
Narrative and Expository Language: A Criterion-based Assessment Procedure for School-age Children

Langage narratif et explicatif: Procédure d'évaluation fondée sur des critères à l'intention des enfants d'âge scolaire

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Abstract

Discourse abilities are a growing focus in the intervention practice of the school speech-language pathologist. However, there are few standardized tests or procedures available to assist speech-language pathologists in this important area. This article outlines one assessment package, covering narrative, meta-narrative, and expository language goals, that has been developed in therapy and collaborative teaching with students from grades two to seven.

Résumé

Le discours est un élément auquel on accorde de plus en plus d'importance dans les pratiques d'intervention des orthophonistes scolaires. Toutefois, il existe peu de tests ou de procédures normalisés qui pourraient aider l'orthophoniste dans ce domaine. Cet article décrit une méthode d'évaluation englobant des objectifs linguistiques narratifs, métanarratifs et explicatifs qui a été élaborée à partir d'expériences en thérapie et en enseignement en collaboration avec des étudiants des niveaux 2 à 7.

Traditionally, language acquisition has been considered to be largely complete, other than the continued development of vocabulary and the refinement of complex syntax skills, by the age of seven or eight years. In the last decade or so, further understanding of the link between learning disabilities and language disorders has come through the study of pragmatics (language use) and discourse (units greater than the sentence). Two areas of discourse that have received attention are narration and exposition. This paper outlines a criterion-based assessment package for intervention in the areas of narration and exposition with upper primary and intermediate (grade 2 to 7) language-learning disabled students.

Language Use

Westby (1985) views language use on a continuum from *oral language* used primarily to regulate social interaction to *literate language* used primarily to regulate thinking and planning and to reflect on or seek additional information.

The topics and structure of these two ends of the continuum differ markedly. Oral language topics are often familiar to speaker and listener, and may even be ongoing in the immediate context; topics of literate language activities such as essays are often unfamiliar to the listener/reader and sometimes have only limited familiarity to the speaker/writer, as well as being distanced in time and space. Structurally, oral language can take advantage of mutual knowledge, context, and intonation and be somewhat vague and open to interpretation, but literate language, lacking these additional features, must be explicit and specific.

Narrative Discourse

Westby (1985) describes how narratives form a transition from the language style of the home to the language style of the school. Developmentally, narratives are the first language form that requires the speaker to produce an extended monologue rather than an interactive dialogue. Structurally, they often combine aspects of oral and literate language styles, incorporating intonation, gesture, and prosody with the explicitness required when telling about an event removed in time and space.

Lahey (1988) has charted the normal developmental progression of narratives. She describes narratives as either reports of "what happened," called personal experience narratives, or reports of the imagination, called "stories." Lahey reports that the two types follow similar developmental trends, although performance may differ at a given time for a given child.

Using a story grammar approach, Lahey (1988) describes how narratives can be analyzed at a macro- or a microlevel. The macrolevel relates to the subsections of the text and to how each subsection relates to the narrative as a whole. There are four general logical-temporal stages: (1) *additive chain*, (2) *temporal chain*, (3) *causal chain*, and (4) *multiple causal chain*.

In the additive chain, a sequence of sentences can be arranged in any order without changing the meaning of the text; the sense of unity is provided by a theme or a repetition of actions. Utterances unified by a common theme can be classified as listings (e.g., a boy, a dog, a frog) or descriptions. In the temporal chain, a sequence of sentences or events without causal relationships occur in temporal sequence; rearranging the sentences would affect the meaning of the text. In the causal chain, sentences or events are related by a causal dependency; the events (or states) enable or cause other events (or states). This involves some disequilibrium or complication that has consequences and/or a resolution and is often referred to as an *episode*. Abbreviated causal chains are incomplete, lacking a resolution or arriving at it abruptly, without a description of how the complication is solved. Causal chains with obstacles or attempts involve more than one attempt to resolve the complication. Finally, in the multiple causal chain, two or more episodes are conjoined temporally or causally and related in an embedded fashion.

In addition to the subsections described above (complication, attempts, and resolution), other subsections include introductory statements, setting, internal responses (feelings), and the ending. Stages (1) and (2) are typical of preschool children, and stages (3) and (4) begin to occur in seven and eight year old children. Earlier stages are not abandoned and may be used, even by adults, for different purposes. Not all the subsections are present all the time, and most are missing at levels below the causal chain. Internal responses, other than goals, also are often missing in younger children's causal chains. A regression to simpler episodes, in which subsections such as internal responses are omitted, often occurs when children begin chaining causal events or episodes together (Lahey, 1988).

The microlevel of analysis involves examining how the sequences of sentences are joined, called *cohesion*. Cohesive ties include use of reference (pronouns, demonstratives, comparatives), conjunction (forms such as *and*, *then*, *so*, *but*, *because*), lexical cohesion (repeating a word or use of a related word), ellipsis (omission of an item retrievable elsewhere in the text), and parallelism (similar syntactic structures). Appropriate use of cohesion results in clear, coherent discourse (Lahey, 1988).

Use of cohesion develops in concert with increased mastery over the use of complex sentences because many aspects of cohesion, such as conjunction, ellipsis, and parallelism, are closely tied to syntactic skills. The most frequent type of cohesive tie in the narratives of children 7 to 10 years of age is personal reference, followed by conjunction, then demonstrative reference, and finally, lexical cohesion (Liles, 1985). An explanation of the development of each of

these types of cohesive ties is beyond the scope of this paper, but is available in Lahey (1988).

Expository Discourse

Expository language or instructional discourse is used for the planning and transmission of logic-based knowledge and occurs at the literate end of Westby's language continuum. It is the form of discourse used primarily in the middle elementary years (gr. 3,4) and beyond. It involves comparisons, explanations, and opinions. It is closely tied to meta-language skills and the onset of formal operations in Piaget's views of cognition. Wallach and Miller (1988) provide an overview of instructional discourse and the dimensions that can be used to describe it. An important aspect of expository language is the requirement for explicitness. This is taken to an extreme in written exposition, in which punctuation must be used to map the meanings carried by gesture, facial expression, intonation, and prosody, and topics may be logical arguments based on abstract concepts. The development of expository language, especially in its written form, usually occurs with explicit instruction in school, and so, charting its progression is probably best accomplished by referring to the academic curriculum.

Assessment

The intervention targets of narrative and expository language presented in this assessment protocol were based on the experience of the author (a speech-language pathologist) in collaboration with classroom teachers involved in whole language and thinking/learning strategies, as well as on research indicating deficits in these areas (Liles, 1985; Liles, 1987; Roth & Spekman, 1986; Roth, 1986) and suggested intervention approaches (Bourgeault, 1985; Lahey, 1988; Simon, 1984; Wallach & Miller, 1988; Westby, 1985). This work was motivated by the lack of appropriate pre/post-testing measures available to school speech-language pathologists that would enable them to measure progress in targeted language areas for students classified as language-learning disabled. Those standardized tests that are available do not lead directly to discourse-level intervention goals, and pragmatic batteries such as Simon's (1984) are too lengthy and do not provide sufficient guidance for analyzing the discourse samples.

The narrative/expressive assessment protocol presented below was designed to lead directly to an intervention strategy. It can be applied to written and as well as oral language samples and involves four parts: narrative, meta-narrative, explanation, and opinion. The questions, wording, and layout are continuously modified as more information about

discourse abilities and the range of normal and weak performance in intermediate elementary students becomes available.

The narrative checklist is based on Lahey's (1988) conception of normal narrative development and fits in with teachers' understanding of story grammar. The meta-narrative questionnaire is an attempt to assess explicit story-grammar knowledge in an applied manner. These two parts are appropriate for students as young as grade two. The expository sections are drawn from the non-standardized assessment battery, *Evaluating Communicative Competence: a Functional-Pragmatic Approach* (ECC) (Simon, 1984) and were chosen as representative of the style of language used in elementary school essays and reports. The expository sections are most appropriate for grades four and above. The assessment procedure is described below.

Fictional Narrative

The student is asked to tell a story based on (1) a choice of two pictures and (2) a story starter, "It was a dark and gloomy night..." In this section, imaginary storytelling is used. Pictures are used as a warmup because they seem to be less threatening for the students than the more open-ended story starter. Any interesting pictures are possible; however, the pictures of a boy with many puppies and the man about to hit another man with a fly swatter from the ECC, task 17, work well. In the picture task, there is a tendency to describe the scene rather than tell a story, so conclusions concerning narrative level are more validly assessed using the story starter sample.

The narrative evaluation focuses mainly on the macrolevel of analysis. Approximate judgements of cohesion are made in the syntax and coherency sections. More accurate judgements of cohesion would require audiotaping and a full story transcription. Estimates of length are approximate and based on experience with the most engaging story length. Qualitative comments like unusually fast or slow rates of delivery are noted.

Meta-narrative knowledge

The student is asked questions on story grammar referring to (1) the better formed of the two stories just told (in Part A) and (2) the story "The Three Pigs" for additional probes if necessary. This section attempts to determine the student's ability to analyze stories and his/her knowledge of story grammar terminology. The fairy tale is useful because of its familiarity, and it has been acceptable even to older children.

Explanation

The student is asked to explain (1) how to use a pay phone and (2) a sport of the student's choosing. This section is used to determine the student's ability to organize and sequence information. The first task is fairly simple and is used mainly to determine degree of detail in the description. A picture of a pay phone may be used (e.g., ECC, task 14). The second task is difficult and represents a challenge to the student's organizational ability and the student's ability to separate non-essential from essential information.

Opinion and justification

The student is asked to give an opinion about the following: (1) How do you feel about doing chores around the house?; (2) How do you feel about hitch-hiking?; and (3) How do you feel about making a pet do tricks to get its food? This section is used to determine the student's ability to present logical arguments and incorporate supporting evidence. Three questions are used and pictures matching the questions are provided (such as those in ECC, task 19) in the expectation that at least two of the questions should be interesting enough for the student to answer at some length.

With some practice, the student's performance can be analyzed as he/she speaks and summarized in pause times between test sections. The time required for the entire assessment and analysis is under 30 minutes. A sample evaluation form that was completed for one child, age 12-0, is presented in Appendix A; the complete language sample is included as Appendix B. It should be noted that the analysis was done as the language sample was obtained; it was not based on the transcript and, as a result, does not take note of many interesting features that appear in the transcription. That is the cost incurred when one analyzes on the spot. The analysis and conclusions are based on clinical experience with normally developing children in the same age range, as well as on the literature previously noted.

Conclusion

This assessment is not conclusive. Each clinician will have to adapt it to her/his own particular needs and experience. Of particular importance in the use of this protocol is the development of a personal reference group. Assessing normal students is recommended to obtain a sense of the normal range and variability in responses. It is also recommended that standardized tests be used in conjunction with this protocol for making initial service delivery judgements.

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Appendix A: Sample Evaluation

Narrative Development - Checklist

A. Request a story based on one of two pictures. *I would like you to tell me a story. You can choose one of these two pictures. It can be any kind of story and any length you want.* (Transcribe as much as necessary):

STRUCTURE - Circle major type

- | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------|
| 1. Additive | 2. Temporal | 3. Causal | 4. Multiple C. |
| - listings | | - <u>abbreviated</u> | - conjoined |
| - repeated actions | | - no obstacles | - embedded |
| - descriptive | | - obstacles | |

SUBCATEGORIES - Note which features are present

1. Setting

- characters *I, dog, mom*
- place *no*
- time *no*

2. Plot

- introductory phrase (e.g., One day...), opening action
Once upon a time...I had a dog

- complication(s)

I: dog had babies, mom said sell them

I'm getting a

- feelings *happy, sad*

kitten...tells about

- plan/attempts *no*

self; asks procedural questions

- consequences (what happened)

I: sold them

**weak, too short, bare but good form*

- ending (tying it all together)

I was sad. I'm done now.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES - Note quality of each, give examples if possible

1. Title and specific/descriptive vocabulary *no title; no but not vague*

2. Syntax, sentence variety (put examples on back)

- intact morphology *ok*
- well-formed complex sentences *ok*

3. Clarity

- pre-planning *yes*
- events in order *yes*
- actions, characters easily understood *yes*

4. Dialogue *no*

5. Intonation, facial expression, gestures *some expressive intonation*

6. Length: short (<30 s) average (30 - 180 s) long (>180 s)

B. Request a story based on a story starter "It was a dark and gloomy night..." Now, I'm going to ask for another story. This time, I'll tell you the beginning. You tell me the rest. (Transcribe as much as necessary):

STRUCTURE - Circle major type

- | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Additive | 2. Temporal | 3. Causal | 4. Multiple C. |
| - listings | | - abbreviated | - conjoined |
| - repeated actions | | - no obstacles | - embedded |
| - descriptive | | - <u>obstacles</u> but sparse | |

SUBCATEGORIES - Note which features are present

1. Setting

- characters *me, friends, kid*
- place *18, 19 aves., house*
- time *Halloween night*

2. Plot

- introductory phrase (e.g., One day...), opening action
Once upon a time... halloweening...got candy...went home...ate it... watched fireworks...go for a walk

- complication(s) *1a: kid asked for \$ 1b: kid asked again* **better, ok, needs feelings, details; added explanations of actions and details after;*
- feelings *no*
- plan/attempts *1a: said no, kept on walking 1b: said no again, went home*
- consequences (what happened) *1a: went away 1b: went away* *event recounting?; likes to talk*
- ending (tying it all together) *went to bed. That's all.*

ADDITIONAL FEATURES - Note quality of each, give examples if possible

1. Title and specific/descriptive vocabulary *no title; no, but not vague*
2. Syntax, sentence variety (put examples on back)
 - intact morphology *ok*
 - well-formed complex sentences *ok*
3. Clarity
 - title, pre-planning *yes*
 - events in order *yes*
 - actions, characters easily understood *yes*
4. Dialogue *no - conversation not in dialogue form*
5. Intonation, facial expression, gestures *not really*
6. Length: short (<30 s) average (30 - 180 s) long (>180 s)

Meta-Narrative Knowledge Questions

Use on the better formed of the two stories. If gaps in the stories prevent asking about some details, such as problem or attempts to solve, briefly retell the story and apply questions to that. *I'm going to ask you some questions about one of the stories you just told me.*

1. Did you tell me a title for your story when you told it? *Halloween Story; not clear understanding of title, said it was on Halloween; bit weak*
2. What kind of setting information did you have/was there? (note if no understanding)
 - a) What characters did you have/were there?
 - b) Did you have a place?/ Where did the story take place?
 - c) Did you have a time?/ Was there a time in the story?
only general q.: what night was like and what we did; bit weak
3. How did the story start? *I can't remember; wants exact wording; ok*
4. Were there any problems? *Yes; kid...so he went home; retold most of story (too much); weak*
5. Were any feelings described? *you could tell when I was saying it; no; ok*
6. What happened with the problems? *How did they try to solve them? by us going inside; ok*
7. What were the solutions? *(did not do, answered in 6)*
8. How did it end? *when we went to bed; ok*
9. Do you remember any special or interesting words from the story? *no*
10. Did you use dialogue? (explain if necessary, but note lack of understanding)
prompt; no, yeah, the one kid; weak
11. If you were to tell the story again, how would you improve or change it? *make it longer, weak*

**somewhat weak; limited knowledge of s-g*

Explanation Questions

- A. How to use a pay phone, photo support provided if possible.
What is this thing? How do you use it? I'm from another planet, and I've never seen it before. (Transcribe as much as necessary):
- description & function of whole & parts *no put 25, 5, 10 in slot*
 - sequence of phone use *yes, brief push phone no.*
 - reasons for use *no maybe hello*
 - coherency *ok talk to them*
 - length *short but ok*
- *weak: organized but too brief, restricted; talks about self & phone use*
- B. Explain a sport. No visual support is provided. *I'd like you to tell me about a sport. Choose one you know a bit about. Now, tell me all about it; I don't know what it is or how to play it.* (Transcribe as much as necessary):
- coverage and details: *stick - described: 2 types*
 - goal of the game *indirectly if breaks, plastic blade*
 - physical actions *some ball - on ground*

Narrative and Expository Language

- no. of players (approx.) *no* *goalie - stands there*
- equipment & location *some* *goalie stick - described*
- rules *no* *net - thing you score in*
shoot
save
- coherency *clear, didn't jump around* *score*
- length *brief*

**organized and careful but too brief & restricted; somewhat weak*

Opinion and Justification Questions

Use picture support if possible. Prompt if necessary, but note prompts used. Start with a neutral prompt such as "Explain that" before using a leading one such as "Why." *I'd like to hear your opinion on a few things.* (Transcribe as much as necessary):

A. *How do you feel about doing chores around the house?*

- structure & details: *like it; kinda fun*
- evaluation *yes: before & after* *but sad when can't play*
- supporting reasons (personal anecdotes incorporated or presented incidentally?) *but if must, do, then ask*
yes: I+ *but I don't*
that's my opinion
- alternative approach & argument against it *yes: I+* *I like it*

- coherency *ok*
- length *brief but ok*

**ok: both sides presented and general form present*

B. *How do you feel about hitch-hiking?*

- structure & details *I don't feel good about hh*
- evaluation *yes* *bec. person might:*
- supporting reasons (personal anecdotes incorporated or presented incidentally?) *take you or do something*
2-, developed, off track a bit *to you*
- alternative approach & argument against it
no

- coherency *ok*
- length *ok*

**ok: only one side but developed it*

C. *How do you feel about making a pet do tricks to get its food?*

- structure & details *I feel good about...*
- evaluation *yes* *can learn things*
- supporting reasons (personal anecdotes incorporated or presented incidentally?) *simple*
2+ *just like my dog*
- alternative approach & argument against it
no

- coherency *ok*
- length *too brief*

**weak: eval. & reason but no development of ideas*

**opinions ok: presents supporting reasons and doesn't wander too much*

Appendix B: Language Sample

male, age 12-0

Narrative Development

A. ch: once upon a time, there was a I had a dog/
and - my dog - had um - had babies/
and I was really happy\ happy, like,- uh/
but my mom said I had to sell them and that's when I was sad/
(pause) I'm done now/

B. ch: once upon a time, me and my friends went out on Halloween and it was a dark and gloomy night/
We went to each house and - went trick or treat\went and said trick or treat and we got lots of candy/
and we went on eighteen avenue, nineteenth avenue, seventeen avenue, sixteenth avenue/
then we went back home and ate most of our candy/
then later on, we had fireworks\ fireworks/
then - let's see - then me and my friends decided to go and have a little walk/
Well, when we were having a little walk, there was this kid, he came and um and asked if he\we have any money and we said no and we just kept on walking/
but later on, this kid came\ this kid came back and - he asked do we really have any money? and we went no we did not have any money/
so, when the kid left, we went back home and we - we got ready for bed and we went to bed/
yeah, that's the end of my thing/

Meta-narrative Knowledge

ad: did you tell me a title for your story when you told it?/
ch: The Halloween Story/
ad: okay - wait a minute, did you say that?/
ch: no, yeah, I said that it was on Halloween/
I said it was on Halloween/
ad: okay, what kind of setting information did you give me?/
ch: what the night was like/
and what we did/
and that's about it/
ad: okay, how did your story start?/
ch: um - one day on Halloween - I can't remember that now/
ad: okay, were there any problems?/
ch: yeah, like there was this kid, he kept on coming around and asking us do we have any money?/
so we went home/
ad: were there any feelings described?/
ch: yeah, like the kids were - um - you could tell, like, when I was saying the story that the kids were scared/
so that's why we went home/
cuz we were scared/
ad: did you say that?/
ch: no - but you could tell by the story/
ad: so what happened to the problems?/
how did\ how were they solved/
ch: well, they were solved by us going inside and - /
the other kid left so that's about when we left\ that's about when we went/
ad: okay, uh, so how did it end?/
ch: it end, like when we went to bed and that's it/
I ended the story when we went to bed/
ad: okay -
ch: we got ready for bed and went to bed/
ad: do you remember any special or interesting words from your story?/

ch: hum, no/
 ad: did you use dialogue?/
 ch: what's dialogue?/
 ad: the characters talking - to each other/
 ch: no, didn't do that/
 yeah, except for that one guy, that kid/
 ad: okay, if you were to tell this story again, how would you improve
 or change it?/
 ch: I would have, like made it longer or something/
 Cuz now I forget all about it/

Explanation

A. ch: okay/ (clears throat)
 okay, what you do is you put (clears throat) twenty-f-\ twenty-five,
 five cents or ten cents in the coin\ in the the coin slot/
 then you push the number um\ a phone number/
 then, you might get somebody to say, like,hello or something/
 and then, you like, start talking to them/
 like "how're you doing" or something/

B. ch: hockey is a sport that you play with a stick/
 and on the end of the stick, it's a sloped end/
 and you sometimes, when you're playing ice hockey, you put tape
 around it, the ending/
 but if you don't play hockey, the end of you don't need to put tape/
 and the end might break, so you go to the store and you buy
 plastic blade and then -/
 to play hockey what you do is/
 you have a ball in your hand/
 you put it down on the ground/
 and they might\ like\ a goalie is a person that stands there with a
 goalie stick/
 and a goalie stick is a stick that's almost but it has more details
 on it/
 and um there's a net behind him/
 a net is a thing you score in/
 and um with the ball, you shoot/
 and when you shoot, the goalie's gonna try and save it/
 if the goalie doesn't save it, its gonna go into the net and score/

Opinions

A. ch: well, I like doing chores because they're kind of fun/
 but when your friends are out and you hear them, um, you're gonna
 kinda feel sad because you want to be playing with them/

but if you're supposed to be doing chores, you should be doing
 chores/
 you shouldn't run off and go do/
 and you know what you do with the garbage?/
 you put it in the garbage can where its supposed to be, then you
 go and play somewhere else/
 you're not supposed to do that, you supposed to do, like, if you
 have any other chores, go ask if you have any other
 chores/
 which I don't have any other chores/
 that's my opinion about chores/
 cuz I like doing chores/
 but my mom never gives me some/
 only sometimes I\

ad: \she'd probably love to hear that you don't mind doing them/
 ch: I did the dishes for her one time but we have a washing machine so
 what was the use of doing them?/
 but I didn't care/
 ad: you could always load or unload it/
 ch: uh hum/

B. ch: I don't feel good about hitch-hiking because - when - well -
 when you - when you - like - when a person comes by and they
 give you a ride, the person might do something to you or else they
 might take you to a different place/
 or - someone can easily come and do something to you, instead of
 you getting a ride, they might say you wanna walk with me or
 something/
 or else they might come by and say "I'm looking for a dog,
 can you help me?"/
 and what you should do is you should never you shouldn't
 hitchhike or you shouldn't help anyone help look for a dog/
 if you're a kid and you look and just - uh - you're, like, trying
 to look for something, ask a kid to help you do it, like, don't
 ask a teenage or an adult/
 you can ask your mom and dad or a kid that you know really well/

C. ch: well, I feel good about making dogs or pets doing tricks/
 so, like they can learn things/
 and if a person is trying to teach their dog like, with food, all a dog
 has to do is jump up and get the food from it\ from your and/
 just like my dog (laughs)/
 everytime you have a ball, you have to move the ball everywhere/