LANGUAGE SAMPLING

With Children and Adolescents

Implications for Intervention

Third Edition

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Contents

Preface

This is the third edition of *Language Sampling With Adolescents*, first published in 2010 and then revised in 2014 as a second edition. Whereas the first two editions focused solely on adolescents, this third edition has expanded to include preschool and school-age children, in addition to adolescents. Hence, the book now covers ages 3 through 18 years. Another change is that each discourse genre (conversation, narration, exposition, and persuasion) now has its own chapter, with implications for intervention. This change reflects the expanding knowledge base in spoken and written language development and disorders, thanks to the many tireless researchers throughout the world who have been publishing their work in scholarly journals. It also reflects the growing awareness that each genre is unique in that it calls upon different sets of cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional resources. For example, a speaker's true language competence may not be revealed unless the topic is relatively complex and the individual is knowledgeable about it and motivated to share that insight. In other words, when a language sampling task "stresses the system" (Lahey, 1990), we are more likely to gain an accurate picture of the speaker's ability to communicate in naturalistic, real-world contexts. It is in this way that language sampling can be one of the most valuable assessment tools available to clinicians.

A NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

When this book is used as a text for university courses in language development or language disorders in children and adolescents, I suggest that students be assigned to read chapters from Part II: Grammar Review and Exercises, while they are reading chapters from Part I: Working With Children and Adolescents. This would provide students the opportunity to review grammar in manageable chunks before they apply the information to analyze language samples. Note that the chapters in Part I build on

each other by explaining why language sampling is important to speech-language pathologists (Chapter 1), how it has evolved throughout the years (Chapter 2), and how it can be carried out successfully (Chapter 3). Then, in Chapters 4 through 7, Part I discusses the unique aspects of the different genres—conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive—followed by a discussion of how language sampling can be employed with students who have autism spectrum disorders (Chapter 8). The chapters in Part II also build on each other. For example, by covering different types of words and phrases in Chapter 9 before different types of clauses in Chapter 10, students will understand how certain types of words and phrases are similar to certain types of clauses (e.g., nouns and nominal clauses; adjectives and relative clauses; adverbs and adverbial clauses). Moreover, by covering clause types before sentence types (e.g., simple, compound, complex) in Chapter 11, 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 12), students will be able to distinguish between complete and incomplete C-units and T-units and determine whether a "run on" sentence is actually one, two, or three C-units or T-units. The final chapters on analyzing conversational (Chapter 13) and narrative, expository, and persuasive (Chapter 14) language samples offer students the opportunity to apply the information they have learned from all previous chapters.

Hence, it is suggested that during the first half of a semester, students be assigned to read the chapters in this sequence: 1, 9, 2, 10, 3, 11, and 12. It is also recommended that class time be spent discussing students' answers to the grammar review exercises as they compare their own answers to those contained in Appendices A, B, C, and D. Then, during the second half of the semester, students could read Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, complete the exercises in Chapters 13 and 14, and compare their answers to those contained in Appendices E and F. By following this sequence, students would be well prepared to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples from children and adolescents with typical or disordered language development during the final weeks of the course. The experience of conducting their own language samples with speakers of different ages will assist students to apply the information they have learned from this book.

—Marilyn A. Nippold

Acknowledgments

*This book is dedicated to Jordan Marie,
Jackson James, and Jenna Grace.*

PART I

Working With Children and Adolescents

CHAPTER 1

Why Language Sampling?

Language sampling is one of the most valuable assessment tools available to speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who work with children and adolescents who experience language disorders. Moreover, it is especially relevant in the era of social distancing and telepractice, in which the in-person administration of norm-referenced, standardized language tests can be challenging (Kester, 2020). In contrast, language samples can be elicited via Zoom or other cloud platforms for video and audio conferencing, with the assistance and coaching of a child's parent, older sibling, or caregiver. Yet language sampling is not a simple process that anyone can carry out successfully. On the contrary, it requires a detailed understanding of language development and language disorders; a curious mind that relishes problem-solving; strong interpersonal skills; ample motivation; and generous amounts of patience, practice, and persistence. Nevertheless, most SLPs are up to the job, and when they do embrace the challenge of learning how to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples, they are demonstrating their professionalism by *practicing at the top of their license*. In other words, they are maximizing "time spent delivering services [they] are uniquely qualified to provide" (McNeilly, 2018).

As SLPs, we are in this profession because we understand and value the human ability to communicate in real-world settings, and we wish to ameliorate the dire consequences for individuals and for society when this ability is compromised. Furthermore, we appreciate the fact that expertise in spoken language disorders is *our* domain and one that takes us firmly back to our roots when, in 1925, the American Academy of Speech Correction (predecessor of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association)

was formed in New York City for the purpose of ameliorating speech disorders (https://ashaarchives.omeka.net/exhibits/show/founding/item/8; retrieved June 12, 2020). Although the field has expanded greatly since those early days, no other profession can claim this legacy of advocacy for individuals with communication disorders.

It is essential to remember also that the ability to use language to express oneself with accuracy, clarity, and efficiency 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, children and adolescents who experience difficulties with spoken or written language—during formal or informal situations—are seriously hampered in their social, academic, and vocational endeavors. So let's take a moment to applaud all SLPs who are dedicated to improving the communication skills of children and adolescents!

So why is language sampling an excellent way to evaluate a child or adolescent who has a language disorder? The primary reason is that language sampling focuses on *how* the individual communicates in the real world, under natural conditions (Costanza-Smith, 2010). For this reason, the information gained from a language sample will enable the SLP to design an intervention plan to improve the client's ability to communicate more effectively in everyday situations. Depending on the age of the client, those situations may include, for example, the home, school, or job site when speaking with parents, classmates, teachers, or coworkers.

DO ALL SLPS EMPLOY LANGUAGE SAMPLING?

Unfortunately, many SLPs do not employ language sampling as part of their regular clinical practice, primarily because they believe it takes too much time (Pavelko, Owens, Ireland, & Hahs-Vaughn, 2016). In addition, if they do elicit language samples, they do not necessarily transcribe or analyze them formally (Westerveld & Claessen, 2014). Factors contributing to these patterns include having had little training in language sampling in their graduate education programs, especially for use with older students; having limited knowledge of later language development, especially of complex syntax; and having limited access to computer technology.

In this book, each of these concerns is addressed. For example, regarding the claim that language sampling takes too much time, one must weigh that concern, on the one hand, with the wealth of information, on the other hand, that one can obtain about a child's ability to communicate, even

from a short language sample. This point was demonstrated by Scott Prath (2018), a bilingual SLP, who provided the following excerpt from a child's narrative sample and listed some key aspects of language competence that each utterances reveals, shown in brackets:

C = child

C "There once was a boy and a frog" [story initiation / character identification]

C "Then, he jumped inside the box" [cohesive element / past tense marker / preposition use / object name]

C "They ran behind the trees" [pronoun / past tense irregular verb / preposition / article / plural marker]

Mean length of utterance (MLU) = 6.3 words

In addition to obtaining this "immediate snapshot" (Prath, 2018) of the child's language competence, by transcribing and analyzing the full sample, the SLP would be able to document specific strengths and weaknesses in oral expression—information that could be used to formulate and defend any clinical decisions or recommendations being made about the need for services.

Regarding the broader topic of the SLP's knowledge base, there is no longer a shortage of information concerning language sampling techniques for use with school-age children and adolescents or of information on later language development. During the past 40 years, these have become topics of expanding international interest, and many studies have been conducted to examine the development of spoken and written language production in school-age children and adolescents, often using language sampling as the primary method of data collection (e.g., Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Berman & Verhoeven, 2002; Frizelle, Thompson, McDonald, & Bishop, 2018; Klecan-Aker & Hedrick, 1985; Nippold, Hesketh, Duthie, & Mansfield, 2005; Nippold, Ward-Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005; Ravid & Berman, 2006; Verhoeven et al., 2002). As a result, many language sampling tasks have been created that can be used by SLPs to elicit and analyze conversational, narrative, expository, and persuasive discourse, and much has been learned about the development of syntax and other aspects of language during the school-age and adolescent years (Berman, 2004; Nippold, 2016; Scott, 1988). In addition, audio recording devices have improved substantially in terms of their sound quality, transportability, and storage capacity, and computer programs such as Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT; Miller, Andriacchi, & Nockerts, 2019) have continuously been updated, making it faster and

easier to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples. Moreover, the process of interpreting the results of a language sample has improved with the establishment or expansion of databases of typical children and adolescents speaking in different genres (e.g., Bishop, 2004; Leadholm & Miller, 1992; Miller et al., 2019).

HOW CAN LANGUAGE SAMPLING BE HELPFUL TO CLINICIANS?

Knowing how to elicit, transcribe, and analyze language samples is critical to understanding and improving the communication skills of our clients, especially in view of the fact that at least 10% of school-age children and adolescents have language disorders that restrict their ability to express themselves effectively. This includes, for example, students with specific language impairment (SLI), nonspecific language impairment (NLI), learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and traumatic brain injury (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, pragmatics, and in their overall language productivity. Regarding syntax, children and adolescents with developmental language disorders (DLDs) such as SLI or NLI often produce shorter and simpler utterances than their peers with typical language development (TLD). Moreover, preschool (ages 3 and 4 years) and younger school-age children (ages 5–9 years) with DLDs often struggle with grammatical morphemes, making errors on verb tenses, plurals, and pronouns (Leonard, 2014). As they grow older and move into the later school years, children with DLDs make fewer errors on grammatical morphemes but struggle to produce complex sentences with adequate subordination (Nippold et al., 2008, 2009). Regarding lexical development, many school-age children and adolescents have difficulty using literate vocabulary such as abstract nouns, morphologically complex words, metacognitive verbs, and figurative expressions. During social situations, pragmatic issues may arise where they struggle to answer questions, stay on topic, speak coherently, and add relevant information to a conversation (Timler, 2018). They also may be less attentive to others' perspectives and less productive as speakers and writers compared to their peers with TLD (Paul & Norbury, 2012).

In summary, much has been learned about typical language development during the preschool, school-age, and adolescent years and about

the nature of expressive language deficits experienced by children and adolescents (Berman, 2004, 2008; Berman & Nir, 2010; Miller et al., 2019; Nippold, 2007; Paul & Norbury, 2012). Armed with a clear understanding of typical language development during these years, SLPs can examine the ability of children and adolescents 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–Fifth Edition (CELF-5; Wiig, Semel, & Secord, 2013) are helpful in identifying language deficits (Tomblin & Nippold, 2014) in students who speak Standard American English. However, those tests sample language out of context and do not provide the type of rich, naturalistic information that is required to formulate relevant intervention goals. In contrast, language sampling can assist the SLP to obtain this information by focusing on the language needed to succeed in social, academic, and vocational settings and to identify weaknesses in key areas such as the use of complex syntax, the literate lexicon, and pragmatics. In other words, language sampling offers greater ecological validity than norm-referenced standardized language testing (Costanza-Smith, 2010; Hewitt, Hammer, Yont, & Tomblin, 2005). Moreover, unlike norm-referenced standardized language tests, language samples can be elicited, transcribed, and analyzed as often as is necessary. Therefore, they can be used to monitor a client's progress during intervention and after it, whether the clinical activities are carried out in person or via telepractice. Some of the many benefits of language sampling with children and adolescents are listed in Table 1–1.

Table 1–1. Some Benefits of Language Sampling With Children and Adolescents

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The results of a language sample can indicate how well the child or adolescent communicates in "real-world" settings:

- Talking with parents or siblings while playing a game
- Telling a parent what happened at school
- Telling a teacher the details of a playground conflict
- Conversing with others in person or on the phone
- 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

continues

Table 1–1. *continued*

When assessing children and adolescents who are culturally and linguistically diverse, language sampling can be used instead of standardized tests and interpreted informally to determine how well the child speaks or writes, given his/her age or grade level.

Language samples can be used to establish functional goals and monitor progress during intervention.

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.

- Speaker produces fewer words and utterances.
- Content is inaccurate, limited, or otherwise impoverished.

The results can supplement the findings of a standardized test.

- Speaker uses short, simple utterances.
- Speaker produces grammatical errors.
- Speaker uses imprecise words (vague).

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)