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**Language Sampling with Adolescents:
Implications for School Success**
Session #1037

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Purpose of this Session

- To discuss the **benefits** of language sampling with adolescents.
- To discuss some **challenges** re adolescents.
- To identify some useful **tasks** for eliciting spoken language from adolescents.
- To offer guidance in how to **analyze** the language samples – what to look for.
- To identify practical **intervention** goals and activities, based on the language sample.

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Benefits of Language Sampling with Adolescents

- If elicited and analyzed properly, a language sample can tell you how well an adolescent can communicate in “the real world.”
- Standardized tests are useful for identifying language deficits (e.g., CELF-III).
- But they sample language out of context.
 - They do not provide naturalistic information.
 - They offer little direction for intervention.

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Benefits (continued)

- Language sampling is consistent with a strong tradition in our field:
 - A focus on how people **communicate** in the **real world** for everyday purposes
- It is consistent with what traditionally has been a primary area of expertise:
 - Spoken language development & disorders
 - No other profession holds this expertise.

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Benefits (continued)

- The results of a language sample can provide useful direction for intervention.
- Goals based on a language sample can enhance the relevance of intervention.
 - By focusing on language of the curriculum
 - By focusing on later language development
 - Complex syntax
 - Literate vocabulary

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Challenges Associated with Adolescent Language Sampling

- Few guidelines for eliciting, analyzing, and interpreting adolescent language.
- Difficulty identifying relevant structures.
- Limitations in reference databases.
- Performance is highly variable.
- It is greatly affected by genre:
 - Expository, narrative, & conversational
 - Expo > Narrative > Conversational
 - Much simpler syntax in narrative and conversation

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How does genre affect performance?

- In the expository genre, the speaker is attempting to inform the listener.
 - The content is often unfamiliar to the listener.
 - Speaking is more of a monologue.
 - The speaker bears the weight of communication.
- In the conversational genre, the speaker and listener are chatting informally
 - The content is generally familiar to the listener
 - Speaking is more interactive (dialogue).
 - The partner often provides scaffolding as needed.

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Challenges (continued)

- Performance also affected by psychosocial factors:
 - Topic knowledge
 - Topic interest
 - Motivation to talk
 - Authenticity: Is there a genuine purpose?
- Greater complexity associated with greater knowledge, interest, motivation, & authenticity

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Use Expository Tasks: Why?

- They bring out the adolescent's linguistic competence far better than conversational or narrative tasks.
- They are more likely to reveal syntactic weaknesses in adolescents compared to conversational or narrative tasks ("stress the system" – Lahey, 1990).
- This provides direction for intervention.
- It makes it relevant to school and beyond.

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Why expository tasks? (continued)

- From 4th grade on, classroom success requires strong expository discourse:
 - Explaining the details of a biology experiment
 - Reporting and analyzing historical events
 - Comparing/contrasting two political perspectives
- During adulthood, the 21st century work force requires strong oral communication:
 - Business, industry, education, technology (e.g., working at *Symantec* in customer relations)
- Social situations often require explanations of complex matters (e.g., interpersonal conflicts).

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Factors to Analyze in Expository Discourse Samples

- Language Productivity
 - Total T-units Produced
- Mean Length of T-unit (in words)
- Hierarchical complexity (count verbs)
- Clausal Density
- Use of Subordinate Clauses:
 - Nominal, Relative, Adverbial

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Definitions & Examples

- Main (independent) clause = **IC**
 - Can stand alone as a sentence (contains a main verb): "John plays chess."
- T-Unit:
 - A sentence that contains one main clause:
"Knights go like this"
 - It may contain one or more subordinate clauses:
"So if he is [ADV] right here, then the guy I need [REL] to capture is [IC] here."

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Definitions (continued)

- Mean Length of T-Unit:
 - The average number of words per T-Unit
 - An index of syntactic development
- Clausal density
 - The average number of clauses per T-unit
 - An index of syntactic complexity

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Subordinate Clause Types

- Nominal (object complement): **NOM**
 - Capture the King is where you do not have to say "check."
- Relative (adjectival): **REL**
 - He just beat Topalov, who was the best in the world.
- Adverbial (conditional): **ADV**
 - I learned how to play when I was three years old.

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Adolescents with Language Impairments

- Many adolescents with a history of language impairment (SLI, NLI) exhibit syntactic weaknesses during expository discourse compared to typical peers:
- Adolescents with NLI are especially vulnerable:
 - Greater use of short, simple sentences
 - Less frequent use of subordination (especially relative and nominal clauses)
 - Results in less efficient communication

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Intervention for Expository Discourse: What to Address

- Attempt to promote the adolescent's use of complex syntax and the literate lexicon in relation to **school contexts** (e.g., biology)
- Why complex syntax?
 - It's the structural foundation of language
 - It empowers an adolescent to communicate more clearly and efficiently.
- Why the literate lexicon?
 - It empowers an adolescent to communicate with greater accuracy and precision.

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Complex Syntax

Attempt to build specific aspects of syntax:

- A. Mean T-unit length (utterance length)
through greater use of subordinate
clauses: Relative, nominal, adverbial
- B. Clausal density (mean number main and
subordinate clauses per T-unit)
$$= \text{IC} + \text{REL} + \text{NOM} + \text{ADV} / \text{Total T-units}$$

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The Literate Lexicon: Some later-developing examples

- Metacognitive verbs:
 - Realize, discover, digest, wonder, reflect, assume, suppress, ignore, expect, betray, trust, react
- Metalinguistic verbs:
 - Blur, blame, confess, deny, introduce, argue, explain, apologize, confide, mention, state
- Abstract nouns:
 - Attitude, crisis, obstacle, value, reason, balance, surprise, twist, triumph, neglect, spectrum, chaos

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Literate Lexicon (continued)

- Technical terminology:
 - Metatarsal, quadruped, gazebo, blunder, casting, turnover, assist, anvil, tenor saxophone, bassoon
- Derived nominals:
 - Acceptance, inspection, responsibility, opportunity, generation, companionship, betrayal, loneliness
- Derived adjectives:
 - Supportive, emotional, selfless, inseparable, harmless, respectful, skittish, monstrous, irksome

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Intervention for Adolescent Language

- Focus on expository discourse with adolescents
 - It is *knowledge driven*; ties in with learning
 - It makes intervention *relevant* to the *curriculum*
- Work it into academics (e.g., math, science, history, social studies, economics, literature, etc.)
- Determine where the students are and what they can do (don't overwhelm with too much information).
- Work with classroom teacher to find out.
- Work with classroom teachers to build the knowledge base necessary to support expository discourse.

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