

Narrative Skills In Malayalam Speaking Young Adults And Geriatric

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Abstract

Narrative skills are essential for effective communication and reflect an individual's ability to organize, interpret and convey information meaningfully. Age related changes in cognitive and linguistic abilities may influence narrative performance across the lifespan. The present study aimed to assess and compare narrative skills in young adults speaking Malayalam (18–35 years) and geriatric (60–70 years). The participants were assessed on narrative tasks under familiar and unfamiliar conditions focusing on three domains: trouble source, repair and resolution. The results were analyzed based on the frequency and percentage of correct and incorrect responses and chi-square analysis was used to examine group differences.

The results indicated that in the familiar condition young adults showed higher correct responses in trouble source (60.0%) and resolution (66.7%) compared to geriatric individuals (43.3% and 40.0%, respectively) whereas geriatric individuals demonstrated better performance in repair (60.0%) than young adults (40.0%). Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference for the resolution domain ($\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.29, p = .038$), while no significant differences were observed for trouble source ($p = .196$) and repair ($p = .121$). In the unfamiliar condition young adults demonstrated higher correct responses for trouble source (76.7%) compared to geriatric individuals (56.7%) whereas geriatric individuals showed slightly better performance in repair (56.7%) and resolution (53.3%) than young adults (46.7% and 50.0%, respectively). However, these differences were not statistically significant (all $p > .05$).

Overall, the findings indicated that young adults demonstrated relatively better performance in specific narrative domains particularly resolution under familiar conditions while most other differences between the groups were not statistically significant. The study provided important insights into age related variations for narrative skills and highlighted its clinical relevance in the assessment and management of communication abilities among Malayalam speaking populations.

Keywords: narrative skills, young adults, geriatric population, Malayalam speakers, pragmatic abilities, familiar and unfamiliar contexts, aging, communication skills, chi-square analysis

1. Introduction

Language is defined as a structured system of conventional spoken and written symbols that enabled individuals within a social group to communicate and share cultural experiences (Varshney, 2000). It comprised several interrelated components including phonology morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics each contributing to effective communication. Phonology dealt with the rules governing sound patterns morphology focused on word formation, semantics related to meaning, syntax governed sentence structure and pragmatics involved the appropriate use of language in social contexts (Denham & Lobek, 2010). These components function in an integrated manner to facilitate meaningful communication thereby forming the basis for more complex communicative abilities such as narrative discourse.

Human language distinguished from other communication systems by specific design features such as semanticity, arbitrariness, discreteness, displacement, productivity and patterning (Hockett, 2010). These characteristics enables individual to generate meaningful expressions refer to past and future events and organize linguistic units into complex structures. Communication is defined as a process through which information, ideas, emotions and attitudes are exchanged between individuals using a shared system of symbols, signs or behaviour involving encoding and decoding mechanisms (Webster Oxford Dictionary, 2000). Such communicative processes required not only linguistic competence but also the ability to organize and convey information effectively which was achieved through narrative skills.

Narrative skills are considered as an essential aspect of communication enabling individuals to organize and convey experiences, events and ideas in a coherent and meaningful manner. Narrative analyses are defined as a process through which researchers examined how individuals constructed and interpreted stories based on their experiences and interactions with the world. It focused on the structure, organization and sequencing of discourse as well as the ability to maintain coherence and relevance in communication. Labov (1972) described narrative as a form of discourse that allowed speakers to assign meaning to sequences of events highlighting its role in cognitive and linguistic functioning.

Narrative abilities served as important indicators of language development and contributed significantly to reading comprehension fluency and overall communication skills. Analysis of narrative discourse provided valuable insights into how individuals understood, organized and responded during conversational exchanges. In field of speech language pathology, narrative analysis has been widely used as a tool to assess both typical and disordered communication as it reflected real life language use and functional communication abilities.

Age related changes in cognitive functions such as memory, attention and executive functioning were found to influence narrative performance. Young adults typically demonstrated efficient narrative organization due to optimal cognitive functioning whereas geriatric individuals experienced age related neural and cognitive changes that affected language processing. These changes often resulted in differences in the organization, coherence and completeness of narratives between the two groups.

Communication abilities in the geriatric population had become increasingly important. Narrative assessment provided clinically relevant information about functional communication skills in older adults. In multilingual societies such as India where Malayalam was widely spoken linguistic and cultural factors further influenced narrative performance. However, limited research had examined narrative skills in Malayalam speaking populations across different age groups particularly in relation to contextual

variations. Therefore, the present study on Narrative Skills in Malayalam Speaking Young Adults and Geriatric Individuals was undertaken to evaluate and compare narrative performance across age groups and to provide clinically relevant data for assessment and intervention in speech language pathology

Hanna K. Ulatowska (1983) investigated narrative discourse production in individuals with aphasia and reported that although their narratives were structurally organized, they were reduced in complexity, coherence, and overall quantity compared to typically developing individuals. This indicated that neurological impairments affect higher-level discourse organization despite preserved basic structure.

Kazmarek (1984) examined the neurolinguistic aspects of verbal output in patients with frontal lobe lesions and found that the left frontal lobe plays a critical role in organizing linguistic information, sequencing events, and maintaining coherence in narrative production. Damage to this region resulted in disorganized and fragmented narratives.

Goodglass, H., & Kaplan, E. (1993) compared morphosyntactic abilities in fluent and non-fluent aphasic individuals and reported significant differences between the groups. Agrammatic individuals exhibited marked deficits in syntax and morphology, which adversely affected their ability to construct coherent narratives.

Charles N. Li (1995) explored the influence of topic and listener familiarity on discourse production and found that familiarity significantly enhanced narrative organization, content richness, and communicative effectiveness. This highlighted the role of contextual factors in shaping narrative performance.

Randall (1999) suggested that narrative abilities in older adults continue to evolve across the lifespan, with increased emphasis on interpretation, reflection, and emotional meaning derived from life experiences, rather than mere factual recounting.

Wilkinson (2006) applied conversation analysis to aphasic speech and demonstrated its effectiveness in identifying interactional patterns, communication breakdowns, and compensatory strategies, thereby providing valuable insights for clinical intervention.

Yim and Yih (2006) analyzed conversational patterns in individuals with dementia and identified common communicative difficulties, including directive speech, evasiveness, and emotionally driven responses, which impacted effective communication.

Hough (2007) examined word finding abilities in older adults and reported selective impairments in naming tasks, suggesting that lexical retrieval difficulties increase with age and may influence overall language performance.

Mathias (2008) reported that geriatric individuals exhibited more frequent communication breakdowns and fewer successful repair attempts compared to younger adults, indicating age-related challenges in maintaining effective communication.

Gloria (2009) investigated narrative development in young children and reported ongoing maturation of phonological and morphosyntactic abilities, which contributed to the gradual improvement of narrative skills during early childhood.

Jorgenson and Togher (2009) compared narrative abilities in individuals with traumatic brain injury and healthy controls and found significant impairments in monologic narrative production, including reduced coherence and organization.

Nebu and Kumaraswamy (2014) analyzed narrative skills in Malayalam-speaking geriatric individuals and reported significant differences in repair sequences, lexical diversity, and discourse organization across tasks, highlighting age-related changes in narrative competence.

NEED OF THE STUDY

The average life expectancy of human beings has increased significantly over the years leading to a growing interest in understanding communication abilities across the lifespan particularly in older adults. Narrative skills which reflect an individual's ability to organize, structure and convey experiences meaningfully are considered an essential component of functional communication and are frequently evaluated during language assessment. Despite the clinical importance of narrative analysis there is a paucity of research examining narrative skills among Malayalam speaking populations. Existing literature indicates that linguistic, cultural and socio environmental factors influence narrative performance; however, such influences remain underexplored in linguistically rich and culturally diverse region. Narrative analysis in Malayalam speaking individuals provides ecologically valid and clinically relevant language samples that can aid in both assessment and intervention planning. Furthermore, comparing narrative abilities between young adults and geriatric populations is crucial for understanding age related changes in discourse skills. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate and compare the narrative skills of Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric individuals.

METHODOLOGY

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the present study was to investigate the narrative performance among Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric individuals in both familiar and unfamiliar tasks and to compare the narrative performance between these two groups across familiar and unfamiliar tasks.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 60 individuals who were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 30 healthy young adult individuals aged 18–35 years, while the second group consisted of 30 healthy geriatric individuals aged 60–70 years participated in the study

PROCEDURE

A narrative sample of 5–10 minutes were recorded from each participant based on their description of past events for both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Familiar contexts included story narration and personal life experiences (e.g., describing a memorable family function a favourite festival or a significant childhood event). Unfamiliar contexts involved asking participants to imagine hypothetical situations and narrate accordingly with respect to different roles or perspectives (e.g., describing what changes they would implement if they were a community leader or how they would manage a school as a head teacher). The responses were analyzed using a scoring system in which each correct response was assigned a score of 1 and each incorrect response was assigned a score of 0.

Statistical analysis:

The collected data were summarized by using Descriptive Statistics: frequency, and percentage. To compare narrative skills in Malayalam speaking between young adults and geriatrics; the Chi square test was used. The p value < 0.05 was considered as significant. Data were analyzed by using the SPSS software (SPSS Inc.; Chicago, IL) version 29.0.10.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to analyse the narrative skills of Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric individuals in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and the results obtained are discussed below.

Table 1

Assessment of narrative skills in Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric

		Correct		Incorrect	
		n	%	n	%
Familiar	Trouble source	31	51.7	29	48.3
	Repair	30	50.0	30	50.0
	Resolution	32	53.3	28	46.7
Unfamiliar	Trouble source	40	66.7	20	33.3
	Repair	31	51.7	29	48.3
	Resolution	31	51.7	29	48.3

Fig 1

Assessment of narrative skills in Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric

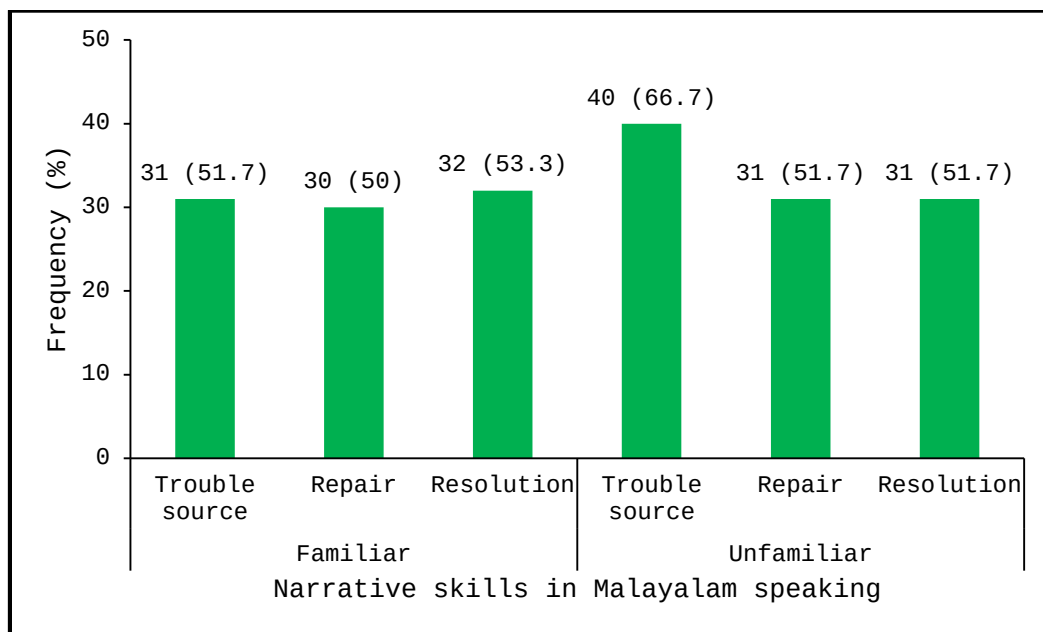


Table 1 and Figure 1 show the comparison of correct and incorrect responses (%) across familiar and unfamiliar conditions for pragmatic skills, including trouble source, repair, and resolution. In the familiar condition, the percentage of correct responses was 51.7% for trouble source, 50.0% for repair, and 53.3% for resolution, indicating a relatively balanced distribution between correct and incorrect responses. In the unfamiliar condition, higher correct responses were observed for trouble source (66.7%), whereas repair (51.7%) and resolution (51.7%) showed similar performance to the familiar condition.

Overall, the results indicated that participants demonstrated better performance in identifying trouble sources in unfamiliar contexts, while repair and resolution skills remained relatively consistent across both familiar and unfamiliar conditions. The graphical representation further supported these findings, showing higher correct responses compared to incorrect responses across most domains, with the most notable difference observed in the unfamiliar trouble source condition

Table 2

Comparison of narrative skills in Malayalam speaking between young adults and geriatric

			Age groups				Chi square	p value	Significance
			Young adults (18-35)		Geriatric (60-70)				
			n	%	n	%			
Familiar	Trouble source	Correct	18	60.0	13	43.3	1.67	0.196	NS
		Incorrect	12	40.0	17	56.7			
	Repair	Correct	12	40.0	18	60.0	2.40	0.121	NS
		Incorrect	18	60.0	12	40.0			
	Resolution	Correct	20	66.7	12	40.0	4.29	0.038	S
		Incorrect	10	33.3	18	60.0			
Unfamiliar	Trouble source	Correct	23	76.7	17	56.7	2.70	0.100	NS
		Incorrect	7	23.3	13	43.3			
	Repair	Correct	14	46.7	17	56.7	0.60	0.438	NS
		Incorrect	16	53.3	13	43.3			
	Resolution	Correct	15	50.0	16	53.3	0.07	0.796	NS

The Chi square test was used to compare narrative skills in Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatrics. There was a difference in the skill: Familiar (Resolution); between young adults and geriatrics. [Table – 2]

Fig 2

Comparison of narrative skills in Malayalam speaking between young adults and geriatric

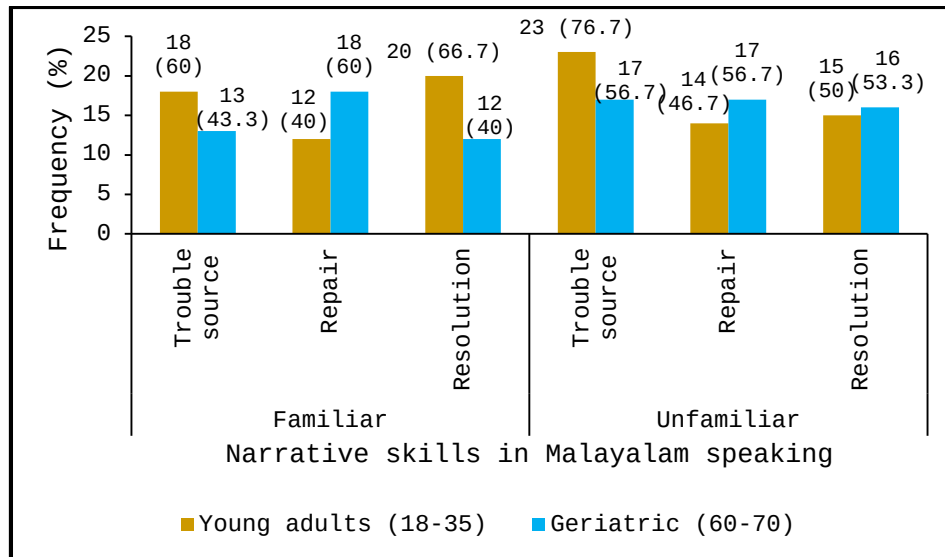


Table 2 and Fig 2 present the comparison of correct and incorrect responses between young adults (18–35 years) and geriatric adults (60–70 years) across familiar and unfamiliar conditions for pragmatic skills, including trouble source, repair, and resolution.

In the familiar condition, young adults demonstrated higher correct responses in trouble source (60.0%) and resolution (66.7%) compared to geriatric adults (43.3% and 40.0%, respectively), whereas geriatric adults showed higher performance in repair (60.0%) than young adults (40.0%). A statistically significant difference was observed only in the resolution domain, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.29, p = .038$, indicating better performance among young adults. No significant differences were found for trouble source, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 1.67, p = .196$, and repair, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 2.40, p = .121$.

In the unfamiliar condition, young adults showed higher correct responses in trouble source (76.7%) compared to geriatric adults (56.7%), whereas geriatric adults performed slightly better in repair (56.7%) and resolution (53.3%) than young adults (46.7% and 50.0%, respectively). However, these differences were not statistically significant for trouble source, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 2.70, p = .100$, repair, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 0.60, p = .438$, and resolution, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 0.07, p = .796$.

Overall, the results indicated that young adults performed significantly better only in the resolution domain under familiar conditions, while no other statistically significant differences were observed between the two age groups. The graphical representation further supported these findings, showing comparable performance patterns across most domains.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to evaluate and compare narrative skills in Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric individuals across familiar and unfamiliar contexts. The results showed that there was statistically no significant difference between the two groups in most narrative domains. However, a statistically significant difference was observed in the resolution domain under the familiar condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.29, p = .038$, indicating that young adults performed better than geriatric individuals in this aspect of

narrative skills. These findings suggested that narrative abilities were largely comparable across age groups with specific differences emerging in more complex components.

The absence of significant differences across most domains may be explained by the preservation of basic narrative abilities across the lifespan. Both young adults and geriatric individuals possess well established linguistic knowledge which supports their ability to identify trouble sources and engage in basic repair strategies. This finding is consistent with the study by Mukundan and Basanta (2007), who reported no significant age related differences in certain lexical processing abilities. Similarly Randall (1999) suggested that narrative abilities in older adults continue to develop with increased emphasis on interpretation and personal meaning which may contribute to the maintenance of narrative performance in later life.

Although no major differences were observed in most domains the study revealed a significant difference in the resolution domain under familiar conditions. Resolution requires higher level cognitive processing including integration of information, sequencing of events and effective closure of narratives. Age related decline in cognitive functions such as working memory and executive functioning may have contributed to the lower performance observed among geriatric individuals. This finding is supported by Mathias (2008), who reported that older adults exhibit more communication breakdowns and fewer successful repair attempts. Additionally, Hough (2007) and Sam et al. (2008) highlighted age related difficulties in lexical retrieval which may further influence narrative organization and completeness.

The influence of contextual familiarity was also evident in the present study. Performance patterns suggested that familiarity may facilitate narrative organization and content generation particularly for complex components. However, the absence of significant differences across unfamiliar conditions indicated that both groups were able to adapt to contextual variations. This observation is consistent with the findings of Li et al. (1995), who reported that familiarity plays an important role in shaping discourse structure and communicative effectiveness.

The findings of the present study are further supported by neurolinguistic and clinical research. Ulatowska et al. (1983) reported that narrative production may remain structurally intact but reduced in complexity in individuals with neurological impairments. Kazmarek (1984) emphasized the role of the frontal lobe in organizing narrative sequences while Goodglass et al. (1993) demonstrated that impairments in morphosyntax can affect narrative coherence. Studies by Wetherell et al. (2007) and Jorgenson and Togher (2009) also reported deficits in narrative organization in clinical populations highlighting the importance of cognitive linguistic processes in discourse production. Furthermore, Hegde et al. (2010), John et al. (2008) and Nebu and Kumaraswamy (2014) reported age related changes in narrative skills among Malayalam speakers particularly in repair strategies and discourse organization which align with the present findings.

Overall, the findings suggested that narrative skills in Malayalam speaking individuals were largely preserved across age groups although certain higher level components such as resolution were affected by age related factors. These results highlight the importance of considering both age and contextual factors when assessing narrative abilities. The study provides valuable insights for clinical assessment and intervention in communication disorders particularly in identifying subtle age related changes in narrative and pragmatic skills among Malayalam speaking populations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present study focused on the narrative skills of Malayalam speaking young adults and geriatric individuals across familiar and unfamiliar contexts. The findings revealed that there were no significant differences between the two groups in most narrative domains indicating that basic narrative abilities were relatively preserved across age groups. However, a significant difference was observed in the resolution domain under familiar conditions where young adults performed better than geriatric individuals.

The findings of the study suggested that while fundamental aspects of narrative skills such as trouble source identification and repair remained stable with age more complex components like resolution were influenced by age-related cognitive factors. Contextual familiarity also played a role in shaping narrative performance.

Thus, in conclusion it can be stated that narrative skills are largely maintained across the lifespan with specific age related differences observed in higher-level narrative processing highlighting the importance of considering both age and context in the assessment of narrative abilities.

LIMITATIONS

Limited sample size was used in the study.

Only young adults and geriatric individuals were included, and the findings cannot be generalized to other age groups.

Only Malayalam speaking individuals were included in the study, limiting generalizability to other linguistic populations.

Only selected narrative domains (trouble source, repair, and resolution) were assessed and other aspects of narrative skills were not included.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study can be extended with larger sample sizes to improve generalizability.

Similar research can be conducted with other age groups, including children and middle-aged adults.

Research can be carried out on clinical populations such as individuals with aphasia, dementia and other communication disorders.

Future studies can include additional narrative and pragmatic domains along with more comprehensive assessment measures.

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