



# Comparison of Personal Versus Fictional Narratives of Children With Language Impairment

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**Purpose:** Personal narratives are common in children's conversations, recommended as the appropriate genre for early writing by educators, and part of many high-stakes tests, possibly because they tend to be better formed than fictional narratives. However, current practice in the field of speech-language pathology employs fictional narratives in assessment, intervention, and study of children with impaired language development. This article explored performance on personal versus fictional narratives by children with language impairment (LI), hypothesizing that performance on the former would be better and a minimal relationship between performances in the 2 genres.

**Method:** Twenty-seven children age 7;0–9;9 (years;months) with LI orally produced personal and fictional narratives (responses to a wordless

picture book). Narratives were analyzed by raters blind to experimental hypotheses using high-point analysis and an analysis derived from scoring of a high-stakes composition for 4th grade.

**Results:** High-point ratings of personal significantly exceeded those of fictional narratives. Disproportionate fictional stories did not meet minimal narrative criteria. However, more personal narratives than would be expected by chance did. The analyses were significantly correlated. Quality of a child's performance of personal was minimally related to that of fictional narratives.

**Conclusions:** Clinicians may want to consider functional aspects of personal narratives.

**Key Words:** children, language disorders, assessment, narrative

The term *narrative* can and has been applied to various genres, especially personal narratives and fictional or make-believe ones. Personal narrative is a recount of a real past experience, while a fictional narrative is either a composition or a recall of a previously heard or read story. Most research has studied one genre or the other; the handful of research that has studied both genres is reviewed below. This article addresses the relative differences between eliciting personal versus fictional narratives, especially with reference to children who struggle with language acquisition. We hypothesized that children with language impairment (LI) tell better personal than fictional narratives, given that they must engage in the former on a daily basis inside and outside of their classrooms.

## *How Narrative Skills Are Related to School Achievement and Literacy*

Children's ability to produce narratives has been linked to their successful acquisition of literacy (Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001; Scarborough, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001). For example, kindergarten narrative production by children enrolled in Head Start programs was one of four measures that predicted fourth- and seventh-grade reading comprehension (Tabors et al., 2001). A review of scientific research related to reading by a national committee revealed kindergartners' sentence or story recall as one of the "strongest single

predictors” of reading difficulty (Snow et al., 1998, pp. 110, 117).

In addition to its importance for reading comprehension, the ability to produce a narrative—particularly a good personal narrative—has been endorsed as a critical component of writing instruction in elementary school. Calkins (1994, pp. 15–16) wrote, “When we [teachers] suggest that [students] choose their own topics for writing, they often write about superheroes or retell television dramas. . . . When we [instead] help children know that their lives do matter, we are teaching writing.” Calkins requested of teachers that they encourage children to write about their own lives rather than recycling the fictional stories they are exposed to; she wrote, “I want children to experience what it is to find meaning in the moments of their lives, and so I want to help them to write about moments that do not come already packaged with ready-made significance” (p. 119). Fordham (1989) argued that the benefits of encouraging students to tell personal rather than fictional stories include relevant content and straightforward organization, and thus these self-generated, self-relevant narratives make optimal early reading material. Advocates such as these have had a wide impact on educators. High-stakes tests mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), used in the state of residence of the first author, often ask children to write a personal narrative.

### ***Differences Between Fictional and Personal Narratives***

The few studies of relative incidence of personal versus fictional narratives in freely occurring conversation suggest that the former are far more prevalent than the latter outside the clinic or laboratory. Preece (1987) studied naturally occurring conversation among 5- and 6-year-olds and found that the majority of those children’s productions were personal narratives; fewer than 4% of the narratives were original fiction. Ghezzi, Bijou, Umbreit, and Chao (1987) studied free conversation of 5 children who were 11 years old interacting with a younger (6-year-old) child, an age peer, and an adult. Most interactions with all three audiences were narrative. Three of the children produced only personal narratives, while the other 2 did so at least 85% of the time to all audiences. Children naturally use personal narratives in social interactions far more often than they do fictional ones. This practice facilitates the development of better structure in the former (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999; Peterson & McCabe, 1983) than in fictional stories. In addition, considerable research documents the extensive contextual support parents provide in early conversations about real past events with their children (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, for a review). The very disproportionate frequency of personal versus fictional narratives in the daily conversation directed toward children also means that the former are more likely to be useful than the latter on a daily basis in social interactions, that parents provide extensive scaffolded support to their children to become narrators of personal experience, and that, in effect, children practice personal narrative far more than they do fictional narrative.

Children with typical language development (TLD) are capable of producing complete and complex oral personal

narratives by the time they enter first grade (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). They are capable of incorporating the precipitation and resolution of goals in personal oral narratives before they can do so when responding to fictional story stems in other studies (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Hudson and Shapiro (1991) found that a larger percentage of children with TLD in preschool, first, and third grade incorporated proportionally more structural characteristics (e.g., maintenance of tense, perspective, temporal sequencing, inclusion of key features such as explanations or problems, inclusion of endings) in personal narratives as compared with either scripts or make-believe stories. Labov (1972) documented a remarkable lack of evaluation in fictional (television show recapitulation) versus personal narratives told by African American children and adolescents with TLD.

Berman (1995) analyzed numerous studies of typically developing speakers of Hebrew age 2 through 12 years, as well as adults, performing oral scripts, personal narratives, and fictional narratives in response to a series of pictures or a wordless picture book and a film. Berman found that preschool children could produce personal narratives but engaged in isolated event description when telling “The Frog Story.” Shiro (2003) studied personal and fictional (film retelling) narratives for first and fourth graders in Venezuela and found that younger children and children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds were at a greater disadvantage when telling fictional versus personal narratives. The weak correlation of evaluation she found in the two genres (one that accounted for less than 5% of the overall variance) led Shiro (2003, p. 192) to conclude that narratives abilities such as the ability to evaluate did not transfer from one narrative genre to the other. Allen, Kertoy, Sherblom, and Petit (1994) also compared personal narratives to fictional tellings of the wordless picture book *A Boy, A Frog, and a Dog* (Mayer, 1967), a story stem, and sets of four sequence pictures. Children (all with TLD) who scored high on sentence structure told personal narratives with greater numbers of complete and multiple episodes, though their fictional stories were longer than their personal narratives and contained more action sequences and multiple episodes. The authors suggested that personal narratives follow a different developmental path from fictional stories. Similar to this view, in a review of many different studies of representations of events, including various kinds of personal and fictional event sequences, Bourg, Bauer, and van den Broek (1997) found that different genres gave rise to different pictures of developmental progression. Specifically, the authors focused on the possibility that event comprehension and representation may develop in a “descriptive to temporal to causal to goal-oriented to thematic” pattern, but acknowledged that work on autobiographical memory did not reveal the “temporal to causal to goal-oriented” pattern to be found in other genres such as picture sequence narrative (Bourg et al., 1997, p. 393).

Bamberg (1994) studied the production of oral narratives in response to the wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969) from 3-, 5-, and 9-year-old German children and adults with TLD. He found that in a variety of ways the younger children engaged more in present tense picture description than past tense event narration per se

(Bamberg, 1994, pp. 210–211). However he cautioned against presuming that 3-year-olds must go through a picture description phase before they engage in true narrative. Bamberg originally proposed use of the wordless picture book to Slobin (M. Bamberg, personal communication, January 9, 2007). Use of a common book originated in the cognitive psychology tradition that values use of the same (controlled) stimulus to get at children's conceptualizations of temporality expressed in different languages. However, early on, researchers became aware that the child does much more than name events depicted in individual pictures. The "Frog Story Project" revealed that narration of a wordless picture book was not simply or even primarily a cognitive expression but an interpersonal process firmly rooted in discourse. In other words, such narration arose from conversational settings (usually between children and adults) instead of from the child's mind or brain (Bamberg, 2002, in press). Further evidence that wordless picture narration is rooted in social interaction rather than universal mental structures inherent in an individual child is the fact that at least two projects (Berman & Slobin, 1994; John & Berney, 1968), conducted by very different researchers from different disciplines in different decades for different purposes, yielded considerable evidence in each case of cultural differences in narration despite the use of a controlled picture book stimulus.

A few studies have investigated both personal and fictional narrative production in children, some of whom have language disorders. Kaderavek and Sulzby (2000) found that while emergent readings of favorite storybooks were longer than personal narratives produced by preschool children with and without LI, personal narratives contained more middles and ends than the fiction. Hadley (1998) sampled a number of different kinds of oral discourse produced by one speaker with LI (age 8;7 [years;months]). Personal narratives were structurally more complex than fictional retellings. Furthermore, retellings resulted in much higher rates of mazing, or production errors. Losh and Capps (2003) investigated children with autism spectrum disorder versus children with TLD in their production of personal narratives versus wordless picture book stories. They found that there was no difference between the two groups in terms of the extent to which they evaluated (i.e., described the emotional impact of) fictional stories. The children with TLD, however, used evaluation in their personal narratives significantly more than their fictional ones. This suggests that personal narratives meant more to them than did fictional ones.

In summary, the few studies that have been done comparing oral personal with fictional narratives have found that children with TLD, as well as those with LI, are better in many ways at producing personal than fictional stories (Allen et al., 1994; Berman, 1995; Hadley, 1998; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000; Losh & Capps, 2003), which is what one would expect given the differential extent to which children practice the two genres in everyday life.

Moreover, there are no obvious obstacles to the use of personal versus fictional narratives due to cultural differences among children, though a thorough discussion of the problems that Standard American English poses for dialect speakers may be found in Perry and Delpit (1998) and would be well beyond the scope of this article. Note that to date the

authors are unaware of any research systematically comparing use of dialect features in factual versus personal narratives. What has been documented, however, is that fact-based stories are much more relevant and popular with Latino children than reading beautifully illustrated fictional stories (Janes & Kermani, 2001).

### Assessing Narratives

Current practice in the field of speech-language pathology generally employs fictional narratives in assessment (e.g., Gillam & Pearson, 2004; Justice et al., 2006; Strong, 1998), intervention (e.g., Cannizzaro & Coelho, 2002; Finestack, Fey, Sokol, Ambrose, & Swanson, 2006; Gillam, McFadden, & van Kleeck, 1995; Hayward & Schneider, 2000; Hoffman, Norris, & Monjure, 1990; Klecan-Aker, Flahive, & Fleming, 1997; Swanson, Fey, Mills, & Hood, 2005), and study of children with LI (e.g., Hay & Moran, 2005). Current practice focuses mainly on eliciting fictional narratives using wordless picture books; there are at least three assessment instruments that focus on picture book stimuli (Gillam & Pearson, 2004; Miller, Gillam, & Peña, 2001; Strong, 1998). Countless other books and articles have also focused on this form of narrative and story grammar analyses of the narratives produced in response to those books (e.g., Merritt & Liles, 1987, 1989; Miller et al., 2001; Paul, 2006; Roth & Spekman, 1986; Scott, 1999; Westby, 1999). The use of picture books has been advocated *because* such books display the narrative structure valued by story grammar analysis (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Use of the books is convenient, and scoring is uniform and relatively easy (Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997; Paul, 2006).

Nonetheless, the popularity of fictional narratives and story grammar analyses ought to be examined. For one thing, in a number of previous reports, story grammar analysis has not differentiated typical from impaired language development (Graybeal, 1981; Griffith, Ripich, & Dastoli, 1986; Hanson, 1978; Hewitt & Duchan, 1995; Johnston, 1982; Jordan, Murdoch, & Buttsworth, 1991; McConaughy, 1985; Merritt & Liles, 1987, 1989; Ripich & Griffith, 1988; Roth & Spekman, 1986; Weaver & Dickinson, 1982). Secondly, the decision to promote fictional narrative production may not result in adequate advancement of skill in important authentic narrative tasks that clients are asked to engage in both in and outside of school. For example, Cannizzaro and Coelho (2002, p. 1072) found that even though they improved the ability of a 39-year-old man with traumatic brain injury to produce complete story grammar episodes, this increase only marginally improved the quality of his clinical stories and did not appear to carry over at all to social interchanges.

This lack of impact of fictional narrative therapy on social interactions is a formidable limitation because LI often entails personal narrative discourse so disordered that it would compromise social interactions. In past research, we have elicited personal narratives from individuals with traumatic brain injury (Biddle, McCabe, & Bliss, 1996) and both English-speaking (Miranda, McCabe, & Bliss, 1998) and Spanish-speaking children with language learning disorders (McCabe & Bliss, 2004–2005). We used a form of analysis that examined a number of discourse components, and we found that

children with specific language impairment, compared to peers with TLD, told shorter personal narratives that often omitted key information and violated chronological sequences of events (McCabe & Bliss, 2004–2005; Miranda et al., 1998). Children and adults with traumatic brain injury, compared to peers with TLD, were significantly more dysfluent and also omitted much key information (Biddle et al., 1996).

In contrast to the aforementioned limitations of research and therapy directed toward fictional narrative, some successful therapeutic approaches to personal narrative have been documented. Specifically, to date there have been two empirical investigations of intervention targeting personal narratives of children with TLD (Boland, Haden, & Ornstein, 2003; Peterson et al., 1999). Peterson and colleagues worked with mothers of preschool children with TLD from low-income communities. They taught the mothers how to elicit and elaborate the narratives of their children. They encouraged them to talk about one topic instead of frequently changing topics, ask *wh*-questions (especially *where* and *when*), use nonspecific prompts to encourage narrative discourse, and talk about the topics that the child wanted to discuss. In-depth training was carried out. A control group of mothers (randomly designated as such) who were not provided this training was also included in the study. The narrative abilities of the children whose mothers received the training improved 1 year after the program was completed. The children's narratives were more elaborate and contained more information than before the intervention occurred. Similarly, Boland and colleagues (2003) successfully trained mothers in the use of an elaborative conversational style in the context of unfolding (rather than already past) events, and this training resulted in improved remembering of events.

### Present Study

In the present study, we focused solely on a population of school-age children with LI rather than comparing them with children with TLD. We did so because we wished to build upon the work of Kaderavek and Sulzby (2000) and Hadley (1998), extending their findings to a larger sample of school-age children with LI. Such children were likely to be receiving clinical work with fictional stories as per current practice. We hypothesized that children with LI would prove more competent at producing personal narratives than they would fictional ones because they are accustomed to parents, teachers, and peers asking them such questions as "What did you do in school today?" and therefore have had more experience producing personal narratives as opposed to narratives prompted by wordless picture books. We further hypothesized that fictional narratives told in response to a wordless picture book by school-age children with LI would often resemble those from preschool children with TLD in that the latter often produce nonnarrative picture descriptions in this context (Berman, 1995).

## Method

### Participants

Twenty-seven children (16 boys, 11 girls) who were diagnosed with LI participated in this project. The children ranged

in age from 7;0 to 9;9 ( $M = 8;4$ ,  $SD = 11$  months). Children with TLD of this age would be expected to tell a complete oral narrative (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). School records indicated that the children exhibited intelligence, hearing, visual acuity, and emotional development within normal limits. The children were all native speakers of English. Twenty one of the participants came from European North American backgrounds, 5 were from Hispanic cultures, and 1 was from an African American community. Academic reports indicated that they were from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds.

They attended two schools that enroll only children who have been diagnosed as having LI, based on standardized test results administered by certified speech-language pathologists. They were in special classes that do not correspond to conventional classes in public schools. The administration battery included formal tests of language development, including the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (Gardiner, 2000), the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals, Third Edition (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 1995), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised (Dunn, 1981). Not every child received all tests; speech-language pathologists determined what test(s) to give each child. Child participants scored 2 *SDs* below the mean for their chronological age on one or more of these measures. Their nonverbal intelligence scores were at or above 85 as measured by a standardized test (e.g., Test of Nonverbal Intelligence, Third Edition; Brown, Sherbenou, & Johnsen, 1977). All children were diagnosed as having LI, based on their test results and the clinical judgment of speech-language pathologists. Test data for each child were not released due to school policy.

### Narrative Elicitation Procedures

Two narratives—one personal, one fictional—were elicited in a random order. Personal narratives were elicited with the conversational map procedure (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). A verbal prompt was presented that described briefly a personal experience of the elicitor such as going to the doctor, engaging in a fight, spilling something, or having a bee sting. The child was asked, "Did this ever happen to you?" If a child replied no, that she or he had not had such an experience, a different verbal prompt was used. If the child responded yes, the child was encouraged to describe the experience (e.g., "Tell me about it."). When the child stopped talking, the interviewer responded to the narrative in a manner designed to encourage elaboration by using neutral subprompts. For all discourse elicitations, four nonspecific prompts were used to encourage further discourse. They were "and?" "uh huh?" "anything else?" and "tell me more." These neutral prompts were used to support discourse while not influencing the content of a child's message (McCabe & Rollins, 1994). This conversational map method has previously been used with children with similar impairments and from similar cultural backgrounds (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McCabe & Rollins, 1994; Miranda et al., 1998).

*Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969), the fictional narrative used in the present procedure, has been used with children from similar backgrounds (Strong, 1998). The elicitation procedure followed Berman and Slobin (1994). The children were instructed to look at all of the pictures before

beginning the task. If a child skipped any pictures, the adult turned the pages back so that the child looked at all of the pictures. After the child had looked at all of the pictures, the adult asked him or her to tell the story. The children looked at the pictures while telling the story to minimize the burden on their memory. If the child stopped before the task was completed, the four neutral subprompts were used to encourage the child to continue telling the story. Replication of the Berman and Slobin (1994) procedure, which included having pictures available during a child's telling, was necessary in order to compare the present data with those presented by these prior investigators. All samples were elicited, audio-taped, and transcribed by trained student clinicians. They were checked for accuracy by the second author. Narratives were simply transcribed in Microsoft Word, without use of additional software.

### Procedures

Two independent analyses were used to determine the quality of narrative. The first was high-point analysis, which has been used to study the development of oral personal narratives in children and adolescents with TLD and looks at the form of a narrative taken as a whole (Labov, 1972; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). In this project it was also applied to fictional narratives in an effort to look at the overall form (including affective and aesthetic elements) of those narratives as well, a practice tested and endorsed by Hedberg and Westby (1993). In addition, a new approach was devised for this project because children's oral narratives now commonly serve as the linguistic resource they need to tap in order to pass the high-stakes test in states such as Massachusetts. For example, the composition prompt of the English Language Arts assessment of MCAS in 2006 was the following: "Think about your favorite thing to do in your free time. Maybe you like to pretend, play sports, read, play a musical instrument, dance, or do something totally different. Write a story about a fun time that you had doing your favorite thing. Give enough details to show the reader what happened and why it was fun" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). The writing prompt for 2004 fourth-grade students was similar: "Think about a time you tried something new. Maybe it was the first day of school, the first time on a bike or bus, the first time you tried a skill learned in class, or the first time you tried a new sport. Write a story about when you did something new for the first time. Give enough detail to show the reader what happened." While exhaustive information about all states' writing prompts is hard to obtain, we did find that Texas, Alaska, and Arizona also request personal narratives, as Calkins (1994) recommends.

The rubrics put in place to score that composition were applied to the children's oral productions in this research. In addition, as length has often served as a rough estimate of complexity in narrative (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) and because it is mentioned specifically on the MCAS writing scoring guide (composition Grade 4: "length and complexity of essay provide opportunity for student to show control of standard English conventions"; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006), the number of words in each narrative was determined to see whether the genres differed in this regard.

### Coding

Narrative has been defined as the oral recapitulation of past experience by matching a sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that presumably actually occurred (Labov, 1972). In this project, "a *minimal narrative* was defined as a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered" (Labov, 1972, p. 360). Because past tense is the dominant tense for most narratives given by 5- and 9-year-old children (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Peterson & McCabe, 1983), a narrative at minimum required two sequenced past tense events. Berman and Slobin looked at the overall pattern of tense usage in fictional narrative. Those authors argued that when a participant switches between past and present, this tense change coincides with a shift from a narrative to a picture-description mode in narration of a frog story; in other words, the presence of an isolated past event in narration of a frog story told primarily in present tense picture-description mode was not considered to be a narrative.

Two graduate students who were blind to the experimental hypotheses (to prevent experimenter bias) rated all 54 narratives for quality using both high-point analysis (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) and the MCAS writing scoring guide for composition. This latter is the criterion for assessing the writing abilities of students in Massachusetts in 4th, 7th, and 10th grades. All students in Massachusetts at present must pass this test in 10th grade to graduate from high school. Because oral language skill is the resource for writing, we wanted to see the extent to which children with LI had oral skill.

### High-Point Analysis

This analysis focuses on the overall structure of a narrative. Each narrative was scored as one of the following types of narrative:

*Classic pattern (7 points):* The narrative orients the listener to who, what, when, and where something occurred, builds actions up to a high point, evaluatively dwells on it (by telling listeners the "important part" or how the narrator felt about the events), and then resolves it.

*Ending-at-the-high-point pattern (6 points):* The narrative builds up to a high point and then ends; there is no resolution of the climactic events.

*Chronological narrative (5 points):* The narrative contains a chronological sequence of events but no real concentration of evaluative comments in a climax.

*Leap-frogging pattern (4 points):* The narrative jumps from one event to another within an integrated experience, leaving out major events that must be inferred by the listener, and confusing the logical sequence of those events.

*Miscellaneous pattern (3 points):* The narrative contains more than two past tense events but without a logical or causal sequence to these events in the real world.

*Two-events pattern (2 points):* The narrative extensively reiterates and evaluates a couple of events, but there is no buildup to a climax.

*One-event pattern (1 point):* The discourse contains only a single past tense event, disqualifying it as a narrative according to Labov (1972), who required at least two such events. (Note that in past research we have sometimes

included a 1-point score for a one-event narrative, under a more relaxed definition of narrative than the classic Labovian one. In the present data set, no narrative of either genre received that score.)

*Nonnarrative pattern (0 points):* The discourse contains no past tense events; usually consists of present tense events and other picture description.

### MCAS Scoring Guide

This analysis was derived from the MCAS writing scoring guide for fourth-grade compositions and applied here to the oral discourses produced by children in our study by two teacher-graduate assistants blind to the hypotheses of this study:

- 6 points = rich topic/idea development; careful and/or subtle organization; effective/rich use of language.
- 5 points = full topic/idea development; logical organization; strong details; appropriate use of language.
- 4 points = moderate topic/idea development and organization; adequate, relevant details; some variety in language.
- 3 points = rudimentary topic/idea development and/or organization; basic supporting details; simplistic language.
- 2 points = limited or weak topic/idea development, organization, and/or details; limited awareness of audience and/or task.
- 1 point = little topic/idea development, organization, and/or details; little or no awareness of audience and/or task.
- 0 points: We added this score to the MCAS system due to the fact that some children did not produce an oral narrative with any appropriate topic/idea development, organization, details, or awareness of audience and/or task.

### Assessment of Reliability

Both raters independently applied both systems to all of the data. We used an adaptation of Cohen's kappa, which corrects for chance rates of agreement. The adaptation registered the fact that scorings that were discrepant by only 1 point in each system were closer than scorings that were off by more than 1 point (Altman, 1990). Agreement between the two raters was estimated to be .69 for high-point analysis, which represents substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977, p. 165). Agreement for MCAS was estimated to be .85, which is what Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165) call "almost perfect agreement." Disagreements were resolved by averaging the two ratings because 29/35 (83%) were differences of only 1 point and reflect relative differences in stringency rather than substantive disagreement about the relative quality of the productions per se. In addition, there were 5 disagreements of 2 points and only 1 of 4 points. It is important to further note, however, that the two raters were in perfect agreement about all 16 discourses that were nonnarrative, and this agreement applied to both the high-point and the MCAS analyses.

### Word Count

We used the following rules to determine the length of discourses in words: (a) we omitted filled pauses such as "a," "er," "uhh," or "um"; (b) we omitted false starts and internal

corrections (e.g., "last night, I was ... I was ... I was watching TV" counted as six words); (c) we omitted "I don't know" responses and other remarks that did not pertain to the narrative per se; (d) we counted lexicalized sound effects (e.g., "He went boom!" counted as three words); and (e) we counted unspecified pronouns but noted these separately (e.g., "the cat went like this" accompanied by a gesture counts as five words but was noted separately as containing an unspecified pronoun).

## Results

Children with LI displayed differential ability to produce personal versus fictional narratives,  $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 5.68$ ,  $p < .025$ . As Table 1 reveals, more fictional stories than would have been expected by chance were nonnarrative and fewer were narrative (as assessed by either system; recall that there was perfect agreement between the systems and the raters as to what constituted a nonnarrative). The reverse was true for personal narratives; more personal narratives were judged true narratives than fictional stories.

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for all major variables in this study. A 3 (score type)  $\times$  2 (story type) repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed a significant effect of scoring type (levels = high-point, MCAS, or word count),  $F(2, 25) = 135.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , with scores on word count naturally exceeding those on high-point analysis, which arbitrarily also exceeded those on MCAS. Of more interest is that on this same repeated measures MANOVA, there was also a significant effect of story,  $F(2, 25) = 33.470$ ,  $p < .001$ , which must be understood in the context of a significant Score  $\times$  Story interaction,  $F(2, 25) = 17.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ; while scores on personal narratives tended to exceed those on frog stories for both high-point and MCAS analyses, scores on word count for frog stories exceeded those for personal narratives. Values of the  $F$  statistic in all three cases were identical regardless of whether Pillai's trace, Wilks's lambda, Hotelling's trace, or Roy's largest root was used. In follow-up analyses, there was a significant difference in length between personal narratives ( $M = 149.9$  words,  $SD = 84.64$ ) and fictional frog stories ( $M = 282.2$  words,  $SD = 115.52$ ),  $t(26) = 5.832$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, there was a significant difference between high-point ratings of both genres; high-point ratings of personal narratives ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ) were significantly higher than those of fictional frog stories ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 2.80$ ),  $t(26) = 1.65$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed).

**TABLE 1. Number of narratives versus nonnarratives using high-point analysis.**

| Story                          | Personal narrative | Frog story |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Narrative (scored 2–7 points)  | 23 (19)            | 15 (19)    |
| Nonnarrative (scored 0 points) | 4 (8)              | 12 (8)     |

*Note.*  $\chi^2(1, N = 27) = 5.68$ ,  $p < .025$ ; the same results were found using Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System analysis. Values enclosed in parentheses represent number expected by chance.

**TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics for major variables.**

| Variable            | Minimum | Maximum | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------|---------|---------|----------|-----------|
| Age (months)        | 84      | 117.0   | 100.9    | 11.02     |
| High-point personal | 0       | 7.0     | 3.9      | 1.98      |
| High-point frog     | 0       | 6.5     | 2.9      | 2.81      |
| MCAS personal       | 0       | 4.0     | 2.0      | 1.01      |
| MCAS frog           | 0       | 4.0     | 1.6      | 1.54      |
| Words in personal   | 68      | 389.0   | 149.9    | 84.65     |
| Words in frog       | 109     | 526.0   | 282.2    | 115.52    |

Note. *N* = 27. MCAS = Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

However, there was no significant difference between MCAS ratings for the two; MCAS ratings of personal narratives ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and fictional frog stories ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) were both low on average,  $t(26) = 1.285$ ,  $p = .10$  (one-tailed).

There was a significant Pearson correlation between high-point ratings and MCAS scores for both personal,  $r(27) = .87$ ,  $p < .001$ , and frog narratives,  $r(27) = .98$ ,  $p < .001$ , so the two analyses were in substantial agreement in determining the quality of both genres of narratives. Thus, the two qualitative systems used to analyze both genres of narratives in this project—high-point analysis and an adaptation of the MCAS—proved to be highly correlated, accounting for 75% of the variance in the case of scoring personal narratives and 96% of the variance in the case of fictional ones.

Neither qualitative system of analysis was correlated with length in words. Length in words of personal narratives was not correlated with high-point,  $r(27) = .06$ , *ns*, or MCAS analysis,  $r(27) = .27$ , *ns*, nor was there any correlation between length in words and high-point,  $r(27) = -.04$ , *ns*, or MCAS analysis,  $r(27) = -.06$ , for fiction.

The quality of a child's performance on one genre was only moderately related to that child's performance on the other genre, and that is only true if one adopts the one-tailed alpha levels (under the assumption that performance in two genres can be predicted to correlate positively if they relate at all). That is, there was a modest correlation between children's performance on personal and fictional narratives using high-point analysis,  $r(27) = .33$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed), and MCAS analysis,  $r(27) = .37$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed), accounting for only 11% or 14% of the variance, respectively. Most (14, or 52%) of the children produced both personal and fictional narratives that qualified as such. Many (9, or 33%) of the children could produce personal narratives but not fictional ones. Only one child (3.7%) produced a fictional narrative but not a personal one. Three children (11%) could produce neither personal nor fictional narratives, though the form those nonnarrative discourses took differed to some extent. Examples of each of these performance patterns can be found in the Appendix.

## Discussion

This study attempted to demonstrate that children with LI are more capable of personal versus fictional narrative

discourse. Fictional discourses were significantly longer than personal ones, but fictional discourses more often than would be expected by chance were not classified as narratives. In these nonnarrative discourses, picture description was typical. As predicted, the elementary school-age children in our study performed much as did preschoolers with TLD in Berman's (1995) study. They treated the pictures in the wordless picture book task in isolation from each other and as separate pictorial units rather than a series of events. They used present tense picture description instead of past tense sequencing of events.

In past work, we found that both English-speaking (Miranda et al., 1998) and Spanish-English bilingual (McCabe & Bliss, 2004–2005) children with LI produced personal narratives that were significantly less well-developed than their peers with TLD (both matched by either language age or chronological age). In this investigation, we established that most English-speaking children with LI produced fictional narratives that were judged (by high-point analysis) to be of significantly less quality than their personal ones. This finding confirms and extends the research of others who have found the same with fewer and/or younger children (Allen et al., 1994; Berman, 1995; Hadley, 1998; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000; Losh & Capps, 2003). Examples of narrative productions of children are presented in the Appendix.

## Educational Implications

Could the argument be made that teaching children with LI how to perform the more difficult fictional narratives more expertly is valuable in and of itself? Could we essentially be instructing children to develop their creative writing? Examination of books about writing fiction suggests that telling premade stories from pictures has little or no role in writing fiction. In the introduction to this article, Calkins (1994), a renowned proponent of process writing instruction for young children, was quoted as making a clear plea for encouraging personal rather than fictional narratives at home, in nursery school and kindergarten, and throughout elementary school. In a text for older creative writing classes, *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers* (Bernays & Painter, 1995, p. 213), the authors—themselves published literary fiction writers—note that writers get their ideas for fiction writing “from memory, from what they see and hear around them—including the daily newspaper, the tragedy next door, the overheard conversation, the arresting image.” Their book contains 37 exercises aimed explicitly at getting novice writers to reflect upon memories, observations, and newspaper articles, among other real recollections, for material that makes good fiction. Not one exercise in their book asks people to tell stories from cartoons or other series of pictures. Popular writers of nonliterary fictional genres as fantastic as horror novels also turn to life as an inspiration for their fiction. Stephen King, for example, wrote that his inspirations for the horrifying *Carrie White* were “the two loneliest, most reviled girls in my [high school] class—how they looked, how they acted, how they were treated” (King, 2000, p. 69). Even magic realism is based upon recollections of reality. In his Nobel laureate address, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982)

enumerated many unbelievably strange yet true facts in the history of Latin America and concluded, "I dare to think that it is this outsized reality [of Latin American history], and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters."

Thus we find no support for the idea that encouraging children or adults with LI to tell stories from picture series or provoked by fantasy prompts will help them become better at creative writing at any age. Furthermore, there is evidence that in some families, fictional narratives are not appreciated as appropriate reading material for children, whereas personal narratives are (e.g., see Janes & Kermani, 2001, regarding Latino families).

### ***Clinical Applications***

**Assessment.** Personal narratives are an excellent focus for assessment of children with LI. Clinicians might wish to evaluate not only functional discourse but also processes that are related to narration such as working memory and the readiness for literacy attainment (Johnston, 2006; Kamhi, 1988). Information concerning these processes is beyond the scope of this article but can be found in a variety of sources (e.g., Chapman, 1992; Gillam, Hoffman, Marler, & Wynn-Dancy, 2002; Snyder, Dabasinkas, & O'Connor, 2002). Narratives can be elicited using the conversational map procedure, described in this article and by McCabe and Rollins (1994). Analyses have been described elsewhere (e.g., Hughes et al., 1997; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McCabe & Rollins, 1994). They focus on both the macrostructure (e.g., high point) and the microstructure (e.g., topic maintenance, event sequencing) of a narrative.

**Goals for intervention.** Intervention goals can be selected that will increase a child's ability to communicate and interact socially with others (Fey, 1986; Lahey, 1988). One aspect of natural discourse is the use of personal narratives. They are used frequently in the discourse of young children (Preece, 1987) and are needed in a variety of settings (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

One aim of intervention might well be to foster personal narrative discourse. There are several ways that this goal may be achieved (Johnston, 2006; Kamhi, 1988). This aim might be addressed by teaching children with LI to organize their discourse if they do not know how to structure what they want to say. Intervention can focus on highlighting the structure for personal narratives or for using narrative discourse structure in different contexts. In order for a speaker to organize discourse, gradually longer and more complex narratives should be highlighted. Initially a simple chronological sequence of a limited number of past events can be elicited or modeled. Temporal words such as *first*, *next*, and *last* can be used to enable a speaker to focus on the chronological ordering of events. Once this simple structure has been mastered, additional details and events can be added in order to expand and elaborate a narrative. For example, descriptions, causal factors, emotions, and dialogue will enrich a narrative. Some aids to narrative discourse are (a) temporary use of photographs, (b) replanning or rehearsal, and (c) role playing of past events (Owens, 2004; Paul, 2006).

A second goal could be to involve parents in elaborating their children's personal narratives. This approach has been shown to be effective in increasing children's narrative skill in past research (Boland et al., 2003; Peterson et al., 1999).

A third goal would be to enable children to use their organizational knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts. This goal could be achieved by enabling children to speak to different listeners and about different experiences. This goal would facilitate transfer of skills to functional settings. Generalization is one aspect of intervention that is reflected in the ability of the child to automatically apply narrative discourse knowledge in different contexts. According to Kamhi (1988), attribution of a generalization deficit to the problems of children with LI is "overly simplistic." He maintained that "generalization problems are best viewed as a failure to acquire broad-based language rules and to flexibly apply existing knowledge" (Kamhi, 1988, p. 309). Although this article does not address "language rules" per se, the focus is on a different type of rule, that of discourse management. The same principles that Kamhi (1988) discussed should be applicable to discourse as well.

Research focusing on transfer of learning (generalization) indicates that it is best achieved by training on targets that most closely approximate the ultimate goal. According to Owens (2004), generalization of language intervention needs to foster functional communication in order for generalization to occur. The targets selected for some interventions may not transfer into functional communication because they are not used outside of the clinic setting, even in academic environments. In an evidence-based practice research investigation, Cannizzaro and Coelho (2002) found that the training of story grammar elements in fictional narratives did not result in increased functional communication. The investigators concluded that there was no generalization because fictional narratives were not part of their client's functional discourse.

Language use that has broad applications is expected to generalize more effectively than language use that has a restricted application (Kamhi, 1988). Personal narratives would be considered in the realm of a broad application because they can be used in a variety of natural contexts, as noted above. In contrast, fictional stories would be considered to represent a more focused application because they can only be used in clinical contexts, as well as in educational settings. Another aid to generalization is the use of frequently occurring targets. Personal narratives occur more frequently than fictional stories (Ghezzi et al., 1987; Preece, 1987).

A final argument for advocating the use of personal narratives is that generalization from fiction to personal discourse would not be expected. As seen in this investigation and others, there is only a minimal to nonexistent relationship between performances in the two genres (Allen et al., 1994; Shiro, 2003). Therefore, work on fictional stories will not be likely to improve functional communication.

A fourth intervention goal would be to focus on associated factors that may contribute to coherent narration. For example, decreased working memory, restricted knowledge base, reduced ability to recognize the similarities between clinical and natural discourse for personal narratives, and limited

information processing may be necessary areas of treatment (Johnston, 2006; Kamhi, 1988). Treatment guidelines for these areas are beyond the scope of this article.

## Conclusions

This article has shown that the quality of personal narratives exceeds that of fictional narratives produced by children with LI. Performance in one genre accounts for little variation in performance on the other. Clinical work on personal narratives will help increase the functional communication and literacy potential of clients. In none of the four examples in the Appendix does it appear that repeatedly requiring a child to tell a story from a wordless picture book would be advisable clinical practice for many reasons. Consider dimensions of narrative not addressed using high-point or MCAS analysis, dimensions such as referential coherence. For example, the best narrator (Example 1 in the Appendix) appropriately introduces the characters at the outset of the fiction: "Once upon a time there was a little boy, a dog, and a frog." However, as she continues, she begins to inappropriately introduce new referents using the definite article (e.g., "the bees," "the tree," "the deer"). Even if children are given instructions to pretend that the clinician doesn't know the story (as in the present study and in Berman & Slobin, 1994), the child may have difficulty calculating exactly what that clinician sees or knows. Children may rely on a clinician to fill in what they leave unsaid because, in fact, the clinician *does* have access to those pictures, and children understand that. In addition, when relating a personal experience to an adult who did not share that experience, children are more complete and coherent than when relating the experience to someone who did (Menig-Peterson, 1975). That is, the nature of specific tasks affects many aspects of narration.

A limitation of this project is the absence of a matching control group of children of similar chronological and/or language ages. Comparison groups of children with TLD would add to the breadth and scope of our understanding of personal versus fictional narrative discourse.

We also do not wish to say that training fictional narrative improvement has no place in school settings. In fact some research has demonstrated that improving children's facility with story grammar improves reading comprehension from kindergarten through high school (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Future research should incorporate empirical studies of evidence-based practice with personal narratives. It is necessary to determine what intervention methods will most efficiently improve the personal narrative discourse of children with LI.

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## Appendix (p. 1 of 2)

### Narrative Examples

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#### Example 1: Excellent Personal and Fictional Narratives (Girl Age 7;5)

##### *Personal*

Well, last night when my dad was picking me up he, my, my big, my um sister was driving us to my Dad's. He, she said, "I'm not gonna get you a drink, I'm gonna get you a vanilla milk shake or a chocolate milkshake." Because she got my sister a chocolate milkshake at Jack-in-the-Box and me a vanilla milkshake at Jack-in-the-Box. And I, and later on when she left, I spilt it because I set it down on the floor. And me and my sister were bored because my dad hadn't got back because he owns a restaurant. And me and her were doing relays and he has this really long blanket and and he has four chairs on his at his house. We put the four chairs like one chair here, one chair here, one chair here, and one chair here and one chair here. Put the blanket over the chairs so the and we have a pillow. So we said, "Okay, I'm gonna make up this one, Anna." And then I I ran and you jump on the pillow and then you do five jumping jacks and then you go under, you crawl under there and then you go back and say "finish." And um like like you know our milkshakes right? Next to there, and I accidentally bumped into it and I got it on my school clothes and it got on my um the floor. But since it was vanilla it went away and I didn't even see it. And luckily, Mom would have yelled at me if that was at her house.

##### *Fictional*

Once upon a time there was a little boy, a dog, and a frog. The the little boy put his frog in in a jar ... with no lid. The dog loved to dunk his, put his head in the in there to look at the frog. The boy and the dog went to sleep on the bed. When the dog and the boy woke up ... the ... the frog had gotten out of the jar. That's what you get for not putting the cap on it! The dog, the dog, the dog, and the boy looked everywhere for that frog. The dog looked in the jar but he got his head stuck in there. They even lifted up the window. They did not find and they yelled, "Froggy, where are you?" but they did not find the frog. The dog fell out of the window, but the dog broke the glass, and he got the cat the um the glass off of his head. The dog looked the boy. The dog got in a angry face. The dog and the boy looked more for him. The dog and the boy, the dog chases a tree. The boy dugged in a hole. But it was a skunk hole. The the boy climbed a tree. The dog was running away from the bees. The bees chases the dog a lot. The boy fell out of the tree. An owl was on the tree. The owl chased the boy. The boy stood on a rock and crawled ... uh ... the the frog and the dog. The deer was running by. The deer picked up the boy. The boy got ran ... the boy had a ride on there. The dog was right under the deer. The boy and the dog both fell out ... off because there was a slight edge. The ... the deer stopped but the boy and the dog went on. The the the boy and the dog fell in the pool of water. The and they got wet. They tried to sneak up in a a log to see if the frog was in it. They went overboard. They found the frog on the other side ... with its babies. The frog has a baby again. The boy has a baby again. The end.

*This child received a 7 (out of 7) for her personal narrative using high-point analysis, and a 4 (out of 6) on the MCAS. Her fictional narrative received a 6 (end at the high point) on the high-point analysis and a 4 on the MCAS. In fact, in spite of her diagnosis of LI, this child does not seem to be struggling with language on the level of narrative in either genre. This result shows the discrepancy that may occur between test data and functional communication.*

#### Example 2: Personal but No Fictional Narrative (Girl Age 9;2)

##### *Personal*

One time we had a rat in our attic. Well, we, we, umm we smelled it. There was, there was like this awful smell, and it was there for a couple, few days. And, and till the the um animal control came, and he said he, he put like a trap. So the, so the umm, so the rat couldn't ... was dead. Dead in the attic. The umm the pet control guy, umm, grabbed it with his net, and he put it in his, put it in his back of his truck, and drove it away.

##### *Fictional*

First there was this boy, and his dog, and his turtle. And he goes off. He, he's sleeping. He's sleeping. And when he wakes up he puts on his boots. And was barefoot. ... He's barefoot. So he's gotta put on his socks and, and put on his boots. And then the dog falls. And then be, be hive, bees. And there's the, there's the bee hive. And that is the hole. I guess it's the beaver hole. And (points to hole) squirrel. No squirrels live in trees. I'm mistaken. Gopher (pointing to picture of the hole). A gopher. And the bee hive plops down. And the all the bees come out. Mad. And if they're mad they want to sting. If they're happy they don't sting. There's the bees. My gosh. ... They're gonna catch, they're gonna catch the dog. Until, until, until the man, the man goes like this (motion). And then owl starts ... the owl is swooping, swooping that way (motions). And, and this is the antlers. And and out comes the deer. And, and the deer gallops him in the place. He's onto the, to the deer's neck. And the deer, and the deer lets, lets. ... There's this like big hill. And the boy, the boy doesn't loses his balance. And he (laughing) and he and he falls down. And then ... and then he's in the lake. He's in the lake where the duckies, where the duckies are. And the boy says, "Shhh." And and then the boy gallops. The boy, the boy umm crawls on the log. And he's balancing on the log until he sees the frog. That's the end.

*As is typical of the productions in our sample, the fictional story is longer than that of the personal narrative. Nonetheless, the child does not do anything but describe the events pictured in the wordless book using present tense narration (for which she received a 0 in both systems). The fictional frog story above gives the illusion of narration because the pictures support it. What the child is actually doing is a nonnarrative, present tense picture description, despite the fact that her personal narrative demonstrates she is capable of producing past tense narration. Her narrative about a dead rat in the attic is quite coherent—a chronological narrative (4.5) in high-point terms, building up to the rat being dead in the attic, a situation resolved by the "pet control guy." Had she added details, especially more evaluation, this narrative would have been scored a classic one.*

#### Example 3: No Personal but Fictional Narrative (Boy Age 7;10)

##### *Personal*

Question: "Have you ever had a fight with your brother?"

[I] hate it when he wants to be Puss-N-Boot on walking out. But I tell him ... he gets to be Puss-N-Boots on the hero time. Oh there's only one mo, more thing. I trick him. When he get in the water ... Puss-N-Boots says Wally Mamu. Wally Maaamuuu!! Did you write that down, Wally mamu?

*The child continues this discourse with an incoherent description of video game playing with his brother—a script of sorts.*

##### *Fictional*

One day ... one night, a dog and a boy was looking at a frog. After ... the frog was sneaking ... no one. Next morning the boy said, "What on earth!" So this is a rest [skips a page]. But the boy wouldn't know where ... where he was. After his dog fell off into his, into his bowl and cracked it. Whenever the dog fell, he smelled something. It was right there, right by a log. When he looked it up the dog, the bees were like all messed up. Oh, the b, Ooh he fell down and ran. And they saw a deer right and saw horns near by. He fell off the rock. And the deer was behind a rock ... and he was ...

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## Appendix (p. 2 of 2)

### Narrative Examples

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he was gonna drop them off where the frog was. They dropped them off ... Splash! There they fall down ... all the deer was.... Then after that, they saw two frogs and they saw their own. And they got own baby frogs. And they left and got home. The end.

*While this fictional narrative does contain more than one specific past tense event, unlike the child's personal narrative, it is not very coherent (being termed a leapfrog narrative, 4 points, using high-point analysis and receiving only a 2 on the MCAS analysis). In fact, there is little evidence that further practice in such an exercise would appreciably improve his narrative ability.*

#### Example 4: No Personal and No Fictional Narrative (Boy Age 7;0)

##### *Personal*

It's that means you get a break arm. Well, well you, you, you go to the hospital, and you go to the emergency room, and when get, then you get, then you get better. All better.

##### *Fictional*

*In his fictional production, the boy turned back and forth from one page to another and required much help to stay on task to produce the following:* Froggy live right here. And then you can see frog. Okay, good night. Oh no, where the froggy go? Froggy, oh froggy where did you go? Hello, Froggy, where are you? Okay, froggy get back here or I gonna get my Santa Claus hat out (points to the boot on the boy's head) on. Bad doggy, bad doggy, you should be shamed yourself. I am gonna get mad you being out here on your back legs. Froggy? Froggy where are you? He's so cute. Oh no, where are the froggy? Don't make me get the hat on....

*The rest of the child's story was similarly lacking in events, composed of description and dialogue only.*

*This boy produced a script rather than a personal narrative, while his fictional story contained no past tense actions at all—only imagined dialogue and other picture description (he received a 0 on both systems for both narratives).*

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