

# LANGUAGE DISORDERS

A Functional Approach to Assessment and Intervention in Children

SEVENTH EDITION

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# Contents

<i>Preface</i> .....	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	<i>xv</i>

## CHAPTER 1. A FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE APPROACH 1

Language and Language Disorders .....	2
Traditional and Functional Models .....	4
Traditional Intervention Approaches .....	4
The Functional Approach .....	5
Role of Pragmatics in Intervention .....	6
Dimensions of Communication Context .....	9
Summary .....	9
Role of Generalization in Intervention .....	10
Variables That Affect Generalization .....	11
Evidence-Based Practice .....	17
Getting “It” .....	19
Conclusion .....	20

## CHAPTER 2. LANGUAGE DISORDERS 23

Developmental and Educational Outcomes .....	24
Possible Risk and Related Factors .....	26
Neurological Basis .....	27
Aspects of Language Affected .....	28
Information Processing .....	29
Attention .....	29
Discrimination .....	30
Organization .....	30
Memory .....	30
Processes .....	30
Summary .....	31
Diagnostic Categories .....	32
Continuum of Function .....	33
Broad Groupings .....	34

Developmental Language Disorders .....	34
Social Communication Disorder .....	49
Conclusion .....	52

### **CHAPTER 3. LANGUAGE DISORDERS ASSOCIATED WITH OTHER DISORDERS 55**

Language Disorders Associated With Autism Spectrum Disorder .....	56
Development .....	57
Characteristics .....	58
Risk Factors .....	59
Language Characteristics .....	59
Possible Causal Factors .....	64
Summary .....	66
Language Disorders Associated With Learning Disability/Specific .....	66
Learning Disorder	
Description .....	67
Language Characteristics .....	68
Possible Causal Factors .....	70
Dyslexia/Specific Learning Disorder With Impairment in Reading .....	72
and Writing	
Similar Disorders: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder .....	72
Seemingly Similar Disorders: Prenatal Drug and Alcohol Exposure .....	74
Summary .....	76
Language Disorders Associated With Intellectual Developmental Disorder .....	76
Language Characteristics .....	79
Possible Causal Factors .....	82
Language Disorders Associated With Neurocognitive Disorders .....	86
Traumatic Brain Injury .....	86
Cerebrovascular Accident .....	90
Summary .....	91
Language Disorders Associated With Maltreatment: Neglect and Abuse .....	91
Language Characteristics .....	92
Possible Causal Factors .....	93
Summary .....	94
Language Disorders Associated With Less Frequent Disorders .....	94
Late Language Emergence .....	95
Childhood Schizophrenia .....	96
Selective Mutism .....	97
Otitis Media .....	97
Deafness .....	97
Implications .....	98
Conclusion .....	98

**CHAPTER 4. EARLY COMMUNICATION INTERVENTION****101**

Legal Basis for Early Intervention .....	102
The Early Intervention Model .....	103
Children Served in ECI Programs .....	108
Established Risk .....	108
At-Risk Children .....	113
ECI Assessment .....	118
Transdisciplinary Model of Assessment .....	119
Family Concerns, Priorities, and Resources .....	120
Informal Communication Assessment .....	120
Formal Assessment .....	128
Organizing an Early Language and Communication Assessment .....	128
Considerations for Infants With Culturally/Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds .....	133
ECI Intervention .....	133
Use of Daily Routines .....	134
Telehealth .....	134
Record Keeping .....	134
Intervention Strategies .....	135
Natural Settings and Partners .....	135
Culturally Responsive Intervention .....	138
A Hybrid Model .....	139
Intervention for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder .....	140
Augmentative and Alternative Communication .....	144
Types of AAC .....	145
Evidence-Based Practice .....	145
Assessment .....	146
AAC Intervention .....	148
Summary .....	154
Conclusion .....	155

**CHAPTER 5. ASSESSMENT OF PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN WITH  
LANGUAGE DISORDERS****157**

Psychometric Versus Descriptive Procedures .....	160
Normalist Assessment Measures .....	161
Descriptive Assessment Approaches .....	168
An Integrated Functional Assessment Strategy .....	174
Referral, Screening, Questionnaire, and Interview .....	175
Observation .....	177
Formal Language Testing .....	180

Assessment of Related Cognitive Factors .....	188
Dynamic Assessment .....	192
Sampling .....	192
Conclusion .....	193

## **CHAPTER 6. LANGUAGE SAMPLING**

**195**

Extent of Language Sampling Use .....	196
Planning a Language Sample .....	196
Representativeness .....	196
Language Sampling Contexts .....	198
Collecting a Language Sample .....	207
Conversational Samples .....	207
Narrative Samples .....	218
Recording the Sample .....	224
Collecting Samples of Written Language .....	224
Transcribing the Oral Sample .....	224
Utterances .....	226
Conclusion .....	228

## **CHAPTER 7. LANGUAGE SAMPLE ANALYSIS**

**231**

Levels of Language Sample Analysis .....	232
Communication Event .....	232
Across Utterances and Partners .....	251
Within Utterances .....	256
Narrative Analysis .....	284
Macrostructure Analysis .....	285
Microstructure Analysis .....	293
Reliability and Validity .....	300
Summary .....	301
Computer-Assisted Language Sample Analysis (CLSA) .....	301
Conclusion .....	303

## **CHAPTER 8. ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN FROM CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS**

**305**

Difference or Disorder? .....	306
State of Service Delivery .....	307
Lack of Academic Preparation .....	308
Unfamiliarity With Different Languages and Cultures .....	308



Lack of Appropriate Assessment Tools .....	315
Summary .....	316
Language Assessment of a Child Who Is an ELL .....	316
Who Are ELLs?.....	317
Importance of Accurate Assessment.....	319
Overcoming Bias in Assessment of ELLs .....	319
An Integrated Model for Assessment for ELLs .....	322
Components.....	322
Language Assessment of Children Speaking NMAE .....	342
Careful Use of Standardized Tests .....	342
Alternative Assessment Approaches .....	344
Model of Language Assessment of a Child Who Speaks NMAE .....	346
Components.....	346
Conclusion .....	351

## CHAPTER 9. A FUNCTIONAL INTERVENTION MODEL

355

Guidelines .....	357
Be a Reinforcer.....	358
Closely Approximate Natural Learning .....	359
Follow Developmental Guidelines .....	359
Follow the Child's Lead .....	360
Actively Involve the Child .....	362
Remember the Influence of Context on Language.....	362
Use the Scripts Found in Familiar Events .....	362
Design a Generalization Plan First .....	363
Generalization Variables .....	363
Teaching Targets .....	364
Teaching Items .....	365
Method of Teaching .....	367
Language Teachers.....	370
Teaching Cues .....	379
Contingencies .....	380
Location .....	381
Conclusion .....	382

## CHAPTER 10. MANIPULATING CONTEXT

385

Nonlinguistic Contexts .....	386
Linguistic Contexts .....	389
Exposure to Grammatical Targets .....	389
Explicit Instruction.....	391

Conversational Milieu .....	393
Conversations: Top-Down Teaching .....	411
Conclusion .....	412

## **CHAPTER 11. SPECIFIC INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES**

**417**

Cognitive Considerations .....	418
Information Processing .....	419
Pragmatics .....	421
Social Skills and Autism Spectrum Disorder .....	421
Intentions .....	422
Conversational Abilities .....	427
Narration .....	436
Semantics .....	444
Vocabulary and Word Meaning .....	444
Semantic Categories and Relational Webs .....	454
Word Retrieval and Categorization .....	461
Comprehension .....	466
Figurative Language .....	467
Verbal Working Memory .....	469
Syntax and Morphology .....	472
Morphology .....	472
Word Order and Sentence Types .....	482
Children With CLD Backgrounds .....	488
Use of Microcomputers .....	491
Conclusion .....	492

## **CHAPTER 12. CLASSROOM FUNCTIONAL INTERVENTION**

**495**

Background and Rationale: Recent Educational Changes .....	497
Common Core State Standards .....	497
Response to Intervention .....	498
Inclusion .....	500
Collaborative Teaching .....	501
Summary .....	503
Role of the Speech-Language Pathologist .....	503
Relating to Others .....	503
Language Intervention and Language Arts .....	505
Elements of a Classroom Model .....	506
Identification of Children at Risk .....	506
Curriculum-Based Intervention .....	513
CBLI Model .....	513



Classroom Demands .....	515
Instructional Approaches .....	517
Linguistic Awareness Intervention Within the Classroom .....	518
Preschool .....	518
School-Age and Adolescent .....	524
Summary .....	526
Language Facilitation .....	527
Classroom Language Requirements .....	527
Talking With Children .....	537
Classroom Support for Children With Working Memory Deficits .....	539
Instituting a Classroom Model .....	543
Conclusion .....	547

### **CHAPTER 13. LITERACY IMPAIRMENTS: LANGUAGE IN A VISUAL MODE**

**549**

Reading .....	551
Reading Comprehension and Inferencing .....	552
Reading Problems .....	553
Children With Culturally Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds .....	557
Reading and Language Disorders .....	558
Contribution of Linguistic Awareness .....	559
Deficits in Comprehension .....	560
Deficits in Inferencing .....	561
Dyslexia .....	562
Assessment of Reading .....	564
Data Collection .....	564
Data Analysis .....	568
Assessment of Phonological Awareness .....	569
Assessment of Morphological Awareness .....	569
Assessment of Comprehension .....	570
Early Assessment of Dyslexia .....	570
Reading Assessment for Children With ASD .....	572
Language-Based Reading Intervention .....	573
Early Literacy Intervention .....	573
Preschool Emerging Literacy .....	574
School-Age Intervention .....	581
Writing .....	595
Writing Problems .....	596
Assessment of Writing .....	598
Data Collection .....	598
Data Analysis .....	600
Spelling Assessment .....	603
Language-Based Writing Intervention .....	605

Extended Writing.....	605
Spelling.....	609
Sentence Construction and Composition.....	612
Conclusion.....	613
<i>Afterword</i> .....	<i>615</i>
<i>Appendices</i>	
A. Formal Language Measures.....	617
B. SUGAR (Sampling Utterances and Grammatical Analysis Revised).....	621
Procedures	
C. Comparison of Computer-Based Language Sample Analysis Methods.....	629
D. Selected English Morphological Prefixes and Suffixes.....	633
E. Non-Majority American English Dialects and English Influenced by.....	635
Other Languages	
F. Indirect Elicitation Techniques.....	641
G. Intervention Activities and Language Targets.....	643
H. Use of Children’s Literature in Preschool Classrooms.....	649
<i>Glossary</i> .....	<i>657</i>
<i>References</i> .....	<i>663</i>
<i>Index</i> .....	<i>735</i>

# Preface

**T**he seventh edition of *Language Disorders: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Intervention in Children* is a special treat for me because I have joined a new publisher, Plural Publishing. I must admit that I was cautious but have found Plural to be welcoming and supportive. It already feels like home.

As with previous editions, this one is an exhaustive compilation of hundreds of professional studies conducted by my colleagues in the field. To this, I've added my own scholarly and clinical work in speech-language pathology with both presymbolic and symbolic children with language disorders.

When I was a student, my academic department was called Speech and Hearing Disorders. There was no language. I'm thankful for the pioneers and for my contemporaries who have brought the field of language disorders into its maturity.

The subtitle for the text is "a functional approach." This approach goes by other names, such as environmental or conversational, and includes elements of several other models. Where I have borrowed someone's model, ideas, or techniques, full credit is given to that person. I find assessment and intervention to be an adaptation of a little of this and a little of that within an overall theoretical framework.

Readers should read this text with my biases in mind. I do not approach language intervention as I might teaching arithmetic. One plus one may always be two, regardless of the context, but "May I have a cookie, please" only works when we consider the context. And that's my point, teaching language is different.

Context is essential to assessment and intervention with language. Now you can stop reading this book. You've got it all.

I've made some content decisions that should be explained. I group all children with language problems, both delays and disorders, under the general rubric of *language disorders*. This expedient decision was made recognizing that this text would not be addressing specific disorder populations except where applicable. In general, we address the generic child with a language disorder.

I hope you'll be pleased with this edition. Professors who've used previous editions will notice some new additions and changes in emphasis. These are based on professional feedback, reviewers' comments, student input, and the changing nature of speech and language services. Here is a partial list of updates and modifications:

- The text is thoroughly updated with the addition of several hundred new sources. This is the result of many hours of reading or perusing journal articles. In all honesty, I also looked at some other texts on this topic to see how the authors organized and explained language disorders.
- You'll find greater emphasis on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in view of the increasing numbers of children being diagnosed with this disorder.

- I've added a whole new section on developmental language disorders (DLD), a new and more inclusive term than those used before. These children have always been with us but under a variety of different names.
- Chapter 2 of the previous edition has been divided into two chapters to accommodate the new information we have on language disorders. In this volume, Chapter 2 focuses solely on language disorders, such as DLD, and Chapter 3 focuses on language disorders associated with other disorders, such as ASD.
- I've gathered together the various discussions of assessment with children with culturally linguistically diverse backgrounds into a beefier chapter, giving this discussion its rightful place. I'm thrilled by the increasingly diverse nature of U.S. society and believe it's essential that we serve those children who need our services to the best of our ability.
- Fortunately, the number of meta-analyses focusing on the best evidence-based practices continues to increase, enabling us to say more on evidence-based practice. Wherever I've been able to find these professional articles, I have incorporated their results, even when they don't conform to what I might believe. That's how we learn and grow, isn't it?
- The chapters on language and narrative analysis have been strengthened and consolidated into one. Since the last edition, I've devoted myself, with the expert help of Stacey Pavelko, PhD, to development of SUGAR (Sampling Utterances and Grammatical Analysis Revised), an easy, valid, diagnostically accurate, and totally cost-free language sample analysis tool. This development enabled me to discuss SUGAR in a text for the first time. As much as possible, I've attempted to give other methods their due and to tone down my enthusiasm for my own work. Still, I invite you to visit [sugarlanguage.org](http://sugarlanguage.org) and see for yourself. We keep updating our development and research, so check back often.

I hope you are pleased with the results and will find this text useful.

Those who use the methods found within these pages tell me that they and their clients find them to be useful, effective, adaptable, and fun. Time will tell if you agree.

## CHAPTER 1

# A FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE APPROACH

**A**ustin is a preschooler who struggles with language. He didn't begin to use words until age 2 years, and although he's progressed with the help of his parents, preschool teacher, and speech-language pathologist (SLP), progress has been slow. In all honesty, his spoken language sounds more like a typical 2-year-old than a child about to begin kindergarten. He did poorly on his school district's kindergarten readiness exam, and his preschool teacher has recommended that he remain in preschool for an additional year.

Although Austin is a sociable child and is well-liked by his teacher, the other children have begun to shun him because of his language. He often plays alone despite his good social skills. He rarely speaks in complete sentences, and words are often lacking their morphological endings, tense markers, and articles, as in "Mommy go store." Shorter words are often omitted. Although he's a bright child, his SLP, preschool teacher, and parents are concerned that he'll do poorly in school, especially with reading and writing.

Austin is a child with a language disorder who's having difficulty figuring out and learning the language code of his family and community. He's just one of the many children with a language disorder that you'll meet as a school-based SLP. It's my hope that this book and the excellent instruction your professor provides will give you some of the tools to address the challenges children like Austin face daily.

I've been an SLP and college professor for well over 40 years, but I began my career just as you are, sitting in classes, taking notes, reading texts, and eager for but fearful of my first clinical experience. This book is my attempt to give you as much information about language disorders as possible in the shortest space possible. The text is thick and filled with information because this topic is complicated.

Remember your language development course and how complicated that was. Now we'll be exploring how that process can go wrong, and how you as an SLP assess a child's language and plan and carry out intervention.

Even after we've spent all these words in discussing the topic, we'll have only skimmed the surface. You will spend your professional career continually updating this knowledge. And yet, each new child with a language disorder that you meet will challenge your knowledge, your skill, and your creativity. It's what makes the field of language disorder so challenging and rewarding.



So, let's proceed together. If you have concerns as we go, if I've made a mistake or confused you, or if I've been insensitive about a topic at some point, please let me know. I value your input.

Throughout this book, to the best of my ability, I have used evidence-based practice (EBP) as the basis for this text. I have attempted to research each topic, weigh the data, and make informed decisions prior to passing the knowledge on to you. If you are unfamiliar with EBP, I'll explain it at the end of the chapter. For now, let's begin with the basic concepts of **language disorder** and **functional language intervention**.

**Food for Thought:** Stop and think for a moment about language development. Pick one area that might have challenged you. Now imagine that you are 3 or 4 years old. Where might you go astray or struggle. That's what children with language disorders face.

## Language and Language Disorders

Communication and language skills are essential to a child's ability to engage in social relationships and access learning experiences. As you'll recall, language is a vehicle for communication and is primarily used in conversations. As such, *language is the social tool* that we use to accomplish our goals when we communicate. In other words, language can be viewed as a dynamic process. If we take this view, it changes our approach to language intervention. We become interested in the *how* more than in the *what*. It is that aspect of language intervention that I wish for us to explore through this book.

In the field of communication disorders, the study and remediation of language disorders are relatively new. Until the mid-1970s, around the time I was a graduate student, there was little emphasis on language disorders in children outside of childhood speech disorders. My academic department's name was "Speech and Hearing Disorders," and I was bluntly told by the chair that my PhD was not in language disorders. That didn't exist. So, I and others, with the help of a few innovative professors, had to teach ourselves.

In the late 1990s, two large studies came out of the University of Iowa demonstrating that language disorders were independent of speech disorders (Shriberg et al., 1999; Tomblin et al., 1997). Co-occurrence of speech and language disorders, adjusting for age expectations, was estimated at less than 2%. Nor are the two conditions likely to share a common cause.

Furthermore, children with language disorders, in the absence of any other disorders, were least likely to receive intervention despite the Iowa study's documentation that around 7% of monolingual American English-speaking kindergarten-age children like Austin, who were without other diagnosed developmental disorders, had language disorders despite having normal or above-normal range nonverbal IQs. An additional 3% of children were in the borderline range of low nonverbal IQs and also had language disorders. Similar estimates have been reported in other population-based studies (Frazier Norbury et al., 2016).



Think of it. Seven to ten or more percent of children had a disorder that only recently had not even been recognized as such.

The wheel turned slowly. Our primary professional organization became the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in 1978 but left the “L” for language out of the acronym. Two decades later, in 1997, the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research* became the *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, the premier professional journal in our field. Now there’s a special interest group within ASHA devoted solely to language disorders in children. And the caseloads of school-based SLPs are bursting with these children.

ASHA defines *language disorder* as follows:

A language disorder is impaired comprehension and/or use of spoken, written and/or other symbol systems. This disorder may involve (1) the form of language (phonology, morphology, syntax), (2) the content of language (semantics), and/or (3) the function of language in communication (pragmatics) in any combination.

(Ad Hoc Committee on Service Delivery in the Schools, 1993, p. 40)

An international consortium (CATALISE) using a consensus method reached an agreed upon definition (Bishop et al., 2017) in which language disorders refers to difficulties that occur alone or co-occur with other disorders. These disorders cause impairment in daily functioning within the child’s environment.

The term *language disorder* does not apply to children with language difference, such as a child who speaks a non-mainstream dialect of American English or is learning English subsequent to using another language.

For our purposes, we’ll consider the term *language disorder* to refer to a heterogeneous group of developmental disorders, acquired disorders, delays, or any combination of these principally characterized by deficits and/or immaturities in the use of spoken and/or written language for comprehension and/or production purposes that may involve the form, content, or function of language in any combination. Language disorder may persist across the lifetime of the individual and may vary in symptoms, manifestations, effects, and severity over time and as a consequence of context, content, and learning task. As noted previously, language differences, found in some individuals who are English language learners (ELLs) and those using different dialects, do not in themselves constitute language disorders.

In attempting to clarify the definition of language disorder, we have, no doubt, raised more questions than we have answered. For example, causal factors, such as prematurity, although important, are omitted from the definition because of their diverse nature and the lack of clear causal links in many children with language disorders, such as Austin. In general, causal categories are not directly related to many language behaviors. Likewise, diagnostic categories, such as traumatic brain injury, are not included in my definition for many of the same reasons. The definition also states that language differences are not disorders, even though the general public and some professionals often confuse the two.

We’ll explore all of these issues in Chapter 2 and the chapters that follow. For now, relax a little and let’s discuss functional language intervention, the subtitle to this text.

Let's begin with a more traditional model of language intervention and compare it to a functional model.

**Food for Thought:** Might a child who is learning English as a second language also have a language disorder? How would you determine that fact?

## Traditional and Functional Models

The professional with primary responsibility for assessment and intervention with children with language disorders is the SLP. SLPs, you'll find, wear many hats—team members, team teachers, teachers and parent trainers, collaborators, advocates, and language facilitators, to name a few.

These many roles reflect a growing recognition that viewing a child and their communication as the sole source of the disorder is an outmoded concept. Increasingly, language intervention is becoming family and/or classroom centered and environmentally based. Professional concern is shifting from strictly language targets, such as individual morphological endings or vocabulary words, to a more functional, holistic approach focusing on the child's overall communication effectiveness. Read that last sentence again because it is the essence of this text.

## Traditional Intervention Approaches

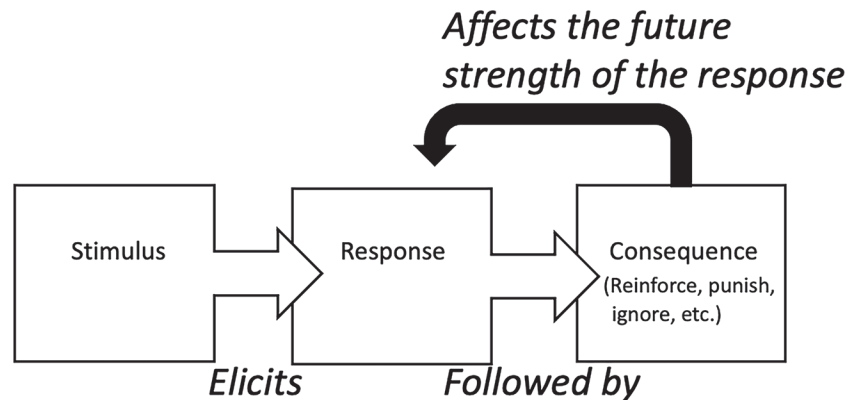
The traditional approach to teaching language is a highly structured, behavioral one, emphasizing the teaching of specific language features within a stimulus-response-reinforcement model. This approach is presented in Figure 1–1. In practice, this means that the SLP controls the situation and cues the child to respond, after which the adult reinforces correct responses or provides corrective feedback and progresses to the next cue. Thus, language is not seen as a process but a product or response elicited by a stimulus or produced in anticipation of reinforcement. There is a certain logic here.

Stimulus-response-reinforcement models of intervention such as this have often taken the form of questions by an SLP and answers by a child or directives by an SLP for a child to respond. Typical stimulus utterances by an SLP might include "Did you say that correctly?" or "Tell me the whole thing." The SLP's responses are based on the correctness of production and might include "Good talking!" or "Repeat it again correctly three times."

Many SLPs prefer a traditional structured approach because they can predict accurately the response of the child to the teaching stimuli. In addition, structured behavioral approaches increase the probability that the child will make the appropriate, desired response. Language lessons usually are scripted as drills and, therefore, are repetitive and predictable for the SLP.

In a structured behavioral approach, the child can become a passive learner. The SLP's overall style is highly directive. In other words, the clinical procedure is unidirectional

**Figure 1–1.** Model of a traditional method of language intervention.



and adult-oriented. Unfortunately, used alone, these approaches are inadequate for developing meaningful uses for the newly acquired language feature. Something's missing.

Although structured behavioral approaches that exhibit intensity, consistency, and organization have been successful in teaching some language skills, they exhibit a major weakness—**generalization**. For example, the failure of language-teaching targets to generalize to other uses is one of the major criticisms of intervention with children with autism spectrum disorders. Could that failing rest with the highly behavioral methods used with these children?

## The Functional Approach

In contrast to traditional models, functional approaches give more control to the child and decrease the amount of structure in intervention activities. Measures of improvement are increased successful communication rather than simply the number of correct responses. Procedures used by the SLP and the child's communication partners more closely resemble those in the language-learning environment of children. In addition, the everyday environment of the child is included in the training.

A functional language approach to assessment and intervention, as described in this text, targets language used as a vehicle for communication. It's a communication-first approach. The focus is the overall communication of the child with a language disorder and of those who communicate with the child. As stated, the goal is better communication that works in the child's natural communicative environment.

In a functional language approach, conversation between a child and their communication partners becomes the vehicle for change. By manipulating the linguistic and nonlinguistic contexts within which a child's utterances occur, the partner facilitates the use of certain structures and provides evaluative feedback while maintaining the conversational flow. That last sentence is another one worth rereading. From the early data collection stages through the intervention process, the SLP and other communication partners are concerned with the enhancement of the child's overall communication.

Functional language approaches have been shown in clinical research to increase mean length of utterance and multiword utterance production, the overall quantity of spontaneous communication, pragmatic skills, vocabulary growth, language complexity, receptive labeling, and intelligibility and the use of learned forms in novel utterances in children with a variety of language disorders and causes. Even minimally symbolic children—those using no words or just a few—can benefit from a more conversational milieu.

Interestingly, functional interactive approaches improve generalization even when the immediate results differ little from those of more directive methods. And as an additional benefit, a functional conversational approach can yield more positive behaviors from the child, such as smiling, laughing, and engagement in activities, with significantly more verbal initiation, than does a strictly imitation approach. In contrast, the child learning through a structured traditional approach is more likely to be quiet and passive.

Naturally, the effectiveness of any language-teaching strategy will vary with the characteristics of the child with a language disorder and the content being taught. For example, children with learning disabilities may benefit more from specific language teaching than do other children with language disorders. Similarly, children with more severe language disorders initially benefit more from a structured imitative approach. That doesn't mean that you as an SLP need to stop there. Although imitation is a quick method for getting a desired response, learning doesn't hold and generalization is weak.

I've probably raised more issues than answered your questions. Don't worry. We have a whole book to examine a functional approach and to address your doubts and concerns. My goal in this chapter was simply to pique your interest. To help you digest all this information so far, Table 1–1 offers a simplified comparison of the traditional and functional models.

**Food for Thought:** Even though I've been vague, can you imagine what the outline of a functional method of language intervention might entail in comparison to a more traditional model. Try to do this without peeking at Table 1–1.

In the remainder of this chapter, we'll further define a functional language approach and explore a rationale for it. This rationale is based on the primacy of pragmatics in language and language intervention and on the generalization of language intervention to everyday contexts. Then, we'll wrap up the chapter with a brief discussion of EBP, which is the basis of this text and what we practice as a profession.

## Role of Pragmatics in Intervention

As you'll recall, pragmatics consists of the intentions or communication goals of each speaker and of the linguistic adjustments made by each speaker for the listener in order

**Table 1–1. Comparison of Traditional and Functional Intervention Approaches**

Traditional Model	Functional Model
Individual or small group	Individual, small group, large group, or an entire class
Clinical situation	Actual communication situation
Isolated language targets	Relationship of linguistic units stressed as target is used in conversation
Begin with small units of language and build up to conversation	Target conversation as “fixing” the child’s language as needed with minimal prompts
Stress on modeling, imitation, practice, and drill	Conversational techniques stressing successful communication
Use in conversations stressed in final stages of intervention	Use is optimized as a vehicle for intervention
Child’s behavior and language constrained by adult	Increased opportunity to use the new language feature in a wide variety of contexts
Little real conversation and use	Premised on real conversation and use
Little involvement of significant others	Parents and teachers used as agents of change

to accomplish these goals. Most features of language are affected by pragmatic aspects of the conversational context. For example, a speaker’s selection of pronouns involves more than syntactic and semantic considerations. The conversational partners must be aware of the preceding linguistic information and of each other’s point of reference. For example, a noun reference is used before the speaker can refer to it with a pronoun. In addition, pronouns such as *I* and *you* depend on who’s speaking.

In an earlier era, interest by SLPs in psycholinguistics led to a therapeutic emphasis on increasing syntactic complexity. With a therapeutic shift in interest to semantics or meaning in the early 1970s came a new recognition of the importance of cognitive or intellectual readiness. The influence of sociolinguistics and pragmatics in the late 1970s and 1980s has led to interest in conversational rules and contextual factors. Everyday contexts provide a backdrop for linguistic performance.

Likewise, among those working with individuals with communication disorders, the focus has shifted to the communication process itself. Previously, for example, children’s behaviors were considered either appropriate or inappropriate to the stimulus-reinforcement situation. When emphasis shifts to pragmatics and to the processes that underlie language use, however, the child’s language can be considered on its own terms. For example, does it serve a purpose for the child within their communication context?

Older approaches have tended to emphasize children’s deficits with the goal of fixing what’s wrong. In contrast, a functional approach stresses what a child needs in

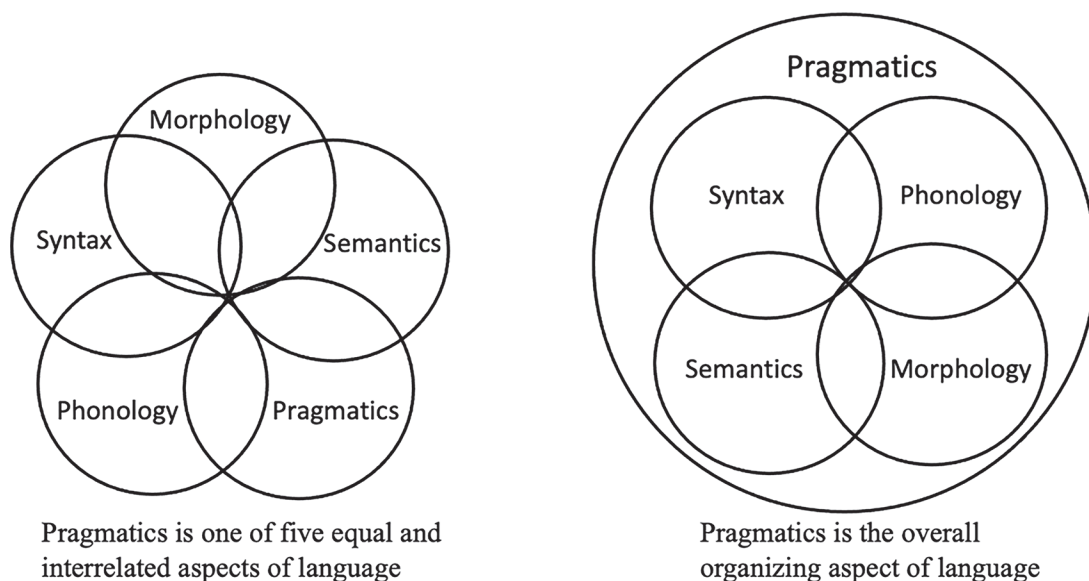


order to accomplish their communication goals. It follows that intervention should provide contexts for actively engaging children in communication. In shifting the focus away from the disorder, the goal of intervention becomes increasing opportunities for supporting a child's participation in everyday communication situations. It's a new recognition that a language disorder is not a thing residing in a child but a dynamic process reflecting the child and the communication context in which the communication occurs.

Increasingly, SLPs are recognizing that the structure and content of language are heavily influenced by the conversational constraints of the communication context. This view of language necessitates a very different approach to language intervention. In effect, functional intervention moves from an entity approach, which targets discrete isolated bits of language, to a systems or holistic approach, which targets language within the overall communication process. The major implication is a change in both the targets and the methods of teaching. If pragmatics is just one of five equal aspects of language, as seen on the left in Figure 1–2, then it offers yet another set of rules to teach and the methodology need not change much. The teaching still can emphasize the *what* with little change in the *how*, which can continue in a structured behavioral paradigm that I've called a traditional method.

In contrast, an approach in which pragmatics is seen as the overall organizing aspect of language, shown on the right in Figure 1–2, necessitates a more interactive conversational teaching approach, one that mirrors the environment in which the language will be used. Therapy becomes child-oriented rather than error-oriented, and conversation is viewed as both the teaching and transfer environment. I'm calling this a functional approach.

**Figure 1–2. Models of how aspects of language are related.**





## Dimensions of Communication Context

Language is purposeful and takes place within a dynamic context that affects form and content and may, in turn, be affected by them. Context consists of a complex interaction of many factors:

- *Purpose*, which affects what to say and how to say it. Here's pragmatics again.
- *Content* or topic, which affects the form and the style.
- *Type of discourse* or characteristic type of structure related to the purpose. An argument differs from a bedtime story in many ways.
- *Participant characteristics*, such as background knowledge, roles, life experiences, moods, group identity and shared rules, willingness to take risks, relative age, status, familiarity, and relationship in time and space, affect the context.
- *Setting and activity*, including circumstances of the communication situation, can affect language, especially the choice of vocabulary.
- *Mode of discourse*, such as speech, signing, and writing, require very different types of interaction from the participants.

Within a conversation, participants continually must assess these factors and their changing relationships. Now, it should be easier to see why consideration of the pragmatic context is an essential feature of effective language intervention.

**Food for Thought:** Imagine telling a narrative to a friend. Now imagine the same story being told to a group of seniors whom you've never met and who will not understand some of the words you used. Do these factors affect the story being told?

An SLP must be a master of the conversational context. Unfortunately, it is too easy to rely on overworked verbal cues that keep the adult in control, such as "Tell me about this picture" or "What do you want?" to elicit certain language structures. There are better, more creative ways to elicit the same structures, but the SLP must be willing to relinquish some of that control and use more creative brain power. If an SLP knows the dimensions of a communication context and understands how these dimensions are likely to affect communication, the SLP can manipulate them more efficiently. I'll explain how later in the text.

## Summary

In the clinical setting, SLPs need to be aware of the effects of context on communication. How well children with language disorders regulate their relationships with other people depends on their ability to monitor aspects of the context. Given the dynamic nature of