



Grammar and Syntax

Developing School-Age Children's Oral and Written Language Skills

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Preface

G*rammar and Syntax: Developing School-Age Children's Oral and Written Language Skills* is a professional reference book that emphasizes that speech-language pathologists' (SLPs') practical decision-making is guided by a synthesis of expert knowledge and skills. This book is intended to enhance four main components of professional expertise. First, this book offers extensive information that can advance SLPs' *academic and theoretical knowledge* of language as a faculty of the human mind and an attribute of human performance. Specifically, this book offers a compendium of information on English grammar and syntax that can be applied to speech-language diagnostic and therapy practices. Effectively diagnosing and treating language impairments chiefly depends upon how thoroughly an SLP understands the principal components of language as they are employed by capable users.

Second, this text reinforces that SLPs need to cultivate a range of *strategies for gathering diagnostic evidence*, so that SLPs supplement their formal testing of grammar and syntax with multiple forms of observational, real-life, and experiential diagnostic evidence. Third, this book promotes that SLPs seek, understand, and apply *the evolving scientific evidence* that describes the factors that influence children's and adolescents' language and literacy development and growth and, specifically, that they address how grammar and syntax are essential for successful school learning and performance. To achieve this aim, this book is amply sourced with published *research across disciplines*, including the fields of speech-language pathology, linguistics, education, and psychology. Fourth,

this book is designed to encourage *creative approaches to curriculum-based speech-language therapy practices* that can help children and adolescents improve their language and literacy capabilities and achieve academic success. To this end, grammar and syntax are situated among the range of language and literacy skills that older school-age learners need for success and that SLPs can support.

Although this book presents more extensive detail about the expressive grammar and syntax of oral language, syntactic comprehension is of great importance, too. The focus on expression stems partly from the fact that there is somewhat more available theoretical and empirical information about expressive grammar and syntax development and impairment. Chapter 5, which addresses the role of grammar and syntax in reading, examines receptive processing of sentence syntax as an aspect of reading comprehension. Chapter 6 considers how grammar and syntax are expressed in writing.

Preschool children's refinement of the systems of grammar and syntax is an important aspect of acquiring language as a means for interpersonal communication. During the school years, using grammar and syntax to read, write, and learn academic material become simultaneous demands. This book discusses at length how grammatical and syntactic difficulties can manifest in younger children's oral language but also explains how grammatical and syntactic difficulties may not appear until learners are faced with advanced oral language and literacy demands in school. Some children may learn oral language adequately, then show a breakdown in



learning to read and write. Other children may struggle with learning academic concepts, comprehending stories, and acquiring a fund of higher-level verbal information drawn from the texts they read. Some children may have both of these kinds of difficulties. The grammatical and syntactic language bases that underlie literacy and learning difficulties are described in detail throughout this book, as are methods of identifying and diagnosing these needs.

Speech-language interventions can focus on strategies for helping children learn the grammatical and syntactic competencies needed for oral language, reading, and writing. SLPs can provide services that meaningfully enhance classroom learning for students of any age. Emphasis is placed throughout this text on how to provide academically relevant speech-language services to school-age children and adolescents who struggle with classroom oral language and with learning to read and write owing to difficulties with grammar and syntax. Topics include multi-purpose intervention strategies to help students whose grammar and syntax deficits have a negative effect on their academic learning, completion of classroom assignments, and performance on achievement testing. Suggestions for adapting mainstream curriculum and assignments, differentiating instruction to accommodate learners of varying levels of ability, and designing classroom accommodations and modifications are given.

This book emphasizes how an SLP's clinical decision-making is guided by a synthesis of (1) knowledge of the theories of language, (2) scientific evidence regarding ascertaining language performance, and (3) clinical, observational evidence of how children and teens learn grammar and syntax and how impairment in grammar and syntax is manifest.

One of my goals as an author and educator is to reference primary sources and original authors of information. I refer to a topic's "classic" texts and authors whenever possible. Included, too, are citations for work by the preeminent authors in the fields of speech-language pathology and literacy studies. Even so, this book is more than a compendium of information that can be found in other books, articles, and online sources. I extensively offer my own conceptualizations about language and language impairments and provide my own strategies for diagnosis and treatment. I infuse this book with my extensive academic background and with the lessons I have learned during my research and clinical experiences with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners in three regions of the United States.

My purpose is to prepare SLPs to understand the complexities of language impairment and to develop multiple perspectives for understanding the ramifications of language impairment. I bring to this book nearly four decades of experience as a clinical SLP and over 25 years as a language scholar, professor, and provider of professional development for SLPs and teachers. My doctoral studies in language arts and literacy instruction and my continued involvement in organizations that promote literacy research and education have influenced me to author a book that prepares SLPs to address students' literacy needs and academic success. I aspire that readers of this book will develop the expertise to enact the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 1991, 2001, 2004, 2010, 2016, 2018b, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d) recommendations that SLPs diagnose how language deficits contribute to students' literacy needs and enhance students' participation in literacy activities.



The chapters of this book include special features to enhance the reader's learning. Each chapter begins with an Anticipation Guide (Head & Readence, 1992; Wood et al., 2008), which is a list of questions to stimulate readers to prepare for reading by thinking about the material

that will be covered in the chapter. Headers in each chapter allow for ready reference to sections of the text. Accompanying the chapters is a glossary of key terms. The terms that appear in bold italic print are found in the glossary.







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readers. Being part of this editorial board, as well as a manuscript reviewer for many other academic journals, has taught me how to carefully examine my own writing and editing. I am honored to have provided service to a number of ASHA committees, boards, and programs, where I worked alongside dedicated, insightful, intelligent, caring, and progressive colleagues. Many thanks to the people who post on the virtual networks that keep me connected to the larger community of practice. I am often cheered and inspired by professionals' and consumers' posts on social media, which I look forward to reading every day. And, recalling the earliest point in my career as a scholar, I am grateful for the valued learning experiences that I shared with my professors and fellow students during my doctoral studies in literacy at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

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In memory of my mother and father.







CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Educational Contexts for Improving School-Age Learners' Grammar and Syntax

This chapter describes background information on the language and learning expectations of K–12 educational contexts. Language arts and literacy curricula require learners to attain competence in grammar and syntax. This chapter discusses the overall educational purposes that SLPs' language interventions address and offers reasons why SLPs would focus on learners' grammatical and syntactic skills.

Anticipation Guide

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to answer the following questions:

- Why is it important for speech-language pathologists to be able to describe, diagnose, and intervene to help school-age children and adolescents who struggle with grammar and syntax?
- What is the rationale for, and what are the benefits of, describing school-age children and adolescents who struggle with grammar and syntax as having a “language impairment?”
- Why are speakers from communities with language that varies from General American English, such as speakers of dialects of American English, not considered to have a language impairment?



- What kinds of grammatical and syntactic skills have been achieved by typically developing children by the time they reach 5 years of age?
- What are some general considerations for assessing the grammar and syntax of school-age children and adolescents?
- What are some of the curricular language and literacy demands that may be difficult to achieve for school-age children and adolescents who have difficulties with grammar and syntax?
- What do the data collected on a national level report on populations of students with language impairments?
- What is the rationale, and what is the importance, for collaborative, curriculum-based, inclusive approaches to improving the grammar and syntax of school-age children and adolescents?
- How can speech-language services for grammar and syntax become a meaningful component of students' school learning?

A Professional Reference Book

This book is designed to be a professional reference for practitioners, researchers, university faculty, and students in the field of speech-language pathology. Practitioners and students in fields allied with speech-language pathology also may benefit from its content. Teachers of regular education and special education students in preschool through Grade 12, teachers of English language arts, learning disabilities teachers and intervention specialists, reading teachers and literacy specialists, teachers of English language learners (ELLs), and the university faculty who prepare preprofessionals for their careers in these fields may find that this text provides information on grammar and syntax that supplements their current knowledge

and practices. Students enrolled in courses in special education, reading and literacy education, child development, and linguistics may find this text's content is relevant to their studies. This text is intended to be a useful resource in higher education courses offered by any academic departments with coursework in language development, language disorders, literacy education, learning disabilities, and developmental disorders. Some content may be of use in speech-language pathology clinical methods courses and practicum settings, and in K–12 educational practica and student teaching settings. Tutoring centers and speech-language clinics might acquire this book as a professional reference.

Children and adolescents with language impairments may have difficulties in learning language and acquiring literacy capabilities. Traditionally, speech-

language pathologists (SLPs) understand the nature of impaired language development, but they may not have detailed professional knowledge of how impaired language adversely affects school learning and academic success. The purpose of this book is to prepare SLPs to have a broad base of knowledge that will inform their interventions with children and teens and enhance their collaborations with regular education teachers, special educators, tutors, and parents (Gordon Pershey, 1998). Clinical identification of language impairment requires a thorough understanding of typical language development. SLPs use typical development as the guidepost against which language deficiencies are measured. Although the nature of language deficits is carefully described throughout this book, the intent is to provide a developmental focus, not a deficit focus. The aim is to moderate the pathologization of learners' differences.

Most importantly, this book is meant to be inclusive and accessible for all its readers. Grammar and syntax can be confusing and intimidating subject matter even for SLPs and education professionals (Justice & Ezell, 1999). One reason for this apprehension may be because, as Rowley (2011) suggested, there is some evidence that SLPs may not have sufficient knowledge of syntax, morphology, and grammar. SLPs' self-reports of their own grammar instruction prior to entering graduate school have varied from no instruction to minimal instruction (Long, 1996; Rowley, 2011). Clinicians may not be prepared to diagnose and treat deficits in advanced syntax in school-age children and adolescents and may actually ignore these areas of language impairment (Justice & Ezell, 1999, 2008). SLPs may feel comfortable providing interventions for language as a mode of communication but may not feel

prepared to focus learners' attention on the structure of language. Teachers may feel similarly underprepared to focus on the linguistic elements of literacy instruction (Joshi et al., 2009; Moats & Foorman, 2003). It is only by acquiring an in-depth knowledge of the grammatical and syntactic properties of language that an SLP can diagnose developmental difficulties and appropriately intervene to improve language learning. Explicit and direct teaching of the structure of language is necessary when SLPs and educators assist students in gaining skills in reading decoding and comprehension, and in the written language skills of spelling, word study, sentence structure, and learning and applying the conventions of grammar (International Dyslexia Association, 2010; Moats & Foorman, 2003).

Grammar and Syntax: Professional Skills for Descriptions, Diagnosis, and Interventions

The intention of this text is to help professionals improve their working knowledge of grammar and syntax, with a focus on three necessary skill sets: describing grammar and syntax as aspects of the structure of language and describing the skills of competent users of grammar and syntax, diagnosing deficits in grammar and syntax, and providing interventions to improve grammar and syntax. These skill sets entail:

(1) Readers of this text may acquire the conceptual knowledge and nomenclature for *describing* elements of grammar and syntax; to this end, the intention is to help readers develop the professional vocabulary to better describe the important

components of grammar and syntax. To facilitate readers' knowledge of linguistic terminology, the descriptive language used in this text to explain grammatical and syntactic concepts is meant to be basic, straightforward, direct, and user-friendly. These descriptions may spark readers' interest in learning more about linguistics. Readers can seek out linguistics texts and websites if they desire more complex explanations. Throughout this book, many references to original linguistics sources are provided when linguistic concepts are explained. The reference list for this book provides resources for learning more about the grammatical and syntactic concerns in school-age and adolescent students.

(2) Readers of this text may learn about methods for *diagnosing* learners' difficulties with grammar and syntax; to this end, this text provides diagnostic approaches to help identify when learners have grammatical and syntactic difficulties. Standardized diagnostic tests of grammar and syntax yield numerical results that provide accountability for diagnostic decision-making and that SLPs are familiar with interpreting. This text focuses more on informal assessment via language sampling and analyses. Classroom observations and assessment of students' classroom work samples are two other approaches for informal assessment. This text offers suggestions for applying the findings of informal assessments of grammar and syntax to diagnose language deficits and to explain why students may be struggling with school curricular demands.

(3) Readers of this text may find recommendations and suggestions for *interventions and teaching*; to this end, instructional ideas are described in general terms that

can be of use to SLPs and teachers. Practitioners can adapt these informal, multi-purpose suggestions to the more formal wording of goals, objectives, and methods that is needed for clinical reports and intervention plans. These informal examples are meant to be nonprescriptive and might offer better inspiration for professionals' creative thought than a step-by-step series of instructions would afford. Readers of this book may feel validated and may become motivated and encouraged to apply this book's suggestions to their own innovative approaches to interventions and instruction. Many of the suggestions given relate to the academic expectations put forth in the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), to be useful in contexts where a standards-based intervention is applicable.

Terminology Used in This Book: "Language Impairment"

To describe children and adolescents with language difficulties, a few terms are used rather generally and interchangeably throughout this book, but most frequently, "*language impairment*" is used in this text, along with expressions like "language difficulties," "struggling learners" (as in struggling with language, reading, and/or writing), "language needs," and similar nonclinical wording. The profession of speech-language pathology uses the terms "language impairment," "*language disorder*," and "*language delay*" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004; Leonard, 2020; Murza & Ehren, 2020;

Paul, 2020; Rice, 2020; Volkers, 2018). Practitioners tend to use the terms “language impairment,” “language disorder,” or “communication disorder” interchangeably. “Language disability” is used to convey that impaired language has a negative effect on daily living and an adverse impact on academic achievement (Justice, 2010; Paul, 2002). There has been a trend among some researchers and practitioners toward the use of “*developmental language disorder*,” or DLD (Green, 2020; McGregor et al., 2020; Owen Van Horne et al., 2018). There are conceptual distinctions and practical realities attendant to the use of each of these terms, some of which deal with symptomatology or measurement variables, for instance, IQ verbal and performance discrepancy scores or determining cut scores for applying certain diagnostic labels. In some children, progress in language development follows a generally typical pattern but is delayed. In other children, progress is disordered and takes on an atypical trajectory. Language delays and language disorders have some similar traits and some distinct dissimilarities. Because it is not possible to maintain these numerous conceptual distinctions when discussing children’s and teens’ difficulties with the language subsystems of grammar and syntax alone, the following explanation is a rationale for employing the more general term “language impairment” throughout this text.

The World Health Organization WHO (2001, 2014) described an *impairment* as an abnormality in the structure or function of a bodily entity or system. “Language impairment” is a term that conveys that *language, as a structured system, is not intact*. Moreover, “language impairment” suggests that *language, as a functional system, is compromised*. The structure and/or the

function of language are not optimal. The structure of language involves its properties as a code and a system. The functions of language are to represent ideas, accommodate the conventions of shared meanings, and communicate.

In the WHO (2001, 2014) model, *disorder* is the *functional* consequence of an impairment. If a bodily entity or system is impaired, then the function that is supposed to be carried out by the entity or system is not readily achieved. To be disordered means to not operate properly for functional use. A “language disorder” would be the extent to which *language, as a functional system, is not operating properly for functional use*. The system’s impairment limits its functionality. *A language disorder is the functional consequence of a language impairment*.

These definitions of the terms “impairment” and “disorder” bring about many considerations, implications, and questions. Discussion is necessary in order to forge a deeper understanding of what goes wrong when language does not develop as expected. While an academic understanding of the distinctions between language impairment and language disorder is important, attempting to maintain this distinction is probably not practical for SLPs in clinical practice. Even in policy and legislative documents, it appears that the words “impairment” and “disorder” might be used interchangeably or somewhat synonymously. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association’s (ASHA, 1993) definition of language disorder is that language is impaired: “A **language disorder** is impaired comprehension and/or use of spoken, written and/or other symbol systems. The disorder may involve (1) the form of language (phonology, morphology, syntax), (2) the content

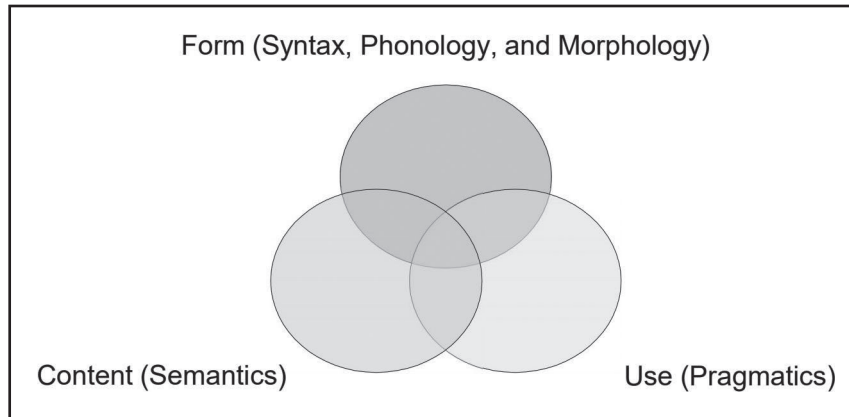


Figure 1–1. The domains of language. Adapted from Bloom, L., & Lahey, M. (1978). *Language development and language disorders*. John Wiley & Sons.

of language (semantics), and/or (3) the function of language in communication (pragmatics) in any combination.” Figure 1–1 depicts how the language domains of content (semantics), form (syntax), and use (pragmatics) (Bloom & Lahey, 1978) interrelate to form the basis for competent language comprehension and production. When there is a deficit in any of the domains, overall language competence can be compromised. Chapter 2 describes content and form development. Chapter 3 relates pragmatic development to the development of syntactic form.

Throughout this book, the term “language impairment” is used rather generally (cf. Owens, 2004) to describe the condition that occurs when an impairment in the structure and/or function of language is the result of developmental factors or acquired conditions. *Within this book, the point of any discussion of language impairment is to describe the impairment along with its functional consequences.* Use of the term “language impairment” acknowledges the reality that “language disorder” oc-

curs concomitantly when any aspects of functional language are affected. Reciprocally, when the term “language disorder” is used, it brings to bear the underlying impairment of the structured system of language.

Language Deficits Versus Language Differences

An additional caveat applies to the delimitations to the content of this book, which is a discussion of developmental language difficulties and not a discussion of the non-clinical language differences that arise from cultural, linguistic, and/or environmental variables. Cultural and linguistic diversity are important considerations for the practice of speech-language pathology. ASHA (2017) mandated that SLPs provide culturally and linguistically relevant interventions that adapt to clients’ experiences, values, identities, and needs. However, the information provided in this text is entirely about the linguistic forms of *General American English* (GAE) grammar