Pragmatic and Narrative Skills of Urdu-Speaking Preschool Children

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Keywords

- Pragmatic Skill
- Narrative
- Topic Maintenance
- Initiation
- turn-taking

Abstract

Communication serves to be the sole foundation of human interaction. Pragmatics is the aspect of language that grasps the useful utilization of language in social settings. Importantly, when past events are discussed it leads to an important aspect of social interaction, whereas through narratives, children improve their pragmatic competence by following specific social and cultural rules. The assessment of pragmatic and narrative skills is an important aspect of early literacy. The objectives of the study are to assess the pragmatic and narrative skills of Urdu-speaking preschool children. It is a descriptive cross-sectional survey. Pragmatic and Narrative skill instrument (PNSI) Urdu version developed by Qadeer (2019) has been used to assess the pragmatic and narrative skills of children. Total sample consist of (N=40) children, the sample was further divided into two groups . Group I included children from age range 4 years to 4 years and 11 months (n=20) and the group II includes children from age range 5 years to 5 years and 11 months (n=20) respectively. The sample included both boys and girls and Non probability purposive sampling was used in the study. Result showed that children between the ages of 4 years to 4 years and 11 months did not perform well in narrative skills but they were able to maintain the topic, initiate conversation and end the topic properly. In the other group, children between the ages of 5 years and 5 years 11 months were unable to narrate stories including beginning, middle, and end. According to this study, a variety of practices and activities that support language comprehension and application in social and practical contexts can help young children improve their pragmatic and narrative skills.

1. Introduction

Language is a tool through which humans develop and maintain social relationships and interact with each other in meaningful activities. The usage of language in social settings is called pragmatics. The use of Pragmatics, however, isn't restricted to starting conversations, topic maintenance, posing and noting inquiries. It is rather how a word is being used while talking in coordination with eye contact, body movements and intonations. Pragmatic language skills are very important to allow clear communication of feelings, thoughts, and ideas. The development of these skills occurs in conjunction with general language development (Marasco et al., 2004). Language development encompasses multiple components such as phonology, semantics, syntax, and morphology; all of which must interlock like a braid for literacy to emerge (McCabe, 1992).

The study of narrative skills, in essence, is the domain of pragmatics which includes the use of sentences with the help of which two individuals attempt to communicate with each other and also maintain a topic of mutual interest. Pragmatic use in one's language is the ability to fit in a social context and also to narrate an event to give directions or convince someone in a dispute. This kind of narrative discourse requires the organization of thoughts into coherent and cohesive messages (Pearson, 2003). Narrative discourse for a long has been considered an important aspect of human communication (Berman, 2009). Generating a narrative is a skill that has received increased attention in research areas, especially in communication disorders. (Wetherill, Botting, & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). Polyani in 1989 highlighted "stories" as one of the types of narrative that includes specific cognitive demands, mastery of lexical, syntax, and pragmatics, and the ability to recall and organize a series of events to develop and maintain a range of characters (Polyani, 1989).

The assessment of narrative and pragmatic language skills is an important and challenging task for speech and language pathologists as these skills have strong repercussions on the early literacy level of children. Moreover, early interventions can prevent learning disabilities in children such as language delays or impairments.

1.1. Aim of the Study

Based on the fact that a very limited amount of research has been conducted on the pragmatic and narrative skills of Urdu-speaking children between the ages of 4 to 5. In order to bridge this gap present study aims at investigating the pragmatic and narrative skills of preschool children. Hence, the patterns identified might help in extending the theory and research in this field

1.2. Objectives

i. To investigate the Pragmatic skills (Topic Maintenance and topic shift) and narrative skills of Urdu-speaking preschooler children from age range 4 years to 4 years and 11 months.

ii. To investigate the Pragmatic skills (selection of Topic Maintenance, greetings) and narrative skills of Urdu-speaking preschooler children from age range of 5 years to 5 years and 11 months.

2. Literature Review

Pragmatic language skills in children usually develop in the same manner as other important milestones. These skills start to develop soon after birth as the newborn baby tries to maintain eye contact and exchanges smiles with a caregiver. These attempts are embedded within normal language development. The use of the language allows them to interact socially and these social interactions serve as a building block of conversations. This conversation helps children become experts in turn-taking procedures, initiations, topic maintenance, and shifting topics (Cekaite, 2013). Maintenance of topics among children starts as early as 2 years of age (McTear, 1985). and continues to improve throughout their adolescents. These skills are the accomplishment of achieving balance in social relationships generally supported by the appropriate utilization of social abilities.

2.1. Development of Pragmatic Skills

The idea of speech acts (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) provides a helpful foundation for comprehending the early origins of pragmatics. Speaking, in Austin's words, involves "doing things with words." According to Austin, a phrase has three parts: the "illocutionary force," which is its intended purpose; the "locution," which is its form; and the "perlocution," which is its impact on the audience.

By placing speech within the realm of action, Speech Act theory identifies nonverbal behaviours as speaking's precursors. Bates, Camaioni, and Volterra (1975), utilising the Speech Acts framework, identified three phases in the earliest pragmatic development of children: the perlocutionary, illocutionary, and elocutionary phases. A baby may make an involuntary effort to grunt, for instance, when reaching for something that is out of reach. If the noise alerted a helpful adult to the child's activity, and the adult then delivered the object to the child, one could say that the child's behaviour had an effect, but it would not be accurate to say that the child intended to communicate. The action would be "perlocutionary," not "illocutionary." A slightly older child may stare attentively at the adult and grab one of her toys. Bates and her colleagues would attribute intent to the action based on the accompanying intent expression and refer to it as "illocutionary." The final "elocutionary" phase begins when a child has the intent to communicate and employs words to do so (regardless of whether the perlocution, or effect, is the same as intended).

Dore (1975) describes a child in the one-word stage who used intonation to alter the illocutionary force of a single locution: "mama" with a falling contour to identify her, a rising contour to pose a question, and a sudden rise-fall to call her. As their linguistic repertoire expands, children can transition from "proto imperatives" (or "proto declarative") to actual imperatives and assertions, and eventually to the entire spectrum of functions that words enable: requesting, prohibiting, greeting, cursing, pledging, etc. Children use these functional words to construct discourse through conversation when they speak and elicit speech. Every conversation has its own set of rules that must be learned. Turn-taking is the first of these rules that need to be developed. Mothers in various cultures will treat their newborns and toddlers as conversational partners long before the youngsters are capable of efficient turn-taking. Respond to the child's grins, burps, and vocalizations, modelling responses in a turn-taking rhythm and extending intervals of joint attention with the child. Following each other gaze and paying joint attention to an object appear to be significant preludes to the discussion. According to research, time spent in joint attention between the

ages of 6 and 8 months predicts later language measurements (Mundy & Gomes, 1998). Indeed, intervals of shared attention are required for dialogue. Children progress from responding to others' vocalizations with actions to replying primarily with other vocalizations, i.e. chatting, throughout the second year.

2.2. Narrative Skills

The narrative has received much more attention in research and early childhood education. Labov and Waletsky (1967) suggest that narratives are a fundamental means for humans to encode and make meaning of their experiences. Understanding and describing the many strands of development involved in the process of narration is a daunting task, but much progress has been made since Labov (Labov & Waletsky, 1967; Labov, 1972) drew linguists' attention to naturally occurring narratives in people's everyday lives and sought to apply basic structural linguistic analysis techniques to narrative functions. Only a few years later, the foundational work of Halliday and Hasan (1976) set the path for the targeted study of microstructures or the particular links that creates cohesiveness between sentences.

The development of narrative skills in children is a fascinating process that involves several stages. Here's a general overview of how narrative development typically unfolds:

i.   Emergence of Personal Narratives (Preschool Years): During the preschool years (around 3-5 years old), children start to engage in personal narratives. They begin by recounting events from their own lives, usually simply and chronologically. These narratives often involve the child as the main character and focus on their immediate experiences.

ii. Expansion of Narrative Structure (Early Elementary School): As children enter the early elementary school years (around 6-8 years old), their narratives become more elaborate and structured. They start incorporating elements such as characters, settings, and plots into their stories. The narratives may still be relatively simple, but they begin to demonstrate a clearer beginning, middle, and end.

iii. Development of Coherent and Complex Narratives (Middle Childhood): In middle childhood (around 9-12 years old), children's narratives become more coherent and complex. They start to use more advanced vocabulary, sentence structures, and descriptive details. They also begin to develop more sophisticated storylines, with multiple characters, conflicts, and resolutions.

iv. Understanding Narrative Elements (Early Adolescence): During early adolescence (around 12-14 years old), children gain a deeper understanding of narrative elements and storytelling techniques. They can analyze and discuss the structure, themes, and character development in stories. They may experiment with different genres, such as fantasy, mystery, or science fiction, and show a growing ability to express their ideas and perspectives through narratives.

v.   Refinement and Personal Expression (Late Adolescence): In late adolescence (around 15-18 years old), narrative skills continue to develop, focusing on refining storytelling abilities and expressing personal thoughts and emotions. Teenagers may explore more complex themes, engage in introspective narratives, and experiment with various narrative techniques. They may also begin to create

narratives in different forms, such as written stories, poetry, plays, or even digital media.

It's important to note that these stages are approximate and can vary from child to child. Factors such as cultural influences, language development, exposure to literature, and individual experiences can also impact the development of narrative skills in children.

Narrative plays a significant role in the development of pragmatic skills, which refer to a person's ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Here are some ways in which narrative helps in developing pragmatic skills:

a) Contextual Understanding: Narratives provide children with exposure to different social situations, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. By engaging with narratives, children learn to understand and interpret social contexts, including appropriate language use, tone of voice, and nonverbal cues.

b) Perspective-Taking: Narratives often involve characters with different perspectives, emotions, and intentions. Through exposure to diverse narratives, children learn to understand and empathize with others' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This helps them develop perspective-taking skills, which are crucial for effective communication and social interactions.

c) Conversation Skills: Narratives provide models of conversational structures and techniques. Children learn about turn-taking, topic maintenance, and coherent storytelling by observing how characters interact and engage in dialogue within a narrative. These skills are transferable to real-life conversations and contribute to effective communication with others.

d) Pragmatic Awareness: Narrative texts contain implicit and explicit information that children need to infer and interpret. As children engage with narratives, they develop pragmatic awareness, including understanding sarcasm, humour, irony, and figurative language. They learn to recognize and use these language features appropriately in social interactions.

e) Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution: Many narratives present characters facing challenges and conflicts. By following these stories, children observe how characters navigate problems, make decisions, and resolve conflicts. Narratives provide examples of problem-solving strategies, negotiation, compromise, and effective communication, which children can apply in their social interactions.

f) Narrative Structure: Understanding the structure of narratives helps children organize and present their thoughts and experiences coherently. By learning about story elements such as characters, settings, events, and resolutions, children develop the ability to structure their narratives and communicate their ideas more effectively.

In summary, narratives provide a rich source of social and linguistic experiences that support the development of pragmatic skills. Through exposure to narratives, children learn about social contexts, perspective-taking, conversation skills, pragmatic awareness, problem-solving, and narrative structure, all of which contribute to their ability to use language appropriately and effectively in social interactions.

Present literature on how children secure complete pragmatic capability expands on newer perspectives to comprehend children's preliminary responsiveness to pragmatic aspects and attributes. This work additionally focuses on a few components that permit children to

conquer early impediments and acquire sufficient communication skills. In addition to this, certain principles for adequate communication and their relation to the psychological development of children were studied as well. As a result, it was concluded that implementation of these principles varies as per the child's growing ability and understanding of language in the social context. This phenomenon possesses important consequences for the adequate language learning of a child. For the new learner, turning out to be pragmatically competent means getting ready to overcome any issues between what words and sentences mean and what the speaker planned to convey by uttering them in a particular setting (Jose, 2014). As per the needs of their converser, preschool children are determined to learn patterns focusing upon alteration of their speaking styles. It is also important to highlight mannerism and traits in nature that begins to develop by the age of two. These two-year-olds begin to change their response when requested more politely. It was also observed that a four-year-old will converse differently with a two year than a child of his age (Matthews, Biney, & Abbot-Smith, 2018).

Moreover, young children tell each many forms of narratives such as recall of personal event, their fantasies or a movie. It is important to note that half of their conversational narratives are based on real personal experiences. The narration of past events is an important aspect of social interaction. Children's pragmatic competencies are improved through narratives. Pragmatic competencies are enhanced when children learn to share their experiences within specific social groups by following sociocultural norms. Through these practices, children are exposed to different points of view of others (Fivush, Haden, & Reese 2006). The range of the narrative is possibly affected by many factors. The size of the narrative grows as the child grows. McCabe and her colleagues (McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1983) analyzed the personal events of young children and described the development sequence of the narrative. According to McCabe, three and half year-old child can combine two events in their longest narrative (Two event Narrative), whereas a four-year-old can narrate two events that occurred at the same time but might be out of sequence (Leap frog). Nonetheless, five-year-old do not face any problem in sequencing an event, but they face difficulty in ending their personal narrative. A six-year-old, meanwhile narrates a well-formed story focusing on who, what, and where something happened and narrates a sequence of events that builds to some sort of climax and then goes on to resolve itself by telling how things turned out. This is known as Classic Narrative (Peterson & McCabe, 1983).

Conversely in Pakistan, no substantial work has been done except a research on the personal narrative skills of children which explored the personal narrative skills of Urdu-speaking preschoolers, aged between 4 and 5 years.. This was the first research that highlighted the narrative skills of Urdu-speaking preschoolers (Hamdani etal., 2019).

3.   Research Methodology

The research method consists of a description of the sample, the Instrument used in the study and a detailed procedure with ethical considerations.

3.1. Sample

A sample size (N=40) of children was collected from three private schools in Rawalpindi. The sample further consists of two groups of preschoolers. Group I included children from

the age range of 4 years to 4 years and 11 months (n=20) and group II includes children from the age range 5 years to 5 years and 11 months(n=20) respectively. The sample included both boys and girls. Non-probability purposive sampling was used in the study to acquire the data. The inclusion criterion was that children with no speech and language difficulties were included and their first language had to be Urdu. The exclusion criteria entailed children with speech and language difficulties, medical conditions, common comorbid conditions, physical, and cognitive psychological disorders.

3.2. Instrument

The pragmatic and Narrative skill instrument (PNSI) Urdu version developed by Qadeer (2019) was used to assess the pragmatic and narrative skills in children. The instrument further contains two separate parts. The first part of the instrument aims at assessing the pragmatic and narrative skills in children in the age range of 4 years to 4 years and 11 months (group I) and the second part is for children from the age range of 5 years to 5 years and 11 months (group II).

First Part consists of three activities. In Activity 1, children were asked to describe their favourite story or a game and the aim of the activity was to assess the topic maintenance and topic shift (Pragmatic skills). Activity 2 was used to assess the narrative skill of children by asking about their daily routine, favourite cartoons, and favourite game. Activity 3 was used to assess the pragmatic skill of children and It included questions related to initiations e.g. Greeting, starting the conversation and how the child ended the conversation.

The second part of the instrument consists of three activities. Activity 1 was used to assess the pragmatic skills of the children and it included questions like "Which story will they choose to tell their family and how it will be described?", "How will they retell the same story to their teacher and how differently will they tell it?" and "How will they narrate the same story to their friends and will describe it based on an informality between them". Activity 2 was to assess the narrative skills of the children and the questions included were "Identify and describe the main elements of the plot, story setting and characters in a story that the researcher told them." and "Spontaneous storytelling with proper start, middle and end by the children". Activity 3 was used to assess the pragmatic skill of children and It included questions related to initiations e.g. Greeting, starting the conversation and how the child ended the conversation.

3.3. Procedure

Initially written permission was taken from three private schools (Dar-e-Arkum, SLS and Sadi's Ecole) in Rawalpindi to conduct the study. The purpose and procedure of the study were explained in detail to school authorities. Later oral and written consent was taken from parents of children fulfilling the inclusion criteria of the study. The data was collected individually from each participant. The session with the participant lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. During the session report was built first later questions were asked by the researcher and responses were audio recorded. For audio recording prior permission was obtained in written from the school authorities and parents. Later the audio recordings were transcribed and coded by two independent researchers. Binary coding was done and a score of "one" was allocated for the correct response and "zero" for the incorrect response. The average score of two independent raters was calculated and analysis was done using SPSS 22.0.

4. Results and Discussion

The sample of typical forty children was analyzed using SPSS 22.

Table 1
Pragmatic skills (Topic Maintenance and topic shift) of 4 years to 4 years and 11 months (Group I) (N=20)

	f	%
Narrates their Favorite Story or Game		
Maintains Topic	11	55
Shifts the Topic	9	45
Does the child take initiative in greeting?		
Yes	17	85
No	3	15
Did the child initiated the conversation?		
Yes	9	45
No	11	55
Did the child appropriately end the conversation?		
Yes	14	70
No	6	30

Table 2
Narrative skills of 4 years to 4 years and 11 months (Group I) (N=20)

	F	%
Narrative Skill		
Below age	13	65
Age Appropriate	5	25
Above Age	2	10

Table 1 & 2 reflected that 55 % of four-year-olds maintained the topic while narrating their favourite game or story and only 45% shifted from the main topic. It is important to highlight that 65% of four-year-olds did not produce age-appropriate narration whereas 25% of narrations were age appropriate and 10% were above age level. Eighty-five per cent of children-initiated greetings while 15% did not initiate the greetings and 45% initiated the conversation too. It is important to highlight 70% of children properly ended the conversation.

Table 3

Pragmatic skills (selection of Topic Maintenance, greetings) of 5 years to 5 years and 11 months *(Group II) (N=20)*

	F	*%*
Selection of Topic as per Audience &		
It same Story & Same way	10	50
Different Story & Same Way	8	40
Different Story & Different Way	2	10
Does the child take initiative in greeting?		
Yes	17	85
No	3	15
Did the child initiated the conversation?		
Yes	12	60
No	8	40
Did the child appropriately end the conversation?		
Yes	14	70
No	6	30

Table 3 indicated that 50% of five years old would narrate the same story in the same way when addressing parents, teachers and their friends. Whereas 40% would choose different stories to narrate to parents, friends and teachers. Only 10% of five -year-old not only would select different stories but their way of narrating would not be the same. Whereas 70% of the children end the conversation appropriately and 30% left without saying anything.

Table 4

Narrative skills of 5 years to 5 years and 11 months *(Group II) (N=20)*

	F	*%*
Story Telling		
Missing	14	70
Beginning, Middle & End	6	30

Table 4 reflected that 70% of the children in the activity "storytelling" did not have a proper beginning, middle and end. Whereas only 30 % of the children were able to produce stories with a beginning, middle and end.

4.1. Discussion

The main aim of the study was to assess the pragmatic and narrative skills of preschool children. Data was collected from private schools in Rawalpindi from two age groups between 4 to 5 years old. Their data was analyzed using SPSS 22.0.

According to this study, when the majority of four-year-old children were asked to narrate their favourite story/ game they were able to maintain the topic. Interestingly, this finding of the study was supported by the findings of another research study. Never the purpose of the aforementioned study was to investigate the influence of different play situations on

topic maintenance performed by four to five-year-old children. The three play situations were miniature hospital, Legos and hospital toys respectively. The finding of the study under discussion revealed that children were found to maintain the topic during the Legos play as compared to the other two play situations. It suggested that specific play situations are supportive of the development of conversational maintenance skills in young children. This also showed that when children are given a topic of their interest they tend to maintain it. The findings of the above-mentioned study correlated with the current study findings (Wanska, Pohlman, & Bedrosian, 1989).

But it is interesting to note that even though this age group did not have any trouble in maintaining their topic however their narrative skills were not age appropriate. According to the literature, children between the ages of three to five years old engaged with other children in longer and more complex narratives. In one study sixty-six, five-year-old children were shown a movie and they were divided into two groups. One group had a discussion with an adult after watching the movie whereas the other did not. The group of children who discussed the movie with the adult had more detailed stories and were better able to answer more complex questions. This finding complements the fact that children can better recall and answer at higher levels of narrative comprehension than those whose misunderstandings are never cleared (Beck & Clarke-Stewart, 1998). It is important to highlight that the contradiction between this research and the abovementioned study may be due to the reason that the researcher never promoted the children while they were narrating their stories.

On the Contrary, initiating greetings and conversation came easily for both of these groups (four & five year-olds). Hence it can be concluded that initiation skills with age are developing. According to the pragmatic scale given by Dr. Kimberly Peters children by the age of 5 master the art of maintaining the topic and ending the conversation (Peters, 2012). According to this current study, five years old do not have the appropriate proficiency in narrating a story. This proficiency is important because it indicates language skills that are required to integrate and organize units of meaning beyond sentence structure. Assessment of narrative skills is becoming useful for assessing language abilities. These skills by many researchers are considered to be a strong link between language and literacy related to academic performance (Westby, 1991; Roth & Spekman, 1991).

Children's performance on this scale indicates that students of all abilities were included in this study. Some of the students failed to perform certain age-appropriate tasks. Usually, children who have difficulty in pragmatic language also face trouble in using the language appropriately in certain situations. Significant delays in pragmatic skills can be associated with learning disabilities and cultural differences. According to the literature children with pragmatic language impairment affects their educational attainments. They compared the reading, comprehension and written expression skills with specific language impairments. Fifty-nine primary school-age children and twelve specific learning impairments were recruited. Their literacy skills were examined and revealed that a high level of literacy impairment was found among both groups (Freed, Adams, & Lockton, 2015).

5. Conclusion

The study indicates that children belonging to group one(4 years – 11 months) had no difficulty in terminating the conversation appropriately and other activities involving requesting, initiating conversation, and topic maintenance received good scores. But in a similar group, the children did not perform well on narrative skills. In group II (4 years – 11 months), children faced difficulty in activity based on narrating a story (beginning, middle & end). The other reason is also based on the fact that there is no formal education of narrative making rendered to children even in our mainstream schools. Nonetheless, this group performed well on initiation questions (greeting and initiating conversation).

The limitation and suggestions from this present study highlight that a larger sample size needs to be considered and more schools need to be included. All stakeholder including school teachers parents should also be included to get the comprehensive view children pragmatic and narrative skills. It can be concluded from this research that children who produce shorter, limited vocabulary and face difficulty in maintaining a topic may struggle academically also. In preschool, a variety of practices and activities that support language comprehension and application in social and practical contexts can help young children improve their pragmatic and narrative skills. More research needs to be conducted on Urdu-speaking pre-schoolers to assess their narratives. The influence of the family and socio-cultural environment is also important. Further research needs to be conducted to find the influence of mother-child interaction on language skills**.**

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