there must be an agreement between subject and the verb of a sentence.

Fluency: there are many factors which affect fluency. Long pauses, mistakes, code switching (syntactic, lexical or phonetic) can decrease fluency.

Since the effect of gender on language ability has been a popular topic, many studies have concentrated on this topic from different perspectives. Newman et al (2008) discuss the differences in the ways men and women use language. In this research, gender differences in language use were examined by using standardized categories to analyze a database of over 14,000 text files from 70 separate studies. According to this research, women used more words related to psychological and social processes, while men referred more to object properties and

impersonal topics. Reid et al (2003) also try to explain how language operates while gender is considered. This article reviews and critiques several reductionist explanations for gender differences in language use and tests an alternative from the perspective of self-categorization theory. It showed that when gender was salient, women used more tentative language than men. Savickiene & Kaledaite (2007) examine the relationship between the process of language acquisition and gender. This work analyzes a longitudinal corpus of one girl, Ruta. A special attention is paid to the effect that the unmarked member is acquired earlier than the marked member of the opposition. Ehrlich (2004) states that many of the claims about gender-differentiated language that emerged from studies in the 1970s and 1980s, were based on a limited number of populations (i.e., white, North American and middle class – engaged in cross-sex conversation), and the results have been over generalized to all men and women. She also states that the participants in these studies were involved in same-sex dyadic conversations with friends. Therefore, communicative settings and tasks *-not* gender- are the possible determinants of linguistic behaviors in these situations.

4. Methodology

In this research 60 participants (30 males, 30 females) were selected randomly. The instrument used to produce the story was a pictorial wordless story book designed by Mercer Mayor (1960) Known as “The Frog Story”; It is made of 24 pictures; each student was allowed to look through the book for almost 5 minutes. Then he was asked to narrate the story. The data was recorded and then transcribed by using IPA symbols. Later, separate files were analyzed and scored. The scoring was based on given numbers for example students missed 0.25 for each lexical error (out of 6 points).

In this research, storytelling skill, or Narrative Total is divided into two sections: Narrative Style and Grammatical Accuracy. Narrative Style, in turn, includes items such as Connected Story, Core Plot Components, Story Features, and Engagement. On the other hand, the second domain, Grammatical Accuracy, examines the more purely linguistic aspects of the subject’s language performance. Features such as Conjunctions, Lexicon, Verb Endings, and Fluency are related to this section.

5. Data Analysis

Here, the statistical results of comparing males' and females' narrative proficiency will be analyzed. We try to show how effectively gender affects narrative proficiency by comparing the means gained by each group. The following table shows that total narrative mean obtained by females is remarkably higher than their male counterparts:

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Narrative Total Score	male	30	21.0500	5.19507	.94849
	female	30	26.5167	5.72575	1.04537

Table 1. Statistics for total narrative proficiency by gender

It can be seen that mean of females' total narrative ability (Narrative Total) is equal to 21.05, while males gained 26.51 ($p=.000$, $t=-3.873$). It is obvious that females have had a generally better performance comparing to males. In order to understand these differences more precisely, two sub-branches of narrative ability (Narrative Style and Grammatical Accuracy) will be analyzed separately.

To achieve this aim, we simply compare the means of each component gained by different genders. Let us start with analyzing Narrative Style Table:

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Narrative Style Score	male	30	11.9000	4.86791	.88875
	female	30	15.3667	4.15629	.75883

Table 2. Statistics for Narrative Style

The mean gained by males is equal to 11.90 and females' score is significantly higher, that is 15.36. This superiority is the result of higher scores females gained in different components such as Connected Story, and Core Plot Component. In other words, females did better in different Narrative Style components. Not surprisingly, they seem to be better at the following components as well:

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grammatical Accuracy	male	30	9.3667	1.94286	.35472
	female	30	11.1500	2.18202	.39838

Table 3. Statistics for Grammatical Accuracy

It was noted that Grammatical Accuracy has many components and results show male participants are weaker at this part. Females' mean is equal to 11.15 and males' is 9.36. It can be seen that when narrative total ability is broken down into its components, i.e. Narrative Style and Grammatical Accuracy, females have higher scores.

6. Conclusion

Narrative ability was defined as an important skill and as a part of speaker's communicative competence. In this article, we tried to show the impact of gender on narrative ability. Two groups of males and females were compared and SPSS results showed that generally females have a better performance while storytelling is considered. This ability is related to different features of narrative proficiency. In other words, females could conduct the story more skillfully than their male peers.

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