A Study of Children’s Meaning Making of Literary Elements: Focusing on Plot, Theme, and Characters

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Abstract

This study was designed to describe how preschool and kindergarten children made sense of a story by analyzing their responses to plot, theme and characters. This study proposes that children’s character understanding is closely related to their understanding of plot and theme. Ninety four preschool and kindergarten children and sixty four college sophomores participated in reading aloud and responding to activities from the book, The Tunnel by A. Browne (1989). The participants were individually interviewed about how they understood the literary elements. The interview questions were developed with reference to Lehr (1991), Roser, Martinez, Fuhbrken & McDonnold (2007), and Sloan (2003) in order to understand childrens understanding of plot, theme and character. Transcribed responses were coded in traits related to plot, theme and character. The responses of the college students were used to understand the adult point of view on literary meaning making. From the present study, it is evident that young childrens meaning making of literary elements is different from adults. Further, it is different even among young age groups. When a child’s age gets to 5, his/her understanding of character becomes more merged with events and plots, which are similar to that of an adult. However young childrens understanding of psychological or internal aspects of character, of which understanding guarantees sense of theme and plot remains to be developed later. From this study, it seems reasonable to suggest that plot and theme becomes comprehensible through deeper understanding of characters.

[Key Words] Literary meaning making, Plot, Theme, Character

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The present research has been conducted by the Bisa Research Grant of Keimyung University in 2008.
INTRODUCTION

With the exception of research by Sipe (2008), there are few studies addressing preschoolers' literary meaning making focusing on plot, theme and characters that emergent readers may be capable of some degree of differentiation of a central meaning or generalization. Young children's literary meaning making gives us insights on how they construct meaning from text with illustrations using their previous knowledge and experience, and how educators or parents contribute to this process. Applebee (1978) suggested that responses of children to stories do not reach analytical levels of thought before a child is 12. When Applebee (1978) asked children to discuss a story they knew, he found that the typical response from 50% of the 6-year-olds was a retelling of the story. Twenty-seven percent of the 6-year-old children interviewed would not respond to the question because they were worried that they might answer incorrectly. He concluded that 6-year-old children do not typically summarize stories but rather represent the story concretely “with little or no reorganization of events into super-ordinate categories” (p. 93).

This finding coincides with Piaget’s 2 to 7-year-old in preoperational stage development, in which a preschooler bases his/her thinking on direct experience and immediate contexts. Stein & Glenn (1978) reported that children of this age typically focus on specific action when recalling a story. According to Applebee, it is not until concrete operational stages that the child can form symbolic or thematic representations that involve hierarchies of categories and subcategories. His assertion was verified by Galda’s (1990) report that generalization response didn’t occur until children were much older.

However, Lehr (1991) has found that young children were busy in exploring theme with narratives. She emphasizes to view the child as a meaning maker with his or her daily experiences. A child responds to his or her experience in a tidy summary which can have credit for thematic elements. She has found that the kindergarten children responding to picture books such as Titch by Hutchins (1993) were able to retell the story in a brief form and at the same time convey the overall plot. The child could categorize the concrete events into more super-ordinate idea and distance oneself from the immediacy of the story. The child could speak in general terms about Titch’s life. According to Lehr’s (1991) finding, 5-year-old children had no difficulty in integrating individual elements from the story into any sort of general framework. She renders the differences of the finding of Applebee (1978) and hers and formulates prompting questions. In other words, retelling the story was more difficult for the children than a task of answering prompting