

Mental State Term Use by Preschoolers in a Storytelling Task

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Models that describe what people typically include in their stories include some aspect of characters' internal states – thoughts and feelings (Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Mandler, 1988). Adults will describe such mental states in stories, whether personal or fictional. Young children are capable of telling stories about themselves that contain mental state terms to describe their thoughts and feelings in a real-life situation, sometimes quite dramatically (McCabe, 1994). However, when they tell fictional stories, they are much less likely to include descriptions of characters' mental states (Hughes, McGilivray, & Schmidek, 1997). We designed a study to see whether we could encourage young children to include mental state descriptions when telling stories from pictures. Participants were 21 children (9 girls) aged 4;2-5;11. Five picture sets were used, each depicting the same main character, a boy, and one secondary character. In each story the boy attempts to reach a goal but fails. The final picture in each story shows the secondary character looking angry and the boy running away. Four of the stories (5 pictures each) were used as pre- and post-intervention stories, with order counterbalanced. The intervention story contained two mental state pictures that presented a close-up of the main character. One picture showed his reaction to seeing a display of cookies in which he is licking his lips. The other showed him later in the story with a horrified expression. Pre and post stories were presented to children as follows: children were presented with a story and were asked to tell it to the examiner. Procedure for the intervention story was the same except that when the mental state pictures were displayed, if the child did not spontaneously provide a mental state description, the examiner would ask questions of increasing explicitness to try to get the children to describe the mental state.

Results: in the intervention condition, 17 children gave at least one mental state description (MSD) spontaneously, that is, without prompts. The remaining 4 children were able to give a MSD with prompting. Of the 17 spontaneous responders, 6 had given at least one MSD in the pre-intervention stories, suggesting that they did not need the intervention phase to get the idea. Of the 11 spontaneous responders who had not used MSDs in the pre-intervention stories, 5 used them post-intervention. Of the children who used MSDs after prompts, one did not use any pre or post, one used them both times, and two used them only post-intervention. Thus the mental state pictures were successful for the majority of the children in eliciting MSDs, indicating that children were able to infer the character's mental states from the pictures when pictures focused on the mental state. However, the intervention did not result in more attention to mental states in the post-intervention stories for many children. Interestingly, 16 children mentioned that the secondary character was angry in at least some of their stories; 10 did so in their pre-intervention stories. It may be that anger is more salient than the feelings we targeted.

References

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