

# Narrative skills of Russian heritage children in Cyprus

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## Abstract

The present study investigated narrative skills of 40 Russian heritage children (HL) in Cyprus (age: 4;0-6;0), with the focus on macro-structure (story structure, structural complexity and internal states terms) and grammaticality, i.e. the extent to which utterances follow the grammatical rules of a language. The analysis of the data revealed that the level of language proficiency, mode of narration (telling/retelling) affected their narrative abilities, as the measures of proficiency in HL were correlated with the macro-structure. The grammaticality analysis revealed that functional categories were the most vulnerable domain for Russian heritage children, which may have been due to cross-linguistic interference or developmental/language acquisition pattern in the language-contact setting. The number of errors was correlated with the language proficiency measures.

Keywords: Russian Heritage children, narrative skills, macro-structure, grammaticality

## Heritage language development and narrative skills

Heritage language maintenance and development depend on family language policy, language dominance, frequency of use, linguistic distance and similarity between the minority and the majority languages or (dia)lects of the society, multi-directionality of cross-linguistic influence and accommodation (Rothman et al., 2019). The present study investigated narrative skills of Russian heritage children in Cyprus, with the focus on macro-structure (story structure, structural complexity and internal states terms), micro-structure and grammaticality, i.e. the extent to which utterances follow the grammatical rules of a language. Grammaticality in narrative tasks can predict language development (Bedore et al., 2010).

Narratives can measure cognitive, linguistic and social skills of bilingual and multilingual children in a less biased way than standardized assessments of language. Narratives can help to identify linguistic, cognitive, semantic and social abilities, communicative competence and cultural awareness of a child. Narrative skills are essential for children's success at school. There is a relationship between oral language (experience with and exposure to discourse) and literacy (Westby, 2012). Cultural communities, language environment, home language use, parental attitudes towards bilingual and bi-cultural learning,

the level of language proficiency are some of the factors that can affect the development of narrative abilities (Fiestas, 2004).

## The Study

The participants of the study were 40 Russian–Cypriot Greek simultaneous bilingual children. Their age ranges from 4;0 to 6;0 (mean 5;2), and they attend kindergarten and primary CG schools, where the language of instruction is Greek. The LITMUS-MAIN, the multilingual assessment instrument for narratives (Gagarina et al., 2015) was used for data collection. Their language proficiency in Russian was measured by the Russian Proficiency Test for Multilingual Children (RPTMC) (Gagarina et al., 2010). Background information was collected using parental questionnaires and interviews. The narratives were recorded, transcribed and analyzed in terms of macro-structure and grammaticality. Grammaticality percentages were calculated for each child.

## Results

The analysis of the data revealed that Russian heritage speakers had better productive skills than perceptive lexical skills, and that they had superior performances with regard to noun production in comparison to verb production, which was not the case for lexical comprehension. The difference between the two age groups regarding such language proficiency measures of their heritage Russian language as the comprehension of grammatical structures, morphological marking on the verb, and receptive and productive lexicon confirmed that there was a developmental pattern regarding their heritage language, see Table 1.

Table 1. Russian Proficiency Test for Multilingual Children: Results.

RPTMC/ Mean scores	Productive lexicon total (52)	Noun production (26)	Verb production (26)
4;0-5;0	28.65	18.2	10.45
5;1-6;0	29.5	17.6	11.9
RPTMC/ Mean scores	Receptive lexicon total	Noun perception (10)	Verb perception (10)
4;0-5;0	14.65	7.35	7.3
5;1-6;0	15.8	8	7.8
RPTMC/ Mean scores	Case (6)	Comprehension of grammatical structures (22)	Morphological marking on the verb (12)
4;0-5;0	3	14	7.1
5;1-6;0	3	15.55	8.4

It was found that the mode of narration (telling/retelling) influenced the macro-structure; in particular, the telling mode triggered the use of more ISTs by the four-year-old bilingual children and improved/more coherent story structure by the five-year-old bilingual children, whereas the retelling mode led to higher scores for story structure, structural complexity and comprehension

questions for the younger age group and to structural complexity, ISTs and comprehension questions for the older group.

Table 2. Macro-structure and comprehension measures.

MAIN/Mean scores	Story structure (17)	Structural complexity (9)	Internal state terms	Comprehension questions (10)
Retelling: 4;0-5;0	6.5	2.5	2.8	7.55
Telling 4;0-5;0	5.8	2	3.55	4.85
Retelling 5;1-6;0	6.5	2.2	3.15	8.45
Telling 5;1-6;0	6.7	2	2.6	6.7

The results revealed that the mode of narration influenced narrative production in Russian. Overall, this is in line with previous findings that the retelling mode elicits longer and more detailed narratives with a more complex story structure than does the telling mode (e.g. Otwinowska et al., 2020). The ages of the participants appeared to affect their narrative skills, particularly their use of ISTs, story structure and their comprehension of the story. The level of language proficiency affected their narrative abilities, as it was found that the measures of proficiency in the heritage language were correlated with the macro-structure measures. There was an obvious effect of chronological age and language proficiency, both for production and comprehension, which is in line with previous studies (e.g. Lindgren, 2019).

Errors/Mean Non-target production	Retelling 4;0-5;0	Telling 4;0-5;0	Retelling 5;1-6;0	Telling 5;1-6;0
Mean number of utterances	10.3	9.65	9.7	9.75
Mean number of words	43.65	46.75	49.45	56.5
MLU	4.39	4.85	5.14	5.73
One-word sentence/utterance	1.1	0.55	3.3	0.2
Null subject pronoun	0.95	0.45	0.6	0.3
Aspect: imperfective instead of perfective	0.25	5	0.45	0.5
Aspect: perfective instead of imperfective	0.1	0	0	0.1
Wrong verb form/innovation	0.55	1.3	0.9	0.85
Infinitive instead of subjunctive	0.05	0.05	0.05	0
Infinitive instead of finite verb	0.05	0	0.05	0
Direct object omission	1.05	1.1	0.7	0.9
Repetition of conjunction	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.75
Case error	0.85	0.65	0.5	1.15
Subject-Verb agreement: Gender	0.25	0.3	0.45	0.35
Subject-Verb agreement: Number	0.05	0.05	0	0.1
Pronoun + Noun agreement: Gender	0.05	0.05	0	0
Word order	0.25	0.3	0	0.05
Wrong noun form: Innovation	0.1	0.15	0	0.01

<b>GAP verb/Circumlocution</b>	0.05	0.35	0.1	0.3
<b>Wrong preposition</b>	0.25	0	0.35	0.25
<b>Omission of preposition</b>	0.05	0	0.2	0.15
<b>Code-switching</b>	0	0.05	0.05	0.1
<b>Wrong conjunction</b>	0	0.05	0.05	0
<b>Total errors</b>	6.7	6.8	8.55	6.15

The grammaticality analysis revealed that the most vulnerable domains for Russian heritage children were morphological agreement, gender, case and aspect features, functional categories such as subject and object pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions, as well as word order, word formation and morphology, which may have been due to cross-linguistic interference or developmental/language acquisition pattern in the language-contact setting, see Table 3. The number of errors was correlated with the measures of language proficiency and not with the measures of macro-structure, with the exception of ISTs.

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