ABSTRACT
Eisenberg, Gillam, Ukraninetz, Justice, Kaderavek & Wilson (2005) examined the oral narratives of children ages 5, 8, and 11 years, for the presence of noun phrase elaboration within complex noun phrases. Specifically, this study assesses the usage of pre-noun modification and post-noun modification, separately as well as in combination with complex noun phrases. The current investigation expanded the Eisenberg et al. study by assessing children's ability to use pre-noun and post-noun modifiers at younger ages (3, 4, and 5-years). Data were analyzed with regard to the effects of age and frequency of complex noun phrase elaborations.

INTRODUCTION
During the toddler and preschool years, children are exposed to decontextualized language through a variety of spoken activities, such as storybook reading. The ability to recount past events or tell stories requires a capacity to utilize language in ways that are not based on the “here and now” or necessarily related to events experienced by either the speaker or listener.

Those linguistic aspects that contribute to the child’s understanding of decontextualized language are termed “literate language features” (Pellegrini, 1985) and emerge initially in the oral narratives of preschool children. It is upon these linguistic skills that reading comprehension is based. Pellegrini described four such features believed to be critical to understanding written language: 1) elaborated noun phrases, 2) conjunctions, 3) adverbs, and 4) mental and linguistic verbs. The frequency of children’s use of these features is believed to provide an estimate of their literate language abilities.

This study seeks to extend this line of research to determine the differences between younger children’s use of elaborated noun phrases (simple designating, simple descriptive, complex pre-noun modification, complex post-noun modification and notably complex) across three age groups (3-, 4-, and 5-years). This study was an expansion of the work conducted by Eisenberg et al. (2005), who examined children ages 5, 8, and 11 years, for the presence of noun phrase elaboration within complex noun phrases. Their results revealed a, “significant increase in the proportion of children producing complex NPs from age 5 to 11 (ASHA, 2005).” This increase was detected pre-noun modification with multiple modifiers and post-noun modification at ages 5, 8, and 11. Their study did not, however, assess younger children’s usage of noun phrases in oral language narratives. Do younger children exhibit usage of noun phrases? Do younger children (ages 3, 4, 5 years) exhibit a developmental increase in usage of noun phrases?

METHOD
- Ninety-six children, ages 3, 4, and 5 years (with 32 per age group), participated in this study.
- Half of the children in each age group (16) came from low income homes (based on their qualification for free lunch). These participants were match by age with children who did not qualify for free or reduced lunch. This latter group was considered middle income.
- Each of the 96 children were seen individually for 30 to 40 minute sessions, during which time they generated original oral narratives using the wordless picture book, Frog, Where Are You? (Mayer, 1969).
- All narratives were tape recorded and orthographically transcribed.
- The transcriptions were segmented into Communication Units or C-units (Loban, 1976). An example of C-unit segmentation is as follows, “I saw something green / but it wasn’t my frog.”
- The mean length of communication units (MLCU) for each narrative was calculated by dividing the total number of morphemes by the number of C-units.
- The presence of the five types of noun phrases were marked and counted within each C-Unit (Justice & Ezell, 2002).
- The usage rate for each literate language feature (i.e., mean number of features per clause) was then calculated (as per Currenton & Justice, 2004).
- $2 \times 3 \times 5$ ANOVA was used to compare participants’ performance across two income levels (low and middle income), three age levels (3, 4, 5 years) and five different noun phrase types (Simple designating, Simple descriptive, Complex with post-noun modification and notably complex).
Noun Phrase Types:
- Simple designating NPs (2N) include only a (determiner) element that specifies the referent in addition to the head noun: *e.g., the dog*
- Simple descriptive NPs (3N) include a descriptive element before the noun: *e.g., a little boy*
- NPs with complex pre-noun modification (4N) include 2 descriptive elements before the noun: *e.g., a little hairy dog*
- Complex NPs with post-noun modification (Post) include a qualifying element after the noun: *e.g., one of his shoelaces (phrasal); something coming down from the sky (clausal)*
- Notably Complex NPs (N-COMP) include both pre- and post-noun modifying elements: *e.g., a group of really strange people; a boy named Don.*

(Eisenberg et. al, 2005)

RESULTS

Figure 1. Use of finite noun phrases as a function of income level

Figure 2. Use of finite noun phrases as a function of age group

Figure 3. Use of finite noun phrases as a function of age and income

1. Effect sizes for income level (across all three age groups) ranged from .05 to .31
2. Effect sizes for age group (across both income levels) ranged from .02 to .35
3. Statistical analysis indicated that neither age nor income level was a significant factor for any of the five noun phrase types examined.
CONCLUSIONS

While results from Eisenberg et al. (2005) indicated that children’s use of complex noun phrases increased with age from 9 to 11 years, the current study failed to observe a similar age effect for younger children (ages 3, 4, and 5 years). In addition, income level did not prove to be a contributing factor to these preschool children’s use of complex noun phrases. These results are similar to those of Lemmon & McDade (2006).

REFERENCES


