Understanding Literate Language: Developmental and Clinical Issues

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For typically developing children, linguistic accomplishments are numerous and impressive during the first 5 years of life. Development proceeds in the first year from prelinguistic, intentional communication to first words and culminates at the end of the preschool years in a fully functional lexicon and a wide range of phonologic, morphologic, and syntactic forms conveying a wide variety of communicative intentions.

In literate societies, those in which reading and writing are critical in the successful daily function of its members, these early linguistic achievements are followed by a transition from oral language competency to literacy (Heath, 1982; Olson, 1977; Pellegrini, 1985; Snow, 1983; Westby, 1991, 1994). Literacy, defined as the ability to read and write, is seen as the product of cognitive, linguistic, social development, and literacy experiences. It is contrasted with oral language, the ability to listen and speak. Whereas oral language is informal and is characterized by concrete, familiar terms and accented by prosodic and nonlinguistic information, literacy demands a denser, more specified lexicon and more complex syntactic forms that must stand alone (Westby, 1991). This denser, more specified lexicon and complex syntax is known as literate language.

A vital relationship exists between oral language development and learning to read. Children who fail to develop higher level language during the preschool and early school-age years are less prepared for the language demands of literate environments and may be at risk for reading difficulties and school failure (Aram, Ekelman, & Nation, 1984; Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978; Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002; Kamhi & Catts, 1998; Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase, & Kaplan, 1998). Therefore, identifying and documenting the advanced lexical and syntactic features that signal a transition to literate behavior are important undertakings for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who are working with young children. A first step in this identification and documentation is a full understanding of the nature of the oral to literate language transition, specifically, the identification and documentation of the requisite linguistic behaviors that emerge and evolve as children enter into the formal literacy of school and the factors that are seen to influence this emergence and evolution.

ABSTRACT: Purpose: Literate language is characterized by a denser, more specified lexicon and more complex syntactic forms than oral language. The development and use of literate language has been strongly linked to reading and academic success. This article seeks to (a) provide a comprehensive review of the literature on literate language feature development, (b) detail clinical implications, and (c) suggest directions for future study.

Method: The methodology used in this article includes a review of historical and current publications addressing literate language and literate language features. This review presents the linguistic forms that are typically identified as literate language, summarizes influences on the development of literate language, discusses the clinical use of literate language analysis, and suggests directions for future study.

Conclusion: The analysis of literate language development is an important area of study for clinicians who are working with children who are at risk for reading difficulties and subsequent academic failure. The author recommends further research to explore the exact nature of the relation of literate language to reading and academic success and to examine the relation of literate language measures to global measures of semantic and syntactic language.

KEY WORDS: literate language, literacy, advanced language development, decontextualized language, linguistic specificity, language learning disability.
Defining Literate Language

Definitions of literate language have included the following four features: (a) a metalinguistic aspect involving a focus on meaning, function, and form; (b) the use of language that is abstract or decontextualized; (c) linguistic specificity; and (d) semantic and syntactic forms that are commonly used in written text and instructional discourse (Nelson, 1985; Pellegrini, 1985; Wallach & Miller, 1988; Westby, 2005). A literate lexicon develops in tandem with literate behavior. Nippold (1998), in describing later language development in adolescence, used the term *literate lexicon* to refer to words that are “important for the literate activities of reading, writing, listening to lectures, talking about language and thought, and mastering school curriculum” (p. 21). Most recently, Paul (2007) stated that literate language is “the style used in written communication and is typically more complex and less related to the physical context than the language of ordinary conversation” (p. 394). Literate language has been described as an overlapping area between language and literacy. It is taught by both classroom teachers and SLPs because it has both academic and metalinguistic uses (Ukrainetz & Fresquez, 2003).

The specific linguistic forms that are most typically identified as literate language, or literate language features, are displayed in Table 1. These forms share the characteristics of advanced semantic and syntactic development. They reflect lexical richness and specificity and are necessary in forming complex sentence constructions that reflect referential, causal, and temporal relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic form</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaborated noun phrase – noun phrase with two or more modifiers preceding the noun, or with qualifiers such as prepositional phrases, appositives, and relative clauses following the noun</td>
<td>“The big, brown dog chased the cat.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction – coordinating (excluding and and then) and subordinating</td>
<td>“My friend, Mary, lives next door.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverb – all adverbs, including those that are structurally in error</td>
<td>“We saw the girl in the blue dress.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental/Linguistic verb – verb expressing cognitive and linguistic processes of humans, animals, or fictional characters</td>
<td>“I don’t like people who are mean.”</td>
</tr>
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Table 1. Specific linguistic forms that are frequently identified as literate language or literate language features.

Influences on the Development of Literate Language

During the preschool years, the selection of words and structures becomes more explicit as children become increasingly aware of differences in speaker–listener experiences and perspectives. Precise vocabulary and decontextualized language become necessary to negotiate social play. Children also acquire literate behavior through literacy experiences or “literacy events” both before, and during, the school years. Heath (1982) observed that these events

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are diverse and culture specific. She reported that for some children, shared storybook reading is a primary avenue to literacy, and these children learn to talk about three kinds of information during shared book reading routines: (a) what explanations in response to questions such as “What is he doing?” (b) reason explanations in response to questions such as “Why did the boy steal the money?” and (c) affective explanations in response to questions such as, “How does the boy feel?” Other literate traditions serving to develop literacy include exposure to rhymes, songs, and television shows like Sesame Street or Wishbone; observing the literate activities of caregivers; attention to environmental print; and listening to, and telling, oral stories. Additionally, formal schooling itself is seen as changing the nature of linguistic content and form (Blank et al., 1978). Nelson (1985, p. 257) stated that “school language may provide the impetus for the organization of the highly conventionalized semantic structures that become evident by seven and eight years of age.”

Literate events, no matter how they manifest in the lives of children, lead to the ability to “think” about language (Francis, 1987). Thinking about language, known as meta-linguistic awareness, and literacy are intricately interwoven. There is a selection process in choosing words to represent specific subtleties of meaning (intentions), and this selection process mirrors a developing sensitivity of the need to use advanced language forms to represent psychological states. Such advanced language use is seen infrequently in the language of young preschool-age children. Its use may be linked to literacy experiences and to the development of theory of mind, which is the awareness of listener perspective differing from that of the speaker. Torrance and Olson (1985) found a clear association between the use of cognitive verbs, such as know, think, and remember, and the development of reading ability. The acquisition of these verbs reflects a “say/mean” distinction and therefore represents a conceptual system for decontextualizing language and thought.

Exposure to, and awareness of, print, however, does not completely account for the development of literate language. It appears that literacy experiences, in combination with important social and cognitive changes, result in language that is specific and decontextualized (Halliday, 1975; Pellegrini, 1985). These changes include developing play and narrative skills. Both behaviors appear to enhance literate language development and use and are examined in the following section.

The importance of play in the development of literate language. It is well known that play is important in the life of young children. Developing language and cognition can be best observed through the window of play, as play provides a meaningful context for the manifestation of these skills (Westby, 1980). When context is meaningful, children are able to demonstrate higher levels of performance (French, Lucariello, Seidman, & Nelson, 1985). Interestingly, literate language appears to be an important part of social play.

Pellegrini (1985) explored literate behavior in relation to the development of social–symbolic play. He found that children produced more advanced language forms during scripted play activities. These forms were used to convey both object and ideational transformations as children enacted everyday events in the context of fantasy play. Object transformations include play behaviors such as turning a block into a car. To convey the transformation, a child may produce an utterance such as “Let’s pretend this is my super fast race car,” evidencing skill in both complex syntax and elaboration of a noun phrase. Idea transformations are exemplified by dialogue in created scripts such as “Let’s pretend we’re at the zoo” or “Let’s be Power Rangers.” Well-developed play scripts require language that sets play goals, describes object transformations, details idea transformations, and negotiates roles. Narratives are often a part of scripted play, and well-developed narratives are thought to be foundational to success in school-based literacy events (Heath, 1982; Pelligrini, 1985).

Literate behavior and narration. Westby (1991) stated that narration forms a bridge between oral and written language. The ability to tell a coherent, well-structured story to a naive listener requires specific vocabulary and complex syntax. It also requires the cognitive development of theory of mind. Narrative ability, with its accompanying linguistic and cognitive skills, emerges during the preschool years and has been shown to predict emergent literacy (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Feagans, 1982; Michaels, 1985). Emergent literacy is the early understanding of reading and writing.

Children’s narrative abilities have been measured by tasks requiring recalling details from stories, retelling stories, and generating stories. Performance on all three of these tasks has been prospectively linked to reading ability (Bishop & Edmundson, 1987; de Hirsch, Jansky, & Langford, 1966; Norris & Bruning, 1988; Roth & Spekman, 1986). In reviewing studies linking narrative ability and reading, McCabe and Rollins (1994) suggested that assessing problems with narrative discourse may provide early indicators of reading difficulty. The most discriminating problems manifest in microstructure variables, specifically, sentence construction and cohesion. Literate language features involving vocabulary selection and the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions are essential elements in both sentence construction and cohesion in narrative discourse. Paul and Smith (1993) stated that “narrative assessment in a story retelling format offers a rich source of information about the complex language abilities of young children” (p. 597). They also recommended examining narrative discourse as the best method to identify the delayed sentence structure abilities that put children at risk for later academic difficulties. Further, in order to convey story “sparkle” (Peterson & McCabe, 1983), children will need a lexicon that conveys mental and linguistic terms as well as adverbs to express degree and manner. Such a lexicon is a critical feature of literate language.

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**CLINICAL RELEVANCE OF LITERATE LANGUAGE FEATURES ANALYSIS**

Catts and Kamhi (2005) observed that language deficits are both the cause and the consequences of reading...
disabilities. Children with semantic and syntactic deficit have been identified in preschool or kindergartens to have subsequent reading and academic difficulty. Scarborough and Dobrich (1990) found that four out of five children with early language delay manifested severe reading difficulty at the end of second grade even when those early language difficulties appeared to resolve. Wig and Semel (1976) noted overuse of limited vocabulary and basic syntactic structures (compared with the use of combining and embedding ideas into more complex constructions) as characteristic behaviors of the school-age student with a language learning disability. More specific to literate language were findings reported by Torrance and Olson (1985). They analyzed language samples obtained from twelve 3 1/2-year-old children and compared the use of mental and linguistic terms to reading behavior at age 10 years. The use of terms referring to speech and mental acts was found to be predictive of the development of good reading.

It appears, therefore, that it is important to identify early language delay in order to minimize its effects on later academic performance. A number of measures exist to look globally at developing language, including mean length of utterance (MLU), number of different words (NDW), and type-token ratio (TTR), but these measures may not be sensitive in identifying the types of linguistic deficit that characterize children who are at risk for reading failure and poor academic performance. Documenting the development of literate language is important in assessing the development of language beyond “learning to talk” and potentially assists in the identification of subtle language deficits that will limit academic success.

Literate language features, as a measure of advanced language development, appear to be robust. They are observed in the language of both preschool and school-age children (Curenton & Justice, 2004; Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001; Nippold, 1998), which makes them usable for the early identification of children who are at risk for reading difficulties. In assessing literate language use, researchers have generally elicited oral narrative discourse; performed frequency counts for all literate language features; and then either divided the counts for all features combined, or for each feature separately, by the number of C-units in the narrative. Studies using this assessment procedure have found no apparent gender differences, and no differences in usage rates were noted when African American preschoolers were compared with Caucasian preschoolers living in the United States (Curenton & Justice, 2004) or when Swedish-speaking preschoolers were compared to English-speaking preschoolers (Sjolander, Trautman, & Wetherby, 2003).

Some literate language features appear to be more useful than others in illuminating developmental changes and in differentiating children with language deficits from those who are typically developing. Conjunctions and mental and linguistic verbs were the most sensitive indicators in age-related changes for preschoolers (Curenton & Justice, 2004), and conjunctions and elaborated noun phrases were the most sensitive indicators of language impairment for 7- to 10-year-olds (Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001).

Future Directions

In summary, the development of literate language is an important achievement as children move from oral language competence to literacy. This achievement develops along a continuum and is shaped and supported by literacy events and social and cognitive change. It is known that children with early language delay are at risk for reading difficulties. The exact nature of this relationship, however, is unclear. Although the use of specific linguistic features, known as literate language features, is well documented and links to reading and school success are strongly inferred, the relationship is only associative at this time. Further study specifically relating literate language development and reading behavior, as well as literate language development and school success, is needed. Additionally, it would be useful to know how measures of literate language are related to other global measures of semantic and syntactic language development. This knowledge would shed further light on the semantic and syntactic nature of literate language as well as enhance intervention planning relevant to the improvement of future academic performance for children with delays in advanced language development.

REFERENCES


