

# The development of oral narrative abilities of young children in rural areas

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Prior research has documented children's developmental advancement in narrative productivity and structure from preschool to school years (e.g., Berman & Slobin, 1994; Justice et al., 2006; Khan et al., 2016); however, most studies were based on children in urban and suburban areas. With limited educational resources, and lower income levels, rural environments were found to have an impact on children's development (Clark et al., 2022); however, rural children have been comparatively understudied in terms of oral language and more specifically narrative skills. To fill the gap, this longitudinal study aimed to examine the development of oral language and narrative abilities of Mandarin-speaking children in mountainous areas of central Taiwan.

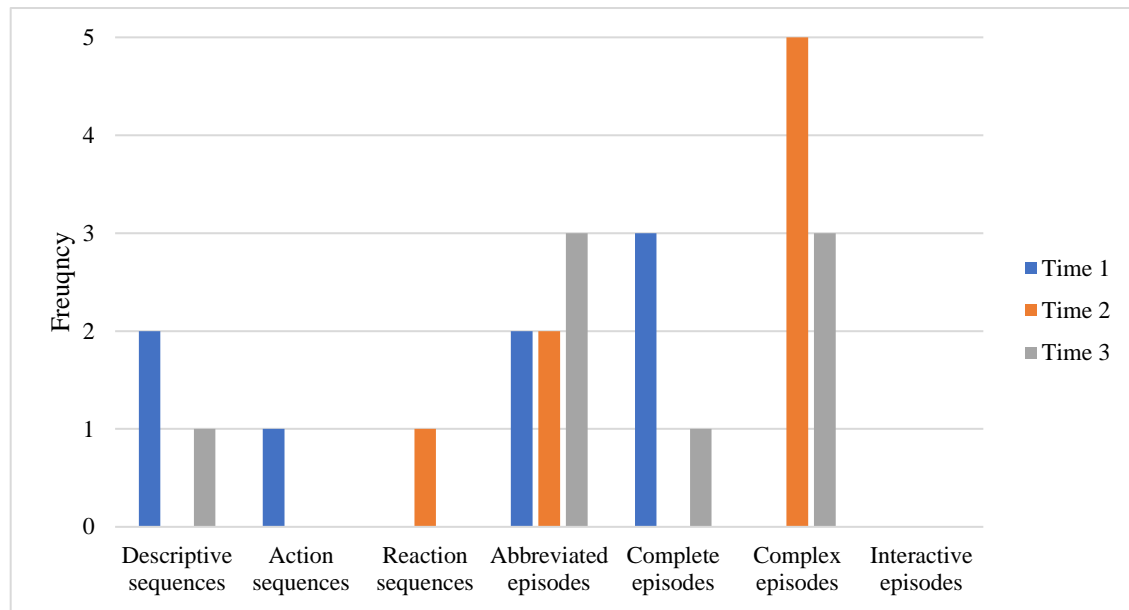
The purposes of this research were twofold: (a) to investigate whether rural children make age-related progressions on language and narrative abilities, and (b) to understand whether these children show developmental gains for all narrative aspects. Eight children were followed from kindergarten (*Mage* = 5.6) until grade 2 (*Mage* = 7.4). General language (expressive and receptive) abilities were assessed yearly by norm-referenced tests (Lin et al., 2008, 2009). Also, each participant performed narrative tasks yearly, whereby picture-book-based narratives were elicited. Narrative abilities were examined in terms of narrative microstructure and macrostructure. The former comprises word diversity, type-token ratio, story length, and syntactic complexity; the latter were indexed by story grammar components, and story structure levels<sup>1</sup> (Glenn & Stein, 1980; Hedberg & Westby, 1993).

Results from ANOVAs displayed main effects of Age for expressive and receptive language measures, showing children's general language abilities significantly improved from kindergarten to grade 2. Regarding narrative skills, however, Age effects were not significant for microstructural measures, nor for story grammar components. Only on story structure levels, children showed age-related progressions between kindergarten and grade 1 (Figure).

Overall, our findings are consistent with the literature showing age-related advancement in young children's general language abilities. In line with Lindgren (2021), we noted that different narrative aspects develop differently in the early childhood stage. Given that narrative production draws upon not only linguistic skills, but also cognitive abilities such as organization, sequencing, and perspective-taking, it is presumably challenging for young children to integrate expressive proficiency with structural competence. Not surprisingly, the development in narrative microstructure was not on a par with the developmental gains in story structure levels, despite that children already made significant progresses in general language abilities. These together suggest that children's ability to produce well-formed stories with rich expressions is still developing in early childhood. Also noteworthy, compared with story grammar components, story structure levels seemed more sensitive to young children's changes in narrative skills. The findings are discussed in relation to socio-economic factors in rural areas (Poolman et al., 2017), and insights from studies on ontogenetic development (e.g., Karmiloff-Smith, 1985). The outcome of this study advances our understanding of narrative development of Mandarin-speaking children in rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> The 7 levels of story structure are shown in the figure below.



**Figure.** Development of story structure levels.

Time 1: Preschool, *Mage* = 5.6; Time 2: Grade 1, *Mage* = 6.5; Time 3: Grade 2, *Mage* = 7.4

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