

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Dealing With Alternative Views: The Case Of the Big Bad Wolf And The Three Little Pigs.



1. Introduction

This study is part of a more comprehensive work which focused on the development of argumentative skills. The traditional view in the psychological literature is that these skills develop late in childhood or early adolescence. However, Stein and Berna (1999) have shown that even very young children are able to generate all components of an argumentative discourse. In this study, argumentative discourse is defined as one which involves the justification of a position, and ideally would also include the evaluation of alternative views. Based on this definition, the components of an argumentative discourse would be: a claim, at least one supporting reason, and the evaluation of counterarguments or alternative views.

The evaluation of alternative views is referred to in the literature as a requisite for critical thinking and the development of good argument (Santos & Santos, 1999). This evaluation may result from the contact with new information which challenges prior knowledge on a specific topic or subject. Occasionally, the outcome of this evaluative process means the revision of some old and well established beliefs. The revision of beliefs often requires finding ways to deal with contrasting information and integrate them into one's discourse. The development of this ability seems to be of great relevance to educational purposes, as well as to enable people to deal with the paradoxical nature of various issues in everyday life (Kuhn, 1991). The evaluation of alternative views may also be associated with knowledge building. This study focus on the development of this argumentative skill, and investigated the impact of new, contrasting information on children's prior beliefs. It was observed how children integrate alternative views into their discourse and whether a developmental tendency was apparent in the elaboration of this ability.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Sixty children of ages five, six, and seven, attending the same school in Natal (RN), Brazil, took part in this study. They were divided into three groups according to their age and there was the same number of boys and girls in each group. All children were familiar with the story of 'The three Little Pigs'.

2.2. Procedure and Material

Each child was interviewed individually and told both the original and an alternative version of the story of 'The Three Little Pigs'. Two illustrated books, one for each version of the story, were used during the story telling part of the interview. The alternative version of the story described the wolf's point of view and challenged the belief of the evil nature of the wolf's character. In his version of the story, the Wolf tried to explain that it was all a misunderstanding, and happened because he had a terrible cold and needed to borrow a little bit of sugar to make his grandmother a birthday cake. This alternative version was presented as "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs", and can be read below.

"The True Story of The Three Little Pigs" (i)

Well, before I start telling the true story of The Three Little Pigs, let me say something: this thing of The Big Bad Wolf is completely wrong. It's all a big misunderstanding. It all happened because I had a terrible cold and I needed a bit of sugar to make a birthday cake for my dear little grandmother.

On the day of my grandmother's birthday, I had a terrible cold and I was sneezing a lot. When I was making the birthday cake, I ran out of sugar. So I thought: "I'll ask my neighbor to lend me a bit of sugar." And my neighbor was one of the Three Little Pigs!

He wasn't very intelligent! He built a house of straw. Can you believe it? Nobody in their right mind builds a house of straw because they know it'll be too weak! Even the slightest wind will blow down a house made of straw! Since the house was very fragile, as soon as I knocked on the door, it fell down! As I'm polite, I don't go into people's houses without announcing myself, so I called out: "Little pig, little pig, are you there?" Nobody answered. That was when my nose began to itch. I felt the sneeze coming. So, I breathed in and let out a great big sneeze. And then, do you know what happened? The house fell down completely. And when I looked, right in the middle of that pile of straw, the first little pig was

running to the next house, which was his brother's, the second little pig. I swear that I had no idea why he was running. All I wanted was to borrow a bit of sugar! Well, as I still didn't have the sugar I needed to make my grandmother's birthday cake, I decided to go to my other neighbor's house to ask for some. And do you know who my other neighbor was? The second little pig. The one that built the house of wood! Ah! This one seemed to be a bit more intelligent, he built his house from wood.

When I got to the wooden house, I rang the doorbell and nobody answered. So I decided to start opening the door to see if there was anyone home. When I was opening the door, I felt another sneeze coming. So I breathed in and let out a great big sneeze! It blew the wooden house down! When the dust had settled, I could see the two little pigs running off to the house of the third little pig, the one that built his house of bricks. Well, as I still didn't have the sugar, I thought: "I'll ask for the sugar I need at my next neighbor's house. I think he'll lend me some because it's to make my little grandmother's birthday cake!" And do you know who my third neighbor was? The third little pig. Ah! Now this one must have been the brains of the family! He built his house of bricks!

When I got to the house, I knocked on the door but nobody answered. So I called out: "Mister Little Pig!" and the little pig shouted out from inside: "Get out of here wolf, don't get on my nerves!" So I thought: "How rude!" "He must have a sack full of sugar and won't even give me a little cup of it to make my little grandmother's birthday cake!" "What a selfish little pig!"

I had already given up making the cake and I was almost leaving when I felt a great big sneeze coming. So I breathed in and sneezed! When I sneezed, the little pig inside shouted: "Hey Wolf, your grandmother can go to hell!"

Look! I'm a very calm Wolf, but when someone talks about my grandmother like that, I go crazy. So, because I got very angry, I tried to knock down the door of the brick house. In the midst of all this commotion, the police arrived! And they caught me trying to knock down the door of the little pig's house, and they thought I was doing that so I could eat the Three Little Pigs.

Can you see how the Story of The Three Little Pigs is all a big misunderstanding? And that's how they turned a poor, sick Wolf, asking for sugar to make his dear little grandmother's birthday cake into a Big Bad Wolf!

The children were asked to give and justify their opinion about the wolf in both versions of the story. After they had listened to the "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs" and said what they thought about the wolf, the children were asked

how they would explain their opinion to a friend of theirs. Following this, they were confronted with an opinion about the wolf which was different from their own and presented to them as the view of another child. They were later asked what they thought about it. This procedure was similar with the “scaffolding technique” used in works by Perkins and his collaborators (Perkins, Farady and Bushey, 1991), Kuhn (1991) and Santos (1996). All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed afterwards.

3. Results

The data analysis focused on the ways in which an alternative view about the wolf’s intentions and behavior affected children’s prior beliefs about the wolf, and whether or not they integrated contrasting information into their discourse. The analysis investigated the changes that happened from “*Time 1*”, which referred to children’s original opinion about the Wolf and the supporting reasons they gave, to “*Time 2*”, which related to children’s discourse about the Wolf after they had been presented with new contrasting information and engaged into a discussion about their views. During this discussion children were asked:

- a. to say what they thought about the Wolf;
- b. to justify their opinion;
- c. to think of more supports for their opinion if they had to explain it to a friend and,
- d. to reply an opposing view, presented as the opinion of a hypothetical classmate.

The present study does not include the analysis of this latter aspect of the interview.

3.1. Part one: Original version

After being told the original version of the story, all children said that the Wolf was bad (or used some other adjective with similar meaning). In general, all children were able to justify their opinion by saying that the Wolf wanted to eat the Little Pigs, however, some of the them needed to be prompted more than once. This occurred more often with 5-year-olds (six children), rather than with 6 and 7-year-olds (two 6-year-olds and one 7-year-old).

3.2. Part two: After the ‘True Story’

The Wolf: Bad or Not bad?

After listening to the alternative version of the story, most of the children (80%) changed their opinion about the Wolf. Figure 1 presents these data.

Only one 7-year-old and two 6-year-old boys maintained their original opinion about the Wolf, whereas, about half of the 5-year-old children (nine of them) continued saying that the Wolf was bad. This result indicates a significant age effect, which suggests that the 5-year-olds reacted to the contrasting information about the Wolf differently from the older children ($\chi^2(2, N = 60) = 10.87,$