Reading-related language abilities

Māori children "at promise"

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KEY POINTS

- Using traditional high-point analysis of oral narratives, the stories of bilingual Māori students in this study were "deficient" because they omitted some elements.

- An alternative analysis of the underlying structure showed instead the sophisticated use of structuring devices such as cyclic patterns and repetition of phrases and themes.

- Under the traditional PIPA assessment of phonological awareness, the only test the children passed successfully was syllable segmentation. Analysis of their "mistakes" indicates that their phonological awareness is based on te reo sounds, with the students seeing the vowel as central to sound structure.

- Based on the traditional assessments, the children in this study would be predicted to have difficulties with learning to read English. Instead, the 9–11-year-olds were reading fluently and comprehending text according to their age, and the younger children were developing proficiency.

The skills of oral narrative and phonological awareness are seen as precursors and predictors of reading development. In this study of bilingual Māori primary school students, Fleur Harris found that current methods of assessing these skills are based on the English language and Western modes of storytelling, and cast these students as "deficit", instead of uncovering the complex, sophisticated and promising language skills they bring to reading.

Introduction

English reading proficiency and the reading-related language skills of oral narrative and phonological awareness are embedded in a well-entrenched deficit construction of Māori children as learners in the education system of Aotearoa New Zealand (see Harris, 2008, for a review of this construction). Words such as *gap*, *underachievement*, *disparity* and *at-risk* signal perceived deficiencies (Gilmore, 1998; Tunmer & Chapman, 2005). My use of the term *at promise* in the title of this paper is a response to my critical engagement with this "at-risk" terminology, which continues to "pathologise" Māori children (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). This shaping of Māori children reflects the culturally bound curriculum and Western values about what matters in education, how it should be assessed, how those assessments should be interpreted and what types of programmes should then be implemented to fix the "deficit" (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). This deficit construction with respect to the reading-related language abilities of oral narrative and phonological awareness is the focus of this paper.

Oral narratives have a long tradition in human discourse. They are the stories we tell and retell during conversations. The ways in which they are told are culturally shaped (Heath, 1986; Minami, 2000; Silliman, Diehl, Aurilio, Wilkinson, & Hammargren, 1995). Gee (1985, p. 11) states, "… just as the common core of human language is expressed differently in different languages, so the common core of human narrative is expressed differently in different cultures".

Many researchers have repeatedly documented that the ability to tell narratives is a predictor and precursor of English reading development (McCabe, 1996). Further, the way we evaluate storytelling is based on assumptions about how people organise and interpret experiences when telling their stories. These beliefs "function as a filter that sifts our judgements about children's competence" (Silliman et al., 1995, p. 31). The accepted "standard"

storytelling form valued in the Western education system is based on a cognitive perspective stemming from European and North American customs, and assumes that narratives are linear in form, temporally sequenced with a definite beginning, middle and end, and are told as monologues (Corston, 1993; McCabe, 1996). However, various beliefs about storytelling exist, in and outside of European and North American customs, that contrast with this cognitive standard (see, for example, Bamberg, 1997; Minami, 2000). For example, the interactionist view is that the act of storytelling is an interactive speech event between the teller and those listening, in which the latter offer their comments and interjections (Corston, 1993). Oral narrative is therefore co-constructed between the teller and the listeners as equal co-participants.

Phonological awareness refers to knowledge of speech sounds, their placement in spoken words and their representation in an alphabetic writing system (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004). As for oral narratives, a body of Western research has determined the importance of phonological awareness ability for learning to read an alphabetic language such as English (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004).

However, the phonological awareness skills that children learn reflect their spoken language. If children are bilingual, their phonological awareness abilities reflect the two languages they speak, depending on the speech sound structure of those languages and their representation in print (Bruck, Genesee, & Caravolas, 1997). Also, bilingual learners can take approximately five to seven years to become fluent readers of English (Cummins, 1992; May & Hill, 2005).

Many Māori identify as bilingual within a daily conversational context and, after English, te reo Māori is the second most common language spoken in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2002, 2007). It is highly likely that Māori children living their lives in bilingual and bicultural contexts learn oral narratives, phonological awareness skills and to read English, in

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different ways from monolingual, monocultural children. However, because the accepted standard assessment and teaching practices used within the education system are tailored to the latter group of children, it is highly probable that these practices perpetually construct Māori children as deficient learners in terms of both reading and these reading-related language skills. Essentially, my research explored the possibilities of alternative discourses to deficit, as related to oral narratives and phonological awareness, and learning to read English.

Inquiry question

Although my inquiry sought to explore a range of questions, the focus of this paper is primarily on the following question:

> How are Māori children constructed as learners when their oral narratives and phonological awareness skills are assessed and interpreted according to traditionally accepted psycholinguistic assessments and alternative sociolinguistic methods?

Study approach

Participants

My study began when I approached a local kaumātua regarding my anticipated research. A year of conversations with him and people in his community led to me working within a local primary school whānau classroom. According to the kaiako, Whāea Kath,[1] te reo Māori immersion level in the classroom was Level 4 (0–33 percent Māori spoken). I followed a core group of 11 Māori children (4.5–11 years of age), three days per week over a year from February to December. The children lived their lives in bilingual and bicultural home contexts, and the following quote from a conversation with Dan (parent) represented the parents' desire for their children to be able to walk in both Pākehā and Māori worlds:

> … it (school) teaches them how to speak properly and to understand both cultures, not just Māori culture as well, to understand the Pākehā culture too and that's the way I was brought up, to learn both sides of the culture … I think if they can learn to accept both cultures they'll handle it (life), find it easier.

My major research role was that of participant-observer, taking part with the children in their day-to-day class tasks, observing and writing my notes as soon as possible after the events. This role allowed me to be a participant within the study, and I came to understand more about the people I was with, as well as about myself as a researcher.

Recording of oral narratives

Throughout the year I recorded 17 personal stories from five of the children, stories that occurred naturally within conversation and were "captured" on audio or video tape during activities that were not necessarily focused on storytelling. I was constantly aware of the possibilities for children to tell narratives and when an opportunity arose I encouraged them. There were times when I used the "Conversation Map" (McCabe & Rollins, 1994) technique to elicit stories. In this technique the adult tells their own story, asks the child if they had a similar experience and invites them to tell about it.

I then analysed the stories according to two divergent systems—high-point analysis (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991) and underlying-structure analysis (Gee, 1985, 1996). High-point analysis is typical of the traditionally accepted psycholinguistic analysis used in our education system; for example, in the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) (Crooks & Flockton, 2005) and the School Entry Assessment (Ministry of Education, 1997), as well as in the storytelling assessments used by Group Special Education personnel. This form of analysis focuses particularly on the sequencing of ideas; the structural components of introducing, developing and ending a story; and the specific information told. Further, in keeping with this traditional analysis, a chronological age sequence for the development of increasingly complex oral narratives has been formulated (McCabe & Rollins, 1994).

Underlying-structure analysis is an alternative sociolinguistic method, not recognised in the education system. It patterns the stories told according to rhythms and poetic forms, thereby illuminating cultural ways of storytelling for all cultures.

Assessment of phonological awareness

During the year, I assessed the children's English phonological awareness skills three times (at three-monthly intervals) using an assessment typical of the traditionally accepted psycholinguistic education tests—the Preschool and Primary Inventory of Phonological Awareness (PIPA) (Dodd, Crosbie, McIntosh, Teitzel, & Ozanne, 2000). I analysed and interpreted the assessment results according to the test manual.

I then analysed the children's responses to this test in an alternative way by identifying and exploring the ways in which the children completed the tasks. These became

themes for discussion. This sociolinguistic analysis was also used for a set of phonological awareness tasks in te reo Māori, constructed with a fluent speaker of te reo Māori and presented to the children twice during the year.

Findings and discussion

Oral narratives: "Can I tell you a story now?"

A. The (traditionally accepted psycholinguistic) high-point analysis

The high-point analysis "lens" interpreted four of the 17 stories as "fully formed" narratives (Labov, 1999, p. 227) using all components: abstract/introducer, orientation, complicating action, resolution and coda. The omitted components in the remaining 13 stories were interpreted as narratives lacking development. For example, omission of the resolution and coda components at the end of the stories was common. A resolution informs the listener as to how everything ends up and a coda brings the teller and listener back to the present. The following two stories (Pere's "Pushed Over" and Tama's "Radio" stories) are examples of the resolution and coda omitted. They would accordingly be considered as deficient and the children considered as needing intervention.

Pushed Over

What happened there?

She just pushed me over like that. (Holding hand with fingers outstretched over his face)   (Action/Evaluation)

Yeah. What was happening?

I don't know.

She was kicking me.   (Action)

And then she just pushed me over.   (Action/Evaluation)

Radio

But my brother, he likes those, um, radios.   (Orientation)

Radios?

Yeah. Cause we, we were cleaning
up the classroom.   (Orientation)

He ah, he turn   (Action)

Where we were over there,   (Orientation)

They were working.   (Orientation/Action)

And then we, we heard it.   (Action)

What?

It was real loud, the radio.   (Evaluation)

Further, with reference to the chronological age at which narratives are considered to typically develop, the children would be constructed as having narrative language difficulties that would be enhanced with a remedial programme. Table 1 places the stories according to the developmental age sequence established by McCabe and Rollins (1994).

TABLE 1 HIGH-POINT ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES ACCORDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE
(Source: McCabe & Rollins, 1994)

Story pattern and age typically developed	Children (Chronological age) Stories	Components omitted
Two-event 3–4 years	Ana (6y 8m) Party and Jade Stadium	Evaluation Resolution Coda
	Pere (6y 10m) Pushed Over	Orientation Resolution Coda
Leapfrog 4 years	Ana (6y 8m) Nan and Party (included four two-event stories)	Evaluation Resolution
End-at-high-point 5 years	Mary (9y 1m) Weekend	Resolution Coda
	Mary (9y 2m) Holidays 2	Resolution Coda
	Mary (9y 6m) Stayover	Resolution Coda
	Mary (9y 7m) Mira Sick	Resolution Coda
	Pere (6y 11m) Bonfire	Introduction Resolution Coda
	Tama (8y 2m) Radio	Resolution Coda
Classic high-point 6 years	Mary (9y 6m) Kicked Out of Bed	Coda
	Mary (9y 7m) Fight *	**
	Mary (9y 7m) Kittens	**
	Ariel (6y 7m) Broken Fingers	Introduction Orientation Coda
	Pere (7y) Head Cut*	Coda
	Ana (6y 7m) Car Fire	**
	Tama (8y) Fat Cat	**
Chronological All ages	Mary (9y 2m) Holidays 1	Resolution

* Prompted classic high-point
** No story components omitted

B. The (alternative, sociolinguistic) underlying-structure analysis

Using this analysis, I found that the children told their stories in different ways from the traditionally accepted cognitive, linear storytelling model. The children used a number of linguistic tools to create complex and

sophisticated oral stories, and I will discuss here two of these—*discourse organisation* and *cohesion*, in accordance with work by Gee (1996).

1. Discourse organisation

Discourse organisation is the grouping of the story into lines and groups of lines called stanzas. A main feature of the stories my research children told was their organisation as stories within stories using cyclical patterns and theme repetition. This illustrated the complex and elaborate nature of their stories. The following story told by Mary, "Mira Sick", is an intricate composition of a theme told and retold, with more information added with each retelling:

1   *Mira kept on spewing up,*
and so we took her to the doctor's.
But the doctor said that she was alright,
but she really wasn't.

2   *So Mum took her to the doctor's*
and, um um, they were staying there for a whole lot of,
um, long time.

3   *And when Mum came back, back,*
she was crying.

4   *So she had to take tests and that.*

5   *And she wasn't alright.*

There are three cycles in this narrative. In Stanza 1, Mary narrates her story: Mira is vomiting, is taken to the doctor's and is not alright. This is the first cycle. Cycle 2 involves Stanzas 2 and 3, with Mary retelling the story briefly and adding more information. Cycle 3 is told in Stanzas 4 and 5, where Mary talks more about the doctor's visit, and then repeats the last idea in Stanza 1, that Mira was not all right. This repetition creates a linguistic border to the story.

2. Cohesion

Cohesion is the way in which lines and stanzas are linked together throughout the story through the use of a range of devices, such as conjunctions, pronouns, adverbs and so on. The following story told by Pere, "Head Cut", is representative of the narratives in which the conjunction *and* is used to stitch story parts together. The first stanza highlights the use of *and* as a way of keeping the story alive. The story finishes in Stanza 3 when *and* is dropped and replaced with the conjunction *so*:

1   *There was this Māori thing at this school.*
And *I didn't know it was there.*

     And *I ran into it.*
And *I fell over.*
After this stanza, I (the listener) asked questions using *and*, so replacing Pere's need to use *and* as a linguistic tool:
And what happened?

2   *Heaps of blood was coming out of it.*
Okay.
And then what happened?

3   *My mum took me to the hospital.*
Mm, and?
Then they just glued it up.
Did they?
Yeah.
And *they said, 'You gotta have a shower in the morning.'*
To get it out.
So *I had one.*

The use of *and* continues as a pattern in Pere's story through my involvement as the listener. This is a good example of how the listener co-constructs the story (Corston, 1993). At the point in Stanza 3 when I say "Did they?" instead of using the *and* conjunction, Pere takes it up again and uses it: "Yeah, *and* they said …" The conjunction *so* in "So I had one" marks the last line of his story.

Repetition of phrases was a typical device used to create cohesion. For example, in two stories told by Ana, the use of repetition links the information imparted. In her "Party and Jade Stadium" story, Ana adds more information to the repetition:

1   *Then after Jade Stadium yesterday.*
After Jade Stadium yesterday
I went to the party.

Ana used this technique in another story, "Nan and Party":

2   *I went with my Nan.*
Aunty Teri.
Yeah.

3   *We got pulled up when we were going back to Aunty Ra's.*
Pulled up when we were going back to Aunty Ra's with
my Nana, dropping me and my mum off.

4   *We got pulled up by police.*

Ana repeats the phrase "We got pulled up" to begin and link Stanzas 2 and 3. She also repeats "pulled up when we were going back to Aunty Ra's" within Stanza 2, but this time adds more information, just as she did in her "Party and Jade Stadium" story. She also adds information when she says, in Stanza 3, "We got pulled up *by police*", a statement that ends the story. Repeating phrases and adding more information on the repetition is a technique that stands out as a way of aiding the listener's understanding and/or recall ability.

This brief presentation of underlying-structure analysis does not exhaust the possibilities (refer to Harris, 2007, for a fuller account). The discourse organisation of many of the narratives told by the children in my study involved stories within stories involving a cyclic pattern and theme repetition. Three main cohesive linguistic tools were used: the conjunctions *and*, *then*

and *and then*; repetition of words and phrases; and pronouns (not discussed here). Overall, the analysis presented the children's storytelling practices as complex and sophisticated, and very different from the standard cognitive linear pattern using high-point analysis. Using the underlying-structure analysis, the children presented with narrative ability.

Phonological awareness: "You'd forget the A otherwise"

A. The (traditionally accepted psycholinguistic) PIPA analysis

All the children completed syllable segmentation according to the test expectations. However, they did not complete all or a combination of the other phonological awareness subtests as per the test requirements (see Table 2). The children would thus be considered as deficient in phonological awareness development, except for syllable segmentation.

B. The (alternative sociolinguistic) thematic analysis

Four major themes emerged from thematic analysis of the children's responses to English and Māori words—themes that highlighted the children's knowledge of sound structures in the two languages:

1. *Syllable segmentation was linguistically strong:* The children segmented both English (for example, mag-ni-tude) and Māori (for example, Pa-ta-ri-ki) words according to syllables.

2. *Consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) segmentation was English-specific:* In the PIPA the children segmented CVC syllables as CVC, and at times overused the CVC segmentation in English words (for example, **pan**-o-rama, e-**lab**-o-ra-tion).

3. *Consonant–vowel (CV) was reo-Māori-specific:* The children segmented Māori words into CV syllables (for example, ma-ra-ma, ta-ni-wha). The CVC segmentation was not used for Māori words. Sometimes the younger children segmented words into CVCV chunks (for example, a-peri-kota).

4. *The variety of verbal techniques that the children used demonstrated that they thought about the vowel as central to sound structure:* For example, when asked to break up English CVC words into two parts, the children typically stated po-op, mo-op, ba-at and so on. When the children were asked to break up English and Māori words into their individual sounds, they retained the vowel with the preceding consonant (for example, sta-a-an, ra-a-bit, tu-

TABLE 2 "PASS" STATUS FOR EACH PIPA SUBTEST

	PIPA 1						PIPA 2						PIPA 3					
	SS	RA	AA	PI	PS	LK	SS	RA	AA	PI	PS	LK	SS	RA	AA	PI	PS	LK
The older kura children																		
Rapata	□	□										*						
Roxy	□		□				□						□		□			
Rata	□						□		□				□		□			
Mary	□		□				□		□				□	□	□			
Tama																		
The younger kura children																		
Pere	□	□		□			□	□	□	□			□					
Ana	□						□											
Ariel	□						□		□			□	□	□	□	□		
Big JL	□			□	□		□	□			□		□		□			
Hone	□	□	□		□							*						
Huriana	□		□		□							*						

* Rapata, Hone and Huriana enrolled at the school later in the year and were administered the PIPA only once.

Key	
□	"Passed" the subtest according to test scoring and analysis procedures
	Did not "pass" the subtest
SS	Syllable segmentation
RA	Rhyme awareness
AA	Alliteration awareness
PI	Phoneme isolation
PS	Phoneme segmentation
LK	Letter knowledge

u-na, ka-a-whe, and so on). It is of interest that five of the seven most common sounds in te reo Māori are the five vowel sounds (Bauer, Parker, & Evans, 1993).

I talked with Whāea Kath about this last feature, and she responded, "They do that [CV chunking] all the time in Māori. If you isolate the consonant, it's more difficult for them. They feel more relaxed with the vowel there, too, because culturally our language is very much vowel sounds."

Reading English

According to two standard reading assessments used in New Zealand classrooms—Running Records for word recognition in text and reading comprehension (Clay, 1998) and the BURT Word Reading Test (New Zealand revision) (Gilmore, Croft, & Reid, 1981), I found that the children from nine to 11 years of age were reading English fluently and comprehending text according to their age. The children six to eight years of age were not yet doing so, and the children from four-and-a-half to six years of age were emergent readers.

However, according to the standard analysis for oral storytelling and phonological awareness, we might expect all the children to have difficulties learning to read English. In fact, the older children were proficient and the younger children were developing proficiency in reading English. This is in keeping with the literature that states bilingual/bicultural learners can take several years to become fluent readers of English (Cummins, 1992; May & Hill, 2005).

Concluding comments

The children in my study were living their lives in bilingual and bicultural contexts. We know bilingualism influences phonological-awareness development and that cultural context influences the ways children learn to tell stories. When their language abilities were assessed using alternative sociolinguistic methods, the children I worked with presented with linguistic knowledge and strengths based on their bilingual bicultural environments. This is likely to be different from children who are monolingual and monocultural. Yet the assessments used in the education system have been developed according to monolingual and monocultural ways of knowing, and when these assessments were used with the children in my study, the analysis presented them as deficient—hence the perpetuation of the deficit construction of Māori children as learners.

It is essential that, as educators, we question our use of assessments with a number of Māori children that are based on monolingual English and monocultural Western children. The ways in which the children in my study demonstrated learning of language and reading of English has implications for how a number of Māori children will learn at school. As educators we need to be aware that a number of Māori children come to school as bilingual and bicultural learners, and that their pathway to learning to read differs from the pathway used by monocultural, monolingual children. Perhaps we need to provide a learning context that takes account of the linguistic strengths of Māori children, utilise those for their learning and re-construct them as learners "at promise".

Acknowledgements

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Note

1 The names of people who participated in this study have been changed to retain anonymity and confidentiality.

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