Children’s genre knowledge: An examination of K-5 students’ performance on multiple tasks providing differing levels of scaffolding

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Summary:

This article examined how much children knew about genre based on how much support (scaffolding) they received. Donovan & Smolkin “broadened the notion of scaffolding from the more typical emphasis on the social mediation of learning by a more knowledgeable other to include the cultural artifacts (e.g., task materials such as storybooks used for pretend readings) around or even by which scaffolding occurs” (428).

To determine children’s genre knowledge, the researchers used their writing in response to different “levels” of scaffolding. The different “levels” of scaffolding ranged from “lowest level,” which scaffold’s “children’s ability by simply making known what is expected with directions such as ‘make up and write a story’” (433), to “highest level,” which “provided…direct instruction with revision” in the students’ writing (434). Though “scaffolding can assist children it may also, at times, hinder children in demonstrating their full range of genre knowledge” (429). For example, “much of the early writing [primary-grade children] did was nonnarrative. However…first graders produced….expressive mode…and posited that they were precursors to mature narrative” (432).

“The privileging of narrative is evident in that the predominant genre in early elementary classrooms is narrative for both reading and writing” (428). Because of the predominance of the narrative genre, children are not exposed to other genres, “like the privileging of narrative over paradigamic discourse genres, the privileging of social forms of mediation over cultural-
artifactual ones may result in pedagogies that constrain children’s overall literacy development and learning in unsuspected ways” (428). Focusing on narrative genre may “interrupt the development of reading and writing in multiple genres” (428).

Quotes & How they may be used

“As facility with different genres is as much a part of the writing process and development as encoding and control of mechanics, a narrow focus on narrative in early school years may interrupt the development of reading and writing in multiple genres” (428).

“This dominance of narrative has been speculated to be at least part of the reason for children’s difficulties with the expository texts that come to dominate their school reading and writing once they enter the upper elementary grades” (428).

- These quotes respond to a portion of Goal C which says that students are to complete school “with an understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural variation that occurs in language”

- If students are to accomplish this, they have to recognize different genres. Focusing on one genre, specifically the narrative genre, will keep them from honing their skills in recognizing and writing other genres.

- This may also be used for the Final Project to introduce the topic of genres in your paper.

“…genre knowledge emerges early as children engage in writing for meaningful purposes” (431).
- This quote shows the ability of students without scaffolding.
- It may be used to support that educators do not have to teach their students of the variation in language because they learn on their own anyway.

“…children’s own writing seemed to serve as a support for children when they were discussing aspects of different genres and the process of composing the texts in front of them” (434).

“children produced more complex stories and informational texts in response to the low-level scaffolded task and more complex stories than informational text in either task” (435).

- These quotes could be used to support that children can create more complex stories with less scaffolding.
- Also, that they can learn about genres using resources that they have created on their own.

“relying on cultural artifacts as scaffolds seemed to index and activate textual, intertextual, and contextual knowledge about particular discursive fields that children possessed even if they could not analyze, verbalize, or critique such knowledge” (435).

- This quote may be used to show that children need very little scaffolding and still learn given that they are provided topics they are familiar with.
- This ties in with the different versions of stories we were provided for the Final Project, especially the Cinderella books. The Cinderella books were sort of revised to fit into different cultures; some of these cultures may be those that your students practice.
Data portion of article:

Story writing:

- First graders showed more temporal sequencing abilities than kindergartners, and provided settings in their stories.

- As the age/grade of the children increased, they progressively incorporated additional elements into their writing such as internal reactions (characters’ thoughts), plans, settings, and initiating events. “All fifth-grade students wrote stories that included settings, initiating events, and attempts” (pg 442)

- With scaffolding pictures in a book, many children came up with texts categorized as Goal Directed 2, during pretend reading. The scaffolding helped them to come up with more complex story plots but not as much internal reactions of characters. They focused more on pictures and physical events and less on mental and emotional elements.

Informational:

- Organizational patterns of informative compositions increased for fourth and fifth graders, some of them even started using paragraphs with topic sentences. Third graders showed first signs of comparison (differences between reptiles and amphibians). “These increases in text organization sophistication continued with the second graders, who produced texts that ranged from Attribute Lists all the way to Unordered Paragraphs (topic introduced; subtopics in paragraphs)” (pg 443).

- Fifth grader, Frank, wrote a piece on Eskimos but it ended up being argumentative instead of informative; he liked Eskimos a lot and wanted the reader to feel the same way.
• Scaffolding with a pretend book helped 7 students but put 9 students at a lower level.

• The children had more physical descriptions, but scaffolding didn’t make a difference in comparisons.

“While seven children produced texts that would be categorized at higher levels of organizational sophistication, nine produced pretend-reading texts that would be seen at lower levels.”

There are important charts on pages 22, 24, and 27.

How you can use this data for ME #3 and Final Project:

This data provides us with information about how children think and what their abilities are with and without scaffolding. By understanding the cognitive development of children through elementary school, we can develop appropriate expectations from our students (not expecting too little or too much). Also, we can apply the successful scaffolding methods to help our AAE speaking students improve their writing. As we have read about in other articles, having children write frequently is a good way of improving their SWE abilities, as it makes them apply their knowledge in a relevant way. We can use the scaffolding techniques, which were effective to help boost out struggling learners. You can also use this for the final project because it talks all about literacy, writing and scaffolding. This article shows the value of writing in helping teachers to understand their students and their thinking. It shows how important written language is in academic development.
Story writing (continued):

- All third graders focused their definitions of stories on the imaginary quality and no third graders produced a goal-directed story or any consequences in their story.

- Fourth grade girls produced very sophisticated informal writings and stories, which included having all possible genre elements.

- All fifth graders thought stories were easier to produce.

Informational (continued):

- All third grader wrote more sophisticated informal texts than those of second graders.

- All fourth graders wrote more sophisticated texts than those of third graders.

- Fourth grade boys found it easier to write informal texts than stories.

Limitations on research:

- Relied on certain research done by experts

- Book choices could have limited students to produce less sophisticated readings

- Selective group research

Tasks:

- After combing the various tasks of students, Donovan and Smoklin concluded that the works of students “created a fuller picture of a child’s developing genre knowledge.” 

(458)
For example, Brendan was more sophisticated in writing in stories than informal writing. “…his focus shifts from task to task… he is sure that they involve people doing things….sometimes thinks that these things can contribute to suspense..fairly confident that stories involve things that are made up.” (Donovan and Smoklin 459)

Scaffolding:

- Through the various tasks given “it became clear that children could produce organizationally more sophisticated story texts during the middle-level scaffolding task of pretend reading than they could during minimal-level scaffolding tasks of writing from prompts.” (Donovan and Smoklin 459)

- Lowest scaffolding writing prompt is what students can do without assistance and middle-level scaffolding pretend reading is students can do without cognitive subtasks of creation and memory from compositional effort. (Donovan and Smoklin 459) And through these tasks, Brendan was able to complete pretend reading of each genre; the tasks also helped him learn more about genre.

- Using written composition known to the students was helpful in creating a more sophisticated text.

- Fifty-two percent of kindergartners who were supported by a story stem (e.g., "Once there was a big gray fox who lived in a cave near a forest," p. 19) were able to write goal-directed stories. (Stein and Albro study (1997))
• Bamberg (1997), commenting on Stein and Albro's work, noted, "The use of story stems (with familiar characters), given to children in the study that is reported in detail in their chapter, strikes as a methodologically ideal exemplar to bring out children's optimal narrative abilities" (p. 2).

• Intertextuality, defined by Barthes (1979), deBeaugrand (1980), and Kristeva (1980), Cairney (1996) as “the process of interpreting and constructing one text by means of a previously composed text. Texts are composed using many different sign systems for making meaning including reading, writing, viewing, listening, drawing, dramatization, and firsthand experiences. Every text can be linked to every other text we have ever constructed,” helped the students create new texts with some changes, which included characters or setting while keeping the main foundation or the story.

  - “Intertextuality also seems to provide support for the use of structure that can be approached, but in which content or wording may be changed in certain ways.”
  
  (Donovan and Smoklin 460)

Disadvantages of scaffolding:

• Doesn’t guarantee higher levels of performance

  - Ex: Baby Animals pretend reading wasn’t helpful for the older students, for instance, “with pretend readings, three of the third graders and fifth grader Frances had texts with structures below paragraph organization.” (Donovan and Smoklin 461)
Semiotic levels:

- According to Martin, genre and register, which are two semiotic levels, are responsible for the meanings of texts. (462)
  
  “Genre attended to the distinctive stages of various social processes that represented the forms through which purposes could be achieved. Register, the second semiotic level, dealt with three other aspects of meaning—the subject, the audience/speaker relations, and whether the produced text was oral or written.” (Martin (1984))

- Systemic functional linguist focus more on genre because it can be a tool “to use language appropriately or effectively for different purposes, that genre, the stages passed through to achieve goals within a given culture, provides a more readily accessible starting point for learning about language.” (Rothery 228)

**How you can use this data for Final Project and ME #3:**

For ME #3, various scaffolding methods such as lowest scaffolding writing prompt, middle-level scaffolding pretend reading, intertextuality, and the two semiotic levels: genre and register can be used to help students achieve effective writing in SAE. These methods can be used to develop the student’s ideas, create new texts using the given text, expand understanding of genre as well as using language appropriate in text. This article can be used for the Final Project, because the research done by Donovan and Smoklin is based on the using literature to see how well students comprehended and critically think/analyze literature.