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The Impact of Film Watching on Preschoolers' Language Development: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of film watching versus traditional narrative listening on the language development of Iranian preschoolers across three age groups (2.5-4 years, 4-5.5 years, and 5.5-7 years). The primary objective is to assess and compare language development in preschoolers exposed to narratives through both traditional listening and animated film watching. The study investigates differences in language skills, such as topic maintenance and descriptive abilities, between these two exposure methods. Conducted in Iran, the study encompasses various settings where children were exposed to both narrative listening and animated film watching, followed by story recounting over five sessions. The collected data were meticulously coded to identify disparities in topic maintenance and the length of story descriptions. Key findings reveal that traditional narrative listening resulted in more consistent topic maintenance and longer descriptions compared to film watching. Older children consistently crafted similar stories, demonstrating a deeper understanding of literacy concepts. Additionally, children with more educated mothers exhibited extended and fluent language skills, while others excelled in the context of film watching. In summary, this research underscores the significance of considering different media in preschoolers' language development, highlighting their distinct impacts on language skills. These findings carry significant implications for literacy practices, parenting, childcare, materials development, and policymaking. Ultimately, the study provides valuable insights for teachers, parents, and policymakers, informing the design of effective early childhood language learning strategies and recognizing the role of both traditional and modern media in shaping language development in young children.

KEYWORDS: Narrative assessment profile; Narrative culture; Preschoolers; Storytelling; Video description

1. Introduction

Storytelling, as a form of authentic performance art, and the oldest form of education (Gottschal, 2013), has been prevalent in all cultures worldwide as to transmit traditions, history, myth, and culture. In simple words, storytelling means expression or retelling of a fiction or nonfiction which includes some sentences and expresses a particular topic (Nava & Pincock, 2011; Padilla, 2013). Storytelling has been a part of everyday communication (Franke et al., 2011), and as a pedagogical form, its efficiency has been proved (Raheim, 2021).

Children from a very early age listen to stories being read at home or nursery schools. Television programs for young children include reading episodes in well-formed linguistic forms which comprise essential story features of setting, episode,

as well as resolution. Hence, young children's competence of these linguistic and narrative features may introduce them conventions of written language long before they learn to read (McCabe & Peterson, 1991).

1.1. Storytelling of pre-school children (3-6 years old) in home context

Stories as a linguistic tool reminds one of the past experiences and actions; evaluates and creates new experiences; and helps one to understand the surrounding environment. When stories are (re)told, emotional and social relationships are formed and retained (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Wang & Fivush, 2005) and hence children are helped out to perceive one's thoughts and actions (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998).

Moreover, storytelling and retelling can facilitate pre-schoolers' recall of contents and facts (NCTE Committee on Storytelling, 2003), comprehension (Babayiğit et al., 2021), and listening and concentration skills (Isik, 2016; Scott et al., 1995). Storytelling provides an opportunity for nurturing children's creative or artistic expression (Catala et al., 2017), ethical value system development (Rahim & Rahiem, 2012), and more importantly, their later literacy development (Isik, 2016) for which many possible reasons have been enumerated as follows:

1. It can help children begin to reflect on units of language such as phonemes (Incognito & Pinto, 2021), words, and syntax (Adams, 1990).
2. It familiarizes children with the language found in books (Strouse et al., 2018).
3. It provides opportunities to gain experience of how books convey meaning (Strouse et al., 2018).
4. It encourages vocabulary development (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002).
5. It models the construction of elaborated informational structures about texts (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002).
6. It introduces children to ways of talking about books that they will encounter when they enter elementary school (Dickinson & Smith, 1991).
7. It familiarizes children with print (Mason, 1992).
8. It acts as significant source of new concepts and lessons for young children (Strouse et al., 2018).

1.2. Storytelling of pre-school children (3-6 years old) in educational context

Moreover, results of the literature revealed that storytelling may lead to the development of verbal fluency, verbal and nonverbal expressiveness, self-confidence, and teamwork for primary school students (Panc et al., 2015). Storytelling furthermore has been shown to support the development of children's writing, reading, vocabulary, listening skills, and other language abilities (Isik, 2016; Lucarevski, 2016; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008; Ramsey, 2003).

Storytelling and retelling abilities comprise a set of higher-level language, cognitive skills, and abilities namely, the events' sequencing, maintainance of text cohesion by means of explicit linguistic markers, exchange of ideas without support, comprehension of cause-effect relationship, and making a story out of the universal story schemata (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002). In other words, narrative skills, as predictors of school success in pre-school or primary schoolchildren, bridge the gap between oral language and literacy through extended, de-contextualized, and cohesive discourse units which children mostly confront in the written texts (Rowe, 2013).

Storytelling requires a macro-structure organization in which the discourse units, unlike conversations, move from topic to topic under more locally negotiated conditions. This macro-structure organization ability is what is demanded by the school discourse situation. In addition, narrative production demands more pre-suppositional judgments in comparison with conversations in which the listener's feedback makes such judgments less crucial. Finally, narration facilitates a meta-linguistic skill in which conscious decisions are made about the most effective ways to relate the tale. In sum, storytelling for young pre-school children in the home context, primary schools, or the educational context can benefit children in multiple ways, which can predict their subsequent or current linguistic and academic achievement (Babayiğit et al., 2021). This achievement level in narrative ability especially seems significant for the preschool children since it can act as an important index of their communicative competence and future academic problems (Smith, 1993)

1.3. Children's narrative stages

The development of students' narrative skills does not occur over night but it progresses through a series of stages (Stadler & Ward, 2005). The pre-school years (i.e., 3-6 years of age) seem to be a crucial period in children's development of storytelling abilities. Between the ages of 3 and 4, children become capable story tellers and within the end of their pre-schooling years,

they become able to tell more cohesive and complete stories without a need for the least support or clues (Melzi et al., 2013). With the increase of age, they become progressively more sensitive to the cause-and-effect relationships in the stories.

Below the age of five, children are unable to link pictures into a unified story schemata; they are likely to treat each picture individually (Berman, 1988). By the ages of 5 or 6, they can tell stories with complete plots and a central character (Scott et al., 1995). Older children are capable of incorporating more story grammar components in episodes (Jafari et al., 2012) and to express a hierarchy of story events (Berman, 1988). In their stories, actions are linked by incorporation of cause-and-effect relationships and knowledge of the most related story elements such as goals, characters, and one's attempt to reach a goal (Nielsen et al., 2012). Sophisticated narrative structure, elaboration abilities, and major features of oral conversational language are attained by middle to late elementary school years (Scott et al., 1995). Although young children differ in the extent to which they include different story elements in their story retellings, they seem to be familiar with most of these elements (Trabasso & Broek, 1992).

By the first grade, typically developing students become capable of producing chain narratives, if not true ones. By the end of the fifth grade, they are more able to produce detailed, multiple-episode stories, which contain more complex sentences, well-developed characters, mental state verbs, temporal adverbs, and cause-and-effect relationships between motives and actions (Gillam & Pearson, 2004). Students with low levels of narrative development are more at the risk of prospective academic problems (Paul et al., 1996). Accordingly, more stories are told for the children and more they are asked to retell them, the better their story telling abilities are increased (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Silva et al., 2014).

1.4. Storytelling, retelling, and listening culture in Iran

Narrowing down storytelling, retelling, and listening to the Persian culture, Iran as an ancient country is no exception in having a unique culture, which distinguishes it from other communities. One of the ways in which values and norms of a society are learnt and appropriately internalized is cultural activities, especially storytelling. Iranian culture has been an integration of Iran's geographical location, worldview, wants, wishes, sorrows, feelings, and beliefs and has an Islamic-Persian scent that distinguishes from other cultures (Salehi Amiri & Habibi, 2009).

Story reading or retelling especially in ceremonies has a long tradition in Iran. A part of this dates to Ferdowsi (author of *Shahnameh*) once it appeared as *Shahnamehkhani* (Reading the *Shahnameh*) (Vejdani, 2014). Story retelling or face-to-face story reproduction along with the transfer of managed sensations to the audience has turned into one of the cultural aspects of the East while the West is taking use of them, admitting that story reproduction belongs to the East and particularly, Iran is considered as the epitome of the storytelling coming from the East ('Storytelling has become a major cultural trend in Iran', Alamati, 2023)

One such traditional story retelling in Iran is *Naqqāli* as the oldest form of dramatic performance in Iran, and a great influence on society, from the courts to the villages. The performer – *Naqqāl* – recounts stories in verse or prose accompanied by gestures and movements, and sometimes music and painted scrolls. *Naqqāls* not only act as entertainers but bearers of Persian literature and culture, who need to be acquainted with local cultural expressions, languages and dialects, and traditional music, while improvising with retentive memory and skill to captivate an audience. Until recently, *Naqqāls* were considered to be the most significant bearers of folk-tales, ethnic epics, and Iranian folk music. With the decrease of the popularity of coffeehouses, nomadic tents, houses, and historical venues such as ancient caravanserais where *Naqqāli* was formerly performed, along aging of master performers who were called *morsheds* and a steady drop in the number of skilled *Naqqāls*, as well as popularity of new entertainment, there has been declining interest in *Naqqāli* performance, which has threatened the survival of this dramatic art (Naqqāli, Iranian dramatic story-telling, 2005).

Another especial occasion for storytelling tradition in Iran relates to storytelling, book reading, and *Shahnamehkhani* (Reading the *Shahnameh*) dating back to the winter solstice to educate children and teenage as a pass time especially during the time the social media was not as saturated as today (Shayesteh-Rokh, 2011). In some cities in the past time, those who knew a story would have retold it to others and if a family member can play flute would have accompanied them with singing traditional rhymes (Telkabadi, 1976, cited in Shayesteh-Rokh, 2011). In Damghan (another town in Iran), one of the elderly men would have sung a song and the others would listen to (Shamani damghan, 1999, cited in Shayesteh-Rokh, 2011). As storytelling and listening have a long history in Iran's culture, it would be needed to investigate how today Persian children listen to and retell stories, as it is accomplished in this study.

2. Literature Review

As above-mentioned, research in the preschool and school context has revealed beneficial effects of increased opportunities to hear stories for children's literacy growth among many other important features. More specifically, the research conducted in the kindergarten and first-grade class contexts have highlighted this significance. The following researches respectively try to

demonstrate the effect of storytelling for linguistic ability developments of Iranian and non-Iranian typically developing preschoolers. Alongside, the gaps in each area are mentioned as follows.

2.1. Storytelling of pre-school children

2.1.1. Storytelling of Iranian preschoolers

There are meager studies conducted in the Iranian context on storytelling of/to preschoolers. For instance, Salari's investigation (2002; cited in Jafari, 2010) revealed the beneficial effect of storytelling on the lexicon (retained and comprehensible vocabularies) of 3-6 years-old Iranian children with regards to their age. However, the variable of gender was not found to play a significant role.

Later on, Haji Mohammadi and Rahimian (2010) investigated the ellipsis pattern in the story retelling of 4-6 year-old Persian-speaking children exposed to 60 stories in nursery schools. The results revealed while noun ellipsis was the most-used one, the least one pertained to the verb phrase. Concerning the age variable, the most forms of ellipsis were devoted to the 5-6 years age range. Regarding the gender variable, boys had made more use of ellipsis than their counterpart girls, whilst the latter made more use of clause ellipsis compared to the boys who had more verb phrase ellipsis.

More recently, Mehrabi et al. (2015) assessed the speaking ability of 15 Persian-speaking children (i.e., 4-5, 5-6, and 6-7 years of age) in terms of cohesive and grammatical devices as well as the type and amount of cohesive devices in relation with their age difference. The results revealed that children from various age ranges were able to use cohesive devices; however, with different tendencies. With the increase of age, the quantity of their use of cohesive devices increased but it was not indicative of their ability or tendency to use them. Children in their story retellings had better performance in terms of the number of clauses and different types of cohesive devices they used. This was not observed in their story creation tasks though.

2.1.2. Storytelling to preschoolers in other countries

Compared to the Iranian context, larger number of studies are conducted on storytelling of/to preschoolers in other than Iranian context. In this sense, Bayon et al. (2003) investigated the collaborative and integrative virtual storytelling and retelling environments for the 5-7 year-old English, Swedish, and American children. The effects of storytelling on development of creativity, literacy, and developmental attributes were also investigated. The results revealed that using the virtual technological storytelling set-ups, children's motivation is increased as for the development of design partnerships and elaborative storytelling capabilities for the expression of more complex nonlinear stories. Creating such collaborative, supportive, and self-confidence boosting storytelling environment helped children in understanding the initiative events and goals and story improvising in front of an audience.

Isbell et al. (2004) showed how storytelling and story reading influence the language development and story comprehension of young children from 3 to 5 years of age, exposed to the same 24 stories. Both storytelling and story reading were found to positively produce oral language. The results were indicative that young children who heard the stories had better story comprehension in their retelling, while children exposed to story reading improved their language complexity.

Van Kleeck et al. (2011) compared the story retelling of African American and European American kindergartners whose mothers had a high school or less educational level versus a group with mothers of academic degrees. The retold stories were measured based on the Renfrew Bus Story – North American Edition scales of information, sentence length, complexity, and independence. The results revealed systematic effects of maternal education and race on the children's performance. As on all measures, children with educated mothers outperformed those with less-educated mothers. Later on, Catala et al. (2017, June) argued that digital storytelling activities can stimulate creativity in children, as required in the 21st century skills.

More recently, Babayiğit et al. (2021) indicated that language comprehension and narrative skills at 5 years of age directly affect reading comprehension skills and reading gains after explaining general cognitive ability, memory, phonological skills, and mother's education. Also, they demonstrated that listening comprehension influences reading achievement of children. In the same year, Lau and Richards (2021) examined relations between home literacy and preschoolers' development of English as a second language in Hong Kong. Findings demonstrated that the home literacy was positively associated with English vocabulary, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and word reading skills while child and family characteristics were controlled for.

Additionally, Rahiem (2021) explored the effects of storytelling on early childhood education for Bangladeshi preschoolers. The results indicated that simple digital technology made storytelling more entertaining, engaging, attractive, and communicative. Suggested were the need to increase the ability of teachers to use digital technology; equipping schools with communication technology devices; allocation of governmental funding to modernize school equipment; adjustment of curriculum to meet technological developments, and provision of opportunities for children to learn effective use of technology.

Furthermore, Incognito and Pinto (2021) investigated the relative effect of the child's family context, i.e., parents' occupation and education levels; home literacy; and the school context on literacy skills of 193 preschoolers. The results showed

that parental education level was directly related to preschoolers' performance; lower performance was more seen of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. All participants had significantly increased performance in terms of phonological awareness, notational skills, and textual competence.

In sum, the results of the above-mentioned studies revealed the beneficial effects of the pre-school children's storytelling on the increase of their motivation, expressive elaborative abilities, self-confidence, lexicon, and literacy development. Besides, the educational level of children's mothers was found to be a contributing factor for children's storytelling outperformance.

2.1.3. The gaps in the research on the storytelling of the pre-school children

Reviewing the research conducted on the storytelling of preschoolers, there seems to be a positive association between the home literacy environment and monolingual children's language and literacy development (Lau & Richards, 2021). More specifically, it can be concluded that there seems to be a lack of sufficient knowledge about the patterns of book use for storytelling to preschoolers not only in the home but also in the nursery school context.

We also know that there are differences in how the books are read to groups of children. Sometimes, children are engaged in highly interactive discussions that include considerable high-level talk about books whereas in others, the amount of children participation is more circumscribed (Dickinson & Smith, 1991). In addition, the effects of film watching on individual or group storytelling of the pre-school children in home and nursery school contexts have not yet been investigated. Moreover, such a study has not yet been investigated in the Persian context in relation to the Persian narrative reading and listening culture.

The results of the literature revealed that storytelling in front of an audience contributes largely to advancement of language abilities and literacy development of children, and not only their verbal but non-verbal expressiveness as well as other psychological factors such as self-confidence and positive attitude toward teamwork. In sum, the restrictive focus of the literature in this regard means that we have a limited view of the factors contributing to later schooling success, and no sense of the extent to which the home reading experiences are variably or mutually reinforcing.

2.2. Significance of the study and research questions

Among the above-mentioned gaps, it should be noted that the research conducted to date on the effect of storytelling of preschoolers has not been plentiful yet. Additionally, most research in this area has mainly focused on children with deficits and not on typically developing children (Babayigit et al., 2021). The literature in general demonstrated the beneficial effects of storytelling on the expressive and literacy skills of children (Charman & Shmueli-Goetz, 1998; Silva et al., 2014), but this has not yet been investigated in terms of these or other possible beneficial or neutral effects from different aspects. Therefore, this gap especially seems a worthwhile consideration for the prospective and current curriculum developments in nursery or primary schools.

More specifically, a quick glance on the research conducted to date on the typically developing preschool children and especially those of the 3-6 years age range reveal a gap on possible effects of storytelling for the children from this life span not only in the Iranian but also in the worldwide context. More importantly, effect of watching short films on the storytelling ability of these children has not been investigated sufficiently either in Iran or worldwide. What complicates the issue furthermore is that nor the effect of book reading and children's subsequent storytelling has been compared with the children's storytelling based on watching short films in the mentioned contexts. Nor has been investigated the effects of film watching on individual or group storytelling of the pre-schoolers in the Persian context in relation to the Persian narrative reading and listening culture. In an attempt to fill these gaps, the researchers of the current study tried to answer the following research questions and test the related hypothesis by investigating the effects of nursery storybook readings and film viewings on Iranian typically developing 3-6 year-old children's storytelling ability:

- 1) What are the features of Iranian preschooler children's storytelling after hearing the story read from the book and the film-watching based on three dimensions of NAP factors (i.e., topic maintenance, event sequencing, length of narration, fluency, event sequencing, story comprehension, and ability in creation of a similar/ related story reveals)?
- 2) Is there any effect of maternal education level on Iranian children's narratives?
- 3) Are there any differences among different Iranian preschooler age ranges (i.e., 2.5-4, 4-5.5, & 5.5-7) in terms of their storytelling after being read and film watching?

Relatedly, there comes the following hypothesis:

- 1) There are differences between the Iranian preschool children's storytelling after hearing the story read from the book and the film-watching,
- 2) Children with higher maternal education can retell longer and more coherent stories,
- 3) Older preschoolers (i.e., 4-5.5, & 5.5-7) can retell better stories,
- 4) Ancient Persian narrative tradition has relation with the Iranian preschoolers' storytelling abilities and tendencies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

In the present study, nine typically developing Persian-speaking preschool children (in three age cohorts of 2.5- 4; 4- 5.5; and 5.5- 7) participated in five individual sessions during a two-month period between Feb, 2016 to Apr., 2016. Regarding gender, participants consisted of nearly equal number of males and females (five girls and four boys). All participants had produced their first words before the age of two, as indicated by their mothers. Participants were selected from two non-metropolitan cities in Iran. They were divided into three groups for the purpose of comparison based on age differences: group A (2.5 - 4 years old), group B (4 – 5.5 years old), and group C (5.5-7 years old). The latter seven-year-old group was a preschooler as well. Regarding the Social Economic Status (SES) of mothers, all groups were from middle-class families; two of the mothers had high school diplomas, while the rest had college degrees (A.A., B.A., and PhD candidate levels). Except one mother who was a part-timer language teacher, others were housekeepers then.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Shimo rhyming picture books

Maisy Mouse is an animated children's picture book series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999). These are translated into a Persian rhyming picture book series called *Shimo* by Keshavarz (2015). The series has been popular most probably due to its fabulous rhyme and meter as well as its use of brightly colored pictures.

The stories, which were randomly selected by the researchers, are brought up as follows. The ordering is based on the presentation priority:

1. آب و شکر با لیمو / شربت میسازه شیمو. (*Maisy Makes Lemonade*)
2. شیمو کوچولو می تونه / کار بکنه تو خونه. (*Maisy Cleans up*)
3. آرد و شکر تو سینی / پخته شیمو شیرینی. (*Maisy Bakes a Cake*)
4. شب و کتاب و مهتاب / می گن به شیمو بخواب. (*Maisy's Bedtime*)
5. گاز و کلاچ و دنده / شیمو شده راننده. (*Maisy's Bus*)

3.2.2. Maisy mouse animated series

The videos used for this study included five animated episodes of *Maisy Mouse* series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999). The series are narrated in English and is not dubbed into Persian. The reason for selection of such animated series related to rhyming picture books was that they were among the bestsellers for young kids over years in Iran ('best sellers for kids', 2023). Each selected episode is related to one of the rhyming picture books and was thus presented with the related story during one session. The five episodes were ordered below according to the session of presentation:

1. Shed
2. Ginger-cat
3. Playhouse
4. Train
5. Playground

3.3. Procedure

The participants were conveniently reached and selected from typically developing Iranian preschool children who were divided into three age groups with equal numbers in each. Of the nine participants, three were three in each age groups: 2.5-4; 4-5.5; and 5.5-7. Every subject had to attend five sessions, each lasting about 30 minutes in the home context. Every session was divided into two phases: a) a read and retell phase and b) a watch and retell phase, each lasting about 15 minutes.

Each session lasted about 30 minutes and included two phases. In the first phase, each researcher recounted one of the five stories selected from a Persian rhyming story book entitled as *Shimo* (Keshavarz, 2015) and recorded each child's retelling of the story. In the second phase, an episode of topic-related animated *Maisy Mouse* series (Cousins & Nielsen, 1999) was presented to the child which was later followed by each child's description of the video (s)he watched.

In the read and retell phase, one of the researchers read a rhyming story to each child. During the story readings, the book illustrations were shown to the child as a visual aid. Then, the child was asked to retell the story back to the researchers, who were both then PhD candidates of TESOL with an efficient qualitative research background. The researchers supported and encouraged child retelling by providing positive feedback, using phrases like "what happened next?" or "and then what?" and open-ended prompts like "and" or "then". After each participant retold the story, he/she was asked a few comprehension questions. The researchers audiotaped the retold story sessions to be transcribed later. Both researchers shared the same language and cultural background as the children, and they were indigenous to the cities where the children lived.

In the watch and retell phase, the child watched one of the five selected episodes of the animated *Maisy Mouse* series. The researcher provided a brief explanation of the video while the children were watching it. The explanations were rough translations of the random English narration to Persian. Then, the child was asked to explain what happened in the video. Encouragements, support, and comprehension questions were provided as well. Child's narration was audiotaped in a way not to distract his/her attention.

The reason behind the selection of maternal education as a variable was to examine the replicability of the findings of Van Kleeck et al., (2011) on systematic effects of maternal education (with academic degrees) on kindergartners' performance story in the Iranian context.

3.4. Transcription and coding

Working from the 90 recorded retelling sessions, we as the researchers prepared verbatim transcripts for manual analysis and encoding. While transcribing recorded sessions, subjects' mispronunciations were corrected but their grammatical mistakes were retained for further analysis. The transcripts of various phases were divided into three groups according to each age groups of A, B, and C for comparison.

Coding was done by the NVivo qualitative software (Version 11) based on some pre-determined criteria mainly based on the Narrative Assessment Profile (NAP) (Bliss et al., 1998) (see Table 1). NAP, like most of the available narrative assessment tools is designed to evaluate narrative discourse of those with communicative impairments (Bliss et al., 1998); whilst, its application is not limited to the linguistically-impaired. It was selected because it is flexible and useful in evaluating a variety of discourse features. Among different dimensions of NAP, three factors (i.e., topic maintenance, event sequencing, and fluency) were selected to be of concern in the transcripts. Moreover, the transcripts were analyzed and compared regarding comprehension, length of the narratives, and creation of a similar story.

In order to evaluate topic maintenance, the researchers analyzed the data regarding irrelevant utterances and marked them as violations of topic maintenance. If all utterances were on topic, the transcript was evaluated as having appropriate topic maintenance. Otherwise, it was flagged as inappropriate. Likewise, for assessing event sequencing, occurrence of wrong sequence of events was deemed to be of inappropriate event sequencing. Fluency was assessed by spotting number and duration of pauses, false starts, corrections, and repetitions. Comprehension of the stories was evaluated by both spotting irrelevant utterances in transcripts and analyzing child's answers to the comprehension questions. For narration length, the number of words in an uninterrupted narration was counted; hence, the answers to subsequent prompts or questions were not considered. Finally, the subject's ability in the creation of a similar/ related story was assessed by consideration of the attempt to respond to the researcher's request for telling a similar story. Intra-related coding was checked by another co-author. Any independent creation of even a short similar story was counted as the subject's success in task completion.

Table 1. Outline of the investigated variables by each participant and book and film watching stage

		Preschoolers							
Variables		#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8
Book #1	Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
	Length	100	3	19	4	107	80	7	60
Book #2	Comprehension	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
	Length	53	63	10	1	110	95	26	146
Book #3	Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
	Length	47	18	142	4	106	128	41	98
Book #4	Comprehension	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
	Length	32	2	88	35	126	111	98	30
Book #5	Comprehension	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Length	56	20	56	5	101	95	40	97
Film #1	Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Length	6	3	11	17	41	67	23	65
Film #2	Comprehension	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
	Length	11	1	66	7	17	120	77	165
Film #3	Comprehension	✓		✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✗		✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✗		✗		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✗		✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Length	10		10	5	50	111	47	150
Film #4	Comprehension	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
	Event sequencing						✓		
	Similar Story	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Length	5	3	18		7	35	15	10
Film #5	Comprehension	✓		✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic Maintenance	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Event sequencing	✓			✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
	Similar Story	✓		✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
	Length	9		6	7	62	106	37	41

4. Results

Findings of assessment of the NAP features including topic maintenance, length of narration, event sequencing, fluency, story comprehension, and ability in creation of a similar/ related story variations will be discussed separately below. The revealed effects of age, form of presentation, and maternal education on story retelling are also brought forth.

4.1. Assessed NAP features of storytelling after hearing the story versus film-watching

4.1.1. Topic maintenance

Most subjects maintained topics of the stories in their narration of both films and books. Nevertheless, several transcripts included irrelevant utterances and were marked as inappropriate in terms of topic maintenance during the coding process. Inappropriate topic maintenance was only seen in the transcripts from groups A and B that is in the narration of subjects aged below 5.5 years old. Older subjects from group C maintained the topic consistently during their narration. Subjects generally maintained topics more while retelling book stories than describing films.

4.1.2. Event sequencing

In book retellings all children followed the right sequence of events and younger children succeeded in maintenance of event sequencing like older children. In film descriptions; however, group C (5.5 – 7 years) maintained order of events more than the other two groups.

4.1.3. Fluency

For evaluating fluency, subjects' narratives were coded based on repetitions, false starts, corrections, and pauses, which were all observed and recorded during the transcription process. Surprisingly, more instances of false starts and pauses were observed in the narration of older children, mainly group C. Comparing book retellings and film watchings, narrations of the book stories were more fluent than narrations of film stories for all age groups.

4.1.4. Comprehension

In assessing story comprehension, irrelevant utterances or wrong answers to general comprehension questions were coded as miscomprehension. Almost all subjects from the three age groups fully comprehended the stories and succeeded in answering comprehension questions. However, there were fewer miscomprehensions in book retellings than in film descriptions.

4.1.5. Length

To measure the length of narratives, subjects' uninterrupted narrations were separated. Hence, answers to the researcher's questions or repetitions were not counted. Number of words in an uninterrupted narration of the subject was obtained as the length of narratives.

As expected, group C produced longer narratives than groups A and B in both book retellings and film descriptions. Comparing book retellings and film descriptions for all age groups, an interesting result was that Groups A and B produced longer narratives while retelling book stories whereas group C's narratives of books and films were relatively of equal length.

4.1.6. Creation of similar story

Creation of even a very short story of about two lines was encoded as success in the task. The stories created were either an extension of the book or film stories or a similar story with different characters usually including the subject. Only group C showed consistent ability in the creation of a similar story. Groups A and B failed in this task except in few cases. Success in the creation of a similar story mostly occurred following book readings than after film watching.

4.2. Maternal education effects

Children whose mothers had high school diplomas maintained topics more than other children of their age whose parents had university degrees. These children maintained topic throughout their narrations of both films and books consistently while other children with more educated parents had some inconsistencies in topic maintenance in their narratives.

There was no difference in event sequencing between subjects whose mothers were at different educational levels. There also seemed to be an effect of mother's educational level on fluency, since children with less educated parents had more hesitations, false starts and corrections in their narration. Subjects with more educated mothers created longer narratives than subjects in their age groups with less educated mothers while retelling books whereas subjects with less educated mothers produced longer narratives in film descriptions. Regarding mothers' education, there seemed to be a relatively equal level of comprehension between children with differently educated mothers. Regarding the creation of a similar story, there was no difference in this ability between subjects with more or less educated parents of the same age.

4.3. Differences in storytelling after being read and film watching of various age groups

The preschooler children aged below 5.5 years old (i.e., groups A and B) had more inappropriate topic maintenance. Older subjects from group C (5.5 – 7 years) maintained the topic consistently during their narration. Whilst all subjects generally maintained topics more during retelling book stories rather than describing films, similarly, group C maintained the order of events more than the other two groups.

Almost all subjects from the three age groups fully comprehended the stories and succeeded in answering comprehension questions. Fewer misconceptions were seen in book retellings than in film descriptions. In this sense, more instances of false starts and pauses were observed in the narration of older children, mainly group C. Comparing book retellings and film watchings, narrations of the book stories were more fluent than narrations of film stories for all age groups.

As expected, group C produced longer narratives than groups A and B in both book retellings and film descriptions. Comparing book retellings and film descriptions for all age groups, Groups A and B produced longer narratives while retelling book stories whereas group C's narratives of books and films were relatively of equal length. Only group C showed consistent ability in the creation of a similar story. Groups A and B failed in this task except in few cases. Success in the creation of a similar story mostly occurred following book readings than after film watching.

5. Discussion

In an attempt to answer the previously mentioned research questions, verbatim transcripts were encoded and analyzed and the results in the previous section were obtained regarding differences between book retellings and film descriptions, differences between age groups' narratives and differences between performances of children whose mothers were at different educational levels. In addition, it was examined if narratives can be considered as a cultural medium originating from the ancient Persian tradition.

Comparing retellings of books and film descriptions, more topic maintenance, fluency and comprehension were observed from listening to books compared to film watching. This could be in part due to hearing more words from book readings than from films which included only a few sentences. However, another result was that groups A and B produced longer narratives in retelling books whereas group C created narratives of fairly equal length after book reading and film watching. This points out the advantage of books over films for children aged 2.5 – 5.5 years old. It could probably be implied that books are more effective for linguistic development of children below 5.5 years of age compared to watching cartoon/films. This efficiency of book reading for the Iranian context could also date back to the Persian face-to-face storytelling tradition of storytelling, book reading, and *Shahnamehkhani* (Reading the *Shahnameh*) during the winter solstice to educate children and teenage as a pass time especially during the time the social media was not as saturated as today (Shayesteh-Rokh, 2011). Furthermore, it reminds us of the story retelling or face-to-face story reproduction along with the transfer of managed sensations to the audience as one of the cultural aspects of the East and its epitome, Iran ('Storytelling has become a major cultural trend in Iran', Alamati, 2023).

Generally speaking, storytelling and retelling are fairly advantageous activities for preschoolers and bear several merits including improved comprehension (Isbell et al., 2004), creativity (Agosto, 2016), and memory (Isik, 2016; Vaahtoranta et al., 2019). This study in line with previous studies shows advantages of book reading specifically for preschool children and moreover indicates performance differences of preschoolers and older children in retelling books and films.

Regarding age differences, the elder group C outperformed groups A and B considering topic maintenance, event sequencing and length of narratives; however, unexpectedly, group C's narratives had more pauses, corrections, false starts and repetitions. This result can be explained by the significant difference in the length of narratives between group C and groups A and B. Additionally, only the eldest subjects consistently succeeded in creating a similar story, demonstrating their greater understanding of the literacy process and further implying the inclusion of story reconstruction or extension tasks in preschools' curriculum (Mehrabi et al., 2015).

Unlike the studies by Incognito and Pinto (2021) and van Kleeck et al., (2011) in which children with more educated mothers outperformed other children in all instances, in this study, results were varied. Those with more educated mothers

performed longer and more fluently whereas those with less maternal education performed better in film watching which could imply an effect of social class on children's narrative and literacy skills (Silva et al., 2014).

Despite these findings, which were based on pre-determined criteria, in the transcription and coding process, some noteworthy phenomena were observed which can be the topic of further research. One observation was that most of children tried to maintain a poetic tone and sometimes successfully rhymed their narration in an attempt to sound like the original poetic-like story. This implies that the children paid attention to structure and rhyme as well as content and in attempt to follow the rhyme, they were capable of producing rhyming utterances of their own. This observation was present in narratives of all age groups with different maternal education level. This poetic and rhythmic tendency of the Iranian children in their story retelling further dates back to the poetic and rhythmic face-to-face tradition of storytelling, book reading, and Shahnamehkhani (Reading the Shahnameh) during the winter solstice (Shayesteh-Rokh, 2011) as well as the dramatic story-telling of Naqqāli (Naqqāli, Iranian dramatic story-telling, 2011).

6. Conclusion

Children seem to develop storytelling abilities in preschool years. At the age of three to four years old, they gradually become capable storytellers and by the end of schooling, they can tell full stories with the least support or clues (Melzi et al., 2013). The more we tell stories to the child and have him/her retell them, the more child's storytelling abilities develop, which is essential in designing pre-schooling educational programs (van den Broek et al., 2011).

Additionally, in line with the findings of Lau and Richards (2021) regarding the positive link between home literacy-rich environment and children's prospective literacy development, the findings of current study may provide implications for effectiveness of home literacy development of children especially by parents. This could be far more effective when it comes to second/foreign language development. As it was observed here, it was implied that the children paid attention to structure and rhyme as well as content. This observation was present in narratives of all age groups with different maternal educational levels.

As for the implications for educational settings specifically for the Iranian context, story reconstruction or extension tasks should be included in the preschools' curriculum for the children's development of literacy processes. Further, the results provide general guidelines for parents and preschool teachers regarding factors affecting children's literacy development, which should be strengthened during childbearing and child literacy practices. Home literacy practices were also found to be effective for both first and second language development. As for the first language development of Iranian preschoolers, moreover, rhymes were found to be far more effective than film watching. This can provide fruitful implications for the design of literacy and entertaining practices not only in the official preschool contexts but also home environment in Iran. Besides, it may suggest that rhyming book developers and policy makers in Iran invest more in developments of rhyming nurseries in relation to the ancient Iranian storytelling tradition. One limitation of the current study was the convenient selection of preschoolers, due to difficulty of access to them over the long run and in various phases as well as not very large sample accessed. Besides, if further studies can reach preschoolers from more varied cities in Iran, including the metropolitans, it would give more fruitful results.

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