Language Sampling with Adolescents

Implications for Intervention

Second Edition
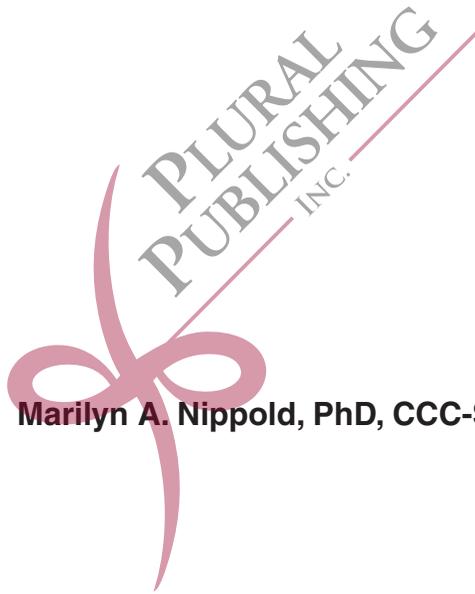
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Preface

*I*n June 1972, I graduated from the University of California Los Angeles with a B.A. degree in philosophy, also having studied psychology. That autumn, instead of reading the works of Plato and Piaget, I began working as a teacher's assistant in a preschool program for low-income families in Southern California. Whenever the speech-language pathologist came into the classroom to evaluate the children who spoke very little or whose speech was unclear or disfluent, I observed with great interest as I continued my duties of setting up for snack, cleaning paint brushes, organizing bookshelves, and creating seasonal bulletin boards. By the end of the school year, having had the opportunity to observe individual and small-group therapy sessions, I knew that I had found my calling—to become a speech-language pathologist and work with children.

Thus, I spent the summer of 1973 taking classes in communicative disorders at nearby California State University Long Beach where I read the works of scholars such as Roger Brown (1973), Noam Chomsky (1965), Mildred Berry (1969), and Mildred Templin (1957). Upon learning about the concept of spontaneous language sampling, I began audio-recording conversations with neighborhood children as they happily talked about story books, pets, and favorite activities. I then transcribed their samples by hand, laboriously calculating mean length of utterance (MLU) in words, and attempting to analyze their speech with an emerging program called *Developmental Sentence Scoring*, or DSS (Lee & Canter, 1971). After that summer, I entered the master's degree program at California State University Long Beach, confident in my choice of career and eager to learn more about it.

After earning my M.A. degree in 1976, I began working as a speech-language pathologist in Southern California, first in a private clinic with preschool children, and later in a public school with young adolescents. During those years, I continued to learn about language development and disorders, reading books and articles and attending conferences. I also continued to record, transcribe, and analyze my clients' conversations. At the time, it was easy to find information on how to analyze the spoken language of young children. However, I was hard pressed to find solid guidance from textbooks, journals, or conferences that would help me to evaluate the spoken language of children over the age of 7 years. Although

it was obvious to me that language development continued well beyond that point, little research had been published on later language development or on language disorders in school-age children and adolescents.

My work as a speech-language pathologist with adolescents was particularly heartbreaking. For those young people, the years of struggling with a language disorder had impacted them greatly, gradually eroding their self-esteem, social development, and school success. Unfortunately, none of my students could read or write at grade level or speak with clarity, precision, or confidence. However, I believed that much could be done to help them succeed, if more information were available from research on later language development.

In the spring of 1978, I was accepted into the doctoral program in speech-language pathology at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. As a doctoral student, my goal was to learn as much as possible about language development and language disorders in school-age children and adolescents. Since graduating from Purdue in 1982, I have been on the faculty in Communication Disorders and Sciences at the University of Oregon, where I have continued to learn about later language development and disorders, by conducting research projects in areas such as figurative language understanding, word learning, metalinguistics, verbal reasoning, reading, and spoken and written discourse.

This book on language sampling with adolescents is an effort to pull together some of my recent projects on discourse development, in an applied format. Its major purpose is to provide guidance for eliciting, transcribing, and analyzing conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive discourse samples with students in grades 5 through 12 (ages 10–18 years). Suggestions are offered on how to use that information to promote students' language development. The book is written for speech-language pathologists who struggle, as I have, to make intervention relevant and effective for older students.

Speech-language pathologists who work in the schools often are called upon to evaluate the spoken and written language skills of adolescents, an activity that should include language sampling in order to learn how well young people communicate in natural settings. This information then can be used to design intervention activities to assist students in meeting Common Core State Standards and in helping them to excel at formal speaking and writing assignments in the classroom. Speech-language pathologists are ideally suited for conducting these activities because of the extensive training they receive in language development and disorders. However, language sampling with adolescents can be challenging. For example, speech-language pathologists often report that they are unfamiliar with language sampling tasks that are appropriate for adolescents; that they are unsure of how to encourage adolescents to talk; and that they have little understanding of how to analyze a sample, not knowing what to expect or what to do with the findings. In addition, they often report that they have

difficulty performing linguistic analyses, such as identifying different types of words (e.g., particles versus prepositions; participles versus gerunds; finite versus nonfinite verbs), sentences (e.g., simple versus complex; complex versus compound), and clauses (e.g., main, relative, adverbial, nominal) and in calculating various units of measurement (e.g., clausal density, mean length of utterance, mean length of C-unit, mean length of T-unit).

This book addresses these and other issues and provides sets of exercises to enhance learning or review. It also offers suggestions for designing intervention goals and activities to promote adolescents' use of complex language. After reading this book and completing the exercises, speech-language pathologists should be able to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples with adolescents quite successfully. They should also know what to do with that information to plan meaningful, relevant, and engaging intervention activities for adolescents.

A NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

When this book is used as a text for university courses in language assessment and intervention, it is suggested that students be assigned to read chapters from Part II: Grammar Review and Exercises, while they are reading chapters from Part I: Working With Adolescents. This would provide students the opportunity to review grammar in manageable chunks before they are expected to apply the information to analyze a language sample. Note that the chapters in Part II build upon each other. For example, by covering word types (e.g., noun, verbs, adjectives) in Chapter 10 before clause types (e.g., nominal, adverbial, relative) in Chapter 11, students will understand how different types of words are similar to different types of clauses (e.g., nouns and nominal clauses; adjectives and relative clauses). Moreover, by covering clause types (e.g., main, coordinate, subordinate) before sentence types (e.g., simple, compound, complex) in Chapter 12, they will understand how the type of sentence is determined by the type(s) of clause(s) it contains. Finally, by covering sentence types before units of measurement (Chapter 13), students will be able to distinguish between complete and incomplete C-units and T-units and to determine whether a "run on" sentence is actually one, two, or three C-units or T-units.

Thus, it is suggested that during the first half of a semester, students be assigned to read the chapters in this sequence: 1 and 10, 2 and 11, 3 and 12, and 4 and 13 and 14. It is also recommended that class time be spent discussing their answers to the grammar review exercises. Then, during the second half of the semester, they could read the following chapters: 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Following this sequence, students would be prepared to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples from adolescents with typical or impaired language development during the second half of the

course. The experience of conducting a language sample then will help to prepare them to apply their findings as they read and discuss the three chapters on language intervention (Chapters 7, 8, and 9).

—Marilyn A. Nippold

Working With Adolescents

Why Language Sampling?

*T*he ability to use language to express oneself with clarity, precision, and confidence in social, academic, and vocational settings is a basic human right. In our modern information-driven world in which effective and effortless communication is the standard expectation for all citizens, individuals who experience difficulties with spoken or written language—during formal or informal situations—are seriously hampered in their pursuit of personal satisfaction, independent living, and economic prosperity.

At least 10% of adolescents have language disorders that restrict their ability to express themselves verbally. This includes, for example, students with specific language impairment (SLI), nonspecific language impairment (NLI), learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and traumatic brain injury (TBI; e.g., Bishop & Donlan, 2005; Landa & Goldberg, 2005; Lewis, Murdoch, & Woodyatt, 2007; Marinellie, 2004; Moran & Gillon, 2010; Moran, Kirk, & Powell, 2012; Nippold & Hesketh, 2009; Nippold, Mansfield, Billow, & Tomblin, 2008, 2009; Scott & Windsor, 2000; Ward-Lonergan, 2010; Ward-Lonergan, Liles, & Anderson, 1999). Frequently, students with these conditions exhibit limitations in their use of complex syntax, literate vocabulary, appropriate pragmatics, language content, and in their overall language productivity. Regarding syntax, adolescents with language disorders often produce shorter and simpler utterances than their peers with typical language development (TLD). Although some adolescents with language disorders also make errors on verb tenses, plurals, and pronouns (Scott, 2004), for the most part, they have mastered grammatical morphology but continue to struggle to produce complex sentences with adequate subordination (Nippold et al., 2008, 2009). Regarding the lexicon, many adolescents have difficulty understanding and using literate vocabulary such as abstract nouns, morphologically complex words, metacognitive verbs, and figurative expressions. During social situations, pragmatic issues may

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arise where they have difficulty answering questions, staying on topic, and showing sensitivity to other peoples' perspectives. Moreover, the content of their discourse may be impoverished, and they may be less productive speakers and writers than their peers with TLD.

In recent years, much has been learned about typical language development during adolescence and about the nature of language deficits experienced by some adolescents (Berman, 2004, 2008; Berman & Nir, 2010; Nippold, 2007; Paul & Norbury, 2012). Armed with a clear understanding of typical language development, speech-language pathologists can examine adolescents' abilities to communicate in natural settings by eliciting and analyzing spoken and written language samples and using the results to establish appropriate intervention goals. Standardized language tests such as the *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Third Edition* (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 1995) are helpful in identifying language deficits (Nippold et al., 2009). However, they sample language out of context and do not provide the type of naturalistic information that is required to plan relevant intervention activities. Language sampling can help the speech-language pathologist address these limitations, focusing on the language of the curriculum and specific aspects of later language development, including complex syntax, the literate lexicon, and pragmatics. Language sampling also offers greater ecological validity than standardized language testing. Some of the many benefits of language sampling are listed in Table 1–1.

This book addresses language sampling in four essential genres: conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive discourse. A conversation is a dialogue in which people take turns expressing their ideas, making comments, and asking questions in a spontaneous fashion. Because the goal of a conversation often is to establish, build, or maintain a relationship, speakers tend to support each other by acting as scaffolds, helping to expand or clarify what is being said. During the years between 10 and 18, young people spend increasing amounts of time in conversations with peers—in person or on the telephone—sharing information, building solidarity, and helping each other to solve complex problems (Nippold, 2007). The ability to use language to convey subtle and sophisticated thoughts to peers is essential for an adolescent's social development, self-esteem, personal identity, and overall well-being (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001).

The interactive nature of conversations makes them more supportive than other genres such as narrative, expository, or persuasive discourse in which the speaker is engaged in more of a monologue and bears most of the responsibility for communicating in a clear and efficient manner. Nevertheless, these other genres also are critical for social development, as when an adolescent tells stories to entertain a peer (narrative), explains to a classmate how to complete an assignment (expository), or tries to convince a friend to assist with a community project (persuasive).

TABLE 1–1. Some Benefits of Language Sampling with Adolescents

- The results of a language sample can indicate how well the adolescent communicates in "real-world" settings:
  - Conversing with others on the phone or in person
  - Telling stories to entertain a group of friends
  - Giving an oral report in history class
  - Explaining to a peer how to play a game or sport
  - Convincing a senior citizen to vote for a school bond
- During cognitively challenging speaking tasks, a language sample can reveal weaknesses in the use of complex syntax and the literate lexicon:
  - Frequent use of simple or incomplete sentences with little subordination
    - "You deal the cards. Take your turn. Pay a fine."
    - "You throw it to first base. Get the guy out."
    - "It's about two guys. One's bad."
  - Frequent use of imprecise, vague, or concrete words
    - "You play the song with this guitar-type thing."
    - "I don't know what it's called, but it's small and round."
    - "Our team needs stuff. We don't got enough."
- Difficulties with pragmatics can be observed, especially during conversations
  - Frequent interruptions and overlaps
  - Off-topic comments
  - Lack of empathy, sensitivity, awareness
  - Failure to consider others' perspectives
- Language productivity may be low in spoken or written language
  - Adolescent produces fewer words and utterances
  - Content is inaccurate, limited, or otherwise impoverished
- The results can supplement the findings of a standardized test.
  - Adolescent uses short, simple utterances
  - Adolescent produces grammatical errors
  - Adolescent uses vague, imprecise vocabulary
- The results can offer direction for intervention, focusing on:
  - Language needed to succeed socially, in school, and on the job
  - Appropriate pragmatic behaviors
  - Use of complex syntax and literate vocabulary
    - Subordinate clauses (relative, adverbial, nominal)
    - Subordinate clauses embedded within other subordinate clauses
    - Abstract nouns (e.g., ambition, strategy, expectation)
    - Morphologically complex words (e.g., availability, philanthropic)
    - Metacognitive verbs (e.g., determine, surmise, perceive)
    - Figurative expressions (metaphors, similes, idioms, proverbs)

Beyond the social uses of language, adolescents in today's schools are expected to use spoken and written language to meet state-mandated educational standards or benchmarks and to excel in the classroom.

Speech-language pathologists who work in middle schools and high schools frequently are called upon to address adolescents' spoken and written language skills. Working collaboratively with classroom teachers, many speech-language pathologists tailor their assessment and intervention activities to assist adolescents to meet specific Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; http://www.corestandards.org). According to the CCSS, beginning in grade 6 and continuing through grade 12, students are expected to demonstrate increasing levels of spoken and written language proficiency. Regarding spoken language, examples of school standards include the ability to "participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (p. 48). In addition, they are expected to "present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning" (p. 48). Similarly, regarding written language, school standards include the ability to produce persuasive and expository essays that are clear, coherent, organized, logical, and supported by evidence, and to produce narrative essays that convey real or imaginary events with proper sequencing, structure, and detail. Given the key role that spoken and written language plays in school success, it is critical that speech-language pathologists have the appropriate knowledge and tools to assess and intervene effectively regarding conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive discourse.

In addition to CCSS in speaking and writing, teachers place their own high expectations on students on a daily basis in the classroom. For example, regarding narrative discourse, the language of storytelling, a 5th-grade teacher may ask the class to read, retell, and discuss (orally or in writing) a folk tale such as *The Baker's Neighbor*, which concerns a conflict between an angry shopkeeper and a cheerful customer (Afflerbach, Beers, Blachowicz, Boyd, & Diffily, 2000). The story contains many abstract words (e.g., disbelief, fragrance, pleasures, privilege), and the characters express contrasting values and personality traits (e.g., greed, selfishness, contentment, honesty). To perform these activities, students must understand the story and its characters, including their actions, perspectives, and motivations. This requires that students listen, read, speak, and write proficiently. As students progress through grade levels, classroom expectations become even higher. In high school, for example, English teachers may require students to read, retell, and discuss the fable by Jean de La Fontaine, *The Value of Knowledge* (McDougal Littell, 2006). This story, a comment on pretentious and excessive wealth, concerns two citizens who represent contrasting values—one who is wealthy but rude and arrogant (the boor)

and another who is poor but witty and humble (the bookman/wit). The fable concludes with the following literate lines:

> Our bookman doesn't deign respond: There's much too much that he might say. But still, revenge is his, and far beyond mere satire's meager means. For war breaks out and Mars wreaks havoc round about. Homeless, our vagabonds must beg their bread. Scorned everywhere, the boor meets glare and glower; welcomed, the wit is plied with board and bed. So ends their quarrel. Fools take heed: Knowledge is power! (p. 543)

Adolescents with language disorders are likely to be challenged mightily by this literate activity as they attempt to retell the fable and make sense of its low-frequency words (e.g., deign, revenge, satire, meager, plied), figurative expressions (e.g., beg their bread, knowledge is power), and uncommon syntactic structures (e.g., revenge is his, and far beyond mere satire's meager means; Mars wreaks havoc; plied with board and bed). For example, if asked to interpret the characters' actions, a student might reasonably be expected to use complex syntax and literate vocabulary, as in the following sentence:

> Although one of the characters in the story, the boor, is wealthy, people do not enjoy spending time with him because he is rude and arrogant.

Expository discourse, the use of language to convey information, is the most common genre used in the upper grades. Although narrative discourse predominates during the early grades, when students reach the 4th grade, a transition occurs in which expository discourse becomes the standard genre of the classroom (Nippold & Scott, 2010). At that time, teachers begin lecturing about complex topics in areas such as science, social studies, geography, mathematics, and history, and students' textbooks are written primarily in a direct, informative manner. In turn, students must display their knowledge of this newly acquired information through oral reports, group presentations, formal essays, and other assignments in which expository discourse is the expected genre. For example, consider the following excerpt from a 5th-grade science textbook:

> Scientists have classified plants into two main groups. Vascular plants, such as ferns and trees, have tubes. Because they have tubes to carry water, nutrients, and food, vascular plants can grow quite tall. Nonvascular plants, such as mosses, do not have tubes. So water must move from cell to cell. These plants need to live in a moist place, and they do not grow to be very large. (Jones et al., 2002, p. A53)

After reading about different classifications of plants and listening to their teachers' lectures, students are asked to write an expository essay in which they do the following: