Introduction

From infancy, and in some respects even the womb, the child absorbs information from different linguistic areas simultaneously. For example, a baby registers intonation, as in the rising pitch at the end of a question; rhythm; tone of voice; gestures; and different phonemes. Because children are bombarded with linguistic stimuli, teachers should become familiar with each student's skills and needs in each linguistic area. For example, a student might discriminate speech sounds with ease (phonology) but have extreme difficulty summarizing the plot of his favorite movie (pragmatics).

A special student population exhibits a degree of language disability when assessed under sufficiently demanding conditions. A "subtle dysphasia" is evident when such students are confronted with complex tasks of naming or producing syntax to formulate their thoughts, especially under time constraints.

Children who display clear-cut disabilities in oral language competence require direct intervention. These children know and understand more than they can express. They struggle with time and their own organizational and expressive language deficits. The impact upon their academic experience is major. To avoid frustration or the embarrassment of delays, errors, misarticulation, disfluencies, or circumlocution, they resort to avoidance techniques (such as getting kicked out of class) or even give up.

Children with normally developing verbal skills can build metalinguistic awareness, an ability to reflect upon language itself. Given exposure to language early in life, they possess intuitions about the structure of language and its components. Four-year-old youngsters busily try out rules they discover, such as adding *-ed* for past-tense verb forms and *-s* for plurals. That these children are not just parroting back what they hear is evident in the logic of their errors, which reflects their realization that our language is governed by rules. They are not copying their parents when they say, "I comed," "I heared," "mouses," and "sheeps." It's that they learn the exceptions to the rules later.

Metalinguistic knowledge serves as a scaffold for orderly processing and storage of information. It allows for concise, coherent delivery of information as well. Difficulty comprehending and using the underlying structure of language affects a child's ability to process or share information accurately, whether listening to a lecture, reading literature, or participating in discussion.

A Case in Point: Annie

Annie entered Landmark at nine years of age. From her records, we knew of a significant discrepancy between Annie's poor verbal skills and superior nonverbal skills. She was a budding artist with a strong sense of hope and optimism. She was well-organized and worked conscientiously. But Annie was almost completely mute in the classroom.

It was our job to help Annie realize her potential in the areas of receptive and expressive language skills. The task was daunting, as Annie seemed unable to describe the simplest experiences in a way that we could understand. Although inaccurate articulation was one barrier, her desperate efforts to recall words and formulate sentences were the main obstacles to satisfying conversation.

I met weekly with Annie and her tutor. Initially, her tutor served as a scribe while Annie and I talked. From the tutor's notes and my observations, I categorized Annie's errors into the five linguistic categories.

Examples from Annie

What Annie Said	What Annie Meant	Type of Error
/akuh/	Because	Phonological
/thum/	Some	Phonological
/buluts/	Bulbs	Phonological
I broken	I broke	Morphological
Doesn't supposed to be	Isn't	Morphological
Amy shared me with the stuff she had.	Amy shared the stuff she had with me.	Syntactical (word order)
She has a grandmother to feel her much better.	She has a grandmother who makes her feel much better.	Syntactical
Keep on finding	Keep on looking	Semantic
Thermometer	Calendar	Semantic

What Annie Said	What Annie Meant	Type of Error
A paper thing like toilet paper, like paper stuff. It's almost like "towel" – oh, yeah, paper towel.	Paper-towel tube	Semantic
You hear like my mother when you yawn.	You sound like my mother when you yawn.	Semantic
In describing a picture of firemen putting out a building fire, Annie described details, beginning with what she saw in the upper right-hand corner of the picture ("I see a bird way up here.") but did not describe the main action in the picture.	A building is on fire. Firemen are putting out the fire.	Pragmatic (prioritizing information)

Annie's tutor and I determined the highest priority goals for Annie, since it would be impossible to address every single need. For Annie, it was most important that she learn how to share her thoughts in a coherent manner. At Landmark, Annie was immersed in a structured curriculum for receptive and expressive language skills the entire academic day. In her written expression class, her oral expression/literature class, and her individualized tutorial, Annie used organizational templates to express what she knew.

Annie's story is one of the most heartening and dramatic in terms of success. She is proof that the strategies we use at Landmark can succeed. Annie is still a budding artist. She has come to love writing as well. Although she is not loquacious, Annie can express herself coherently, and her verbal skills have shown substantial gains in standardized testing. Annie needed to be taught step by step at levels accessible to her.

About This Book

Thinking about Language is intended as a diagnostic and teaching tool for professionals who work with elementary- and middle-school children in language development: special-education instructors, speech-language pathologists, and classroom teachers who are interested in learning about the linguistic structures underlying our language. Although my teaching experience has been with children with language-based learning disabilities, some students in every "normal" classroom are trying to cope with difficulties in isolated areas of language. These students can be helped by teachers who understand the linguistic elements.

The particular focus of this book is oral expression. Students learn not only through listening and reading, but also through self-expression. Listening to their own voices often clarifies their thoughts, and their comprehension might reach a higher level as a result. The more they talk, the greater their self-confidence, in many cases. Bernice Cullinan (1987) argues most persuasively for "talk in the classroom."

The receptive and expressive language skills presented here are divided into the five linguistic areas for purposes of structure and convenience:

- phonology (speech sounds)
- morphology (meaningful word parts)
- syntax (sentence structure)
- semantics (vocabulary, meaning)
- pragmatics (social communication, discourse)

Within each linguistic area, the book's sequence roughly follows a developmental order from simpler, or first learned, to more complex. The chapters on morphology and syntax reflect the work of Wiig and Semel in *Language Assessment and Intervention for the Learning Disabled* (1984). The chapter on pragmatics draws its goals from several sources. Landmark's program for academic discourse is based upon Simon's *Evaluating Communicative Competence* (1994). Other resources for communication skills include Weinrich, Glaser, and Johnston (1986) and Kreidler (1997).

Thinking about Language should be valuable as a:

- diagnostic tool
- guide for teaching receptive and expressive language skills
- resource for strategies used by Landmark School faculty
- desk reference
- resource for organizational templates
- resource for word lists

Auditory Attention and Recall

The significant issue of auditory attention and recall is relevant to every chapter of this book. Many Landmark students appear to lack adequate auditory attention and recall, which are essential for efficiently gathering information. These students might have difficulty:

- screening out ambient noise in the classroom, such as a fan, furnace noise, the flickering hum of a fluorescent light, or even the ticking of a watch
- focusing upon and recalling more, as opposed to less, relevant information (i.e., main ideas as opposed to details)
- developing efficient rehearsal strategies, as in trying to recall a string of words rather than efficiently chunking the information
- processing verbal information from oral presentations delivered at a normal speaking rate
- maintaining the stamina necessary to focus upon oral information; in other words, they might suffer from mental fatigue and be unable to concentrate once they hit overload

Can memory be improved through exercise? The claims of companies selling herbal supplements and educational publishers selling books are most persuasive. However, even if a student is trained to recall a series of five oral directions or seven digits, does the student generalize these splinter skills into overall improvement of short-term memory? Proof is not so clear.

It does seem prudent to explore what a classroom educator can do to help students who don't seem to remember what they just heard. The focus should be on practical, real-life tasks and strategies.

- All Landmark students are required to write down their daily homework in assignment notebooks, which are especially designed to conform with their daily class schedule. Many students would be lost in homework limbo without these assignment books. In fact, Landmark runs a homework makeup session each day after school for students who "forgot" to do their homework. Assignments are presented both verbally and on the board.
- Students with attentional or processing deficits are often asked to retell directions that were just delivered to them. Comprehension of the directions might be an issue.

- Younger students are expected to practice their home addresses and important telephone numbers until they are memorized.
- In phonemic development classes, students are taught to write dictated sentences of gradually increasing length, from five words to eleven words or more. Sentences are dictated only once. Students are encouraged to repeat the sentence quietly, if they wish. Over the years, students have improved their ability to write sentences of increasing length verbatim. Remembering words in context, as in a sentence, as opposed to remembering isolated word strings, is demonstrably easier for students.
- In oral expression/literature classes, students memorize several poems each year. They use a variety of strategies for memorization. One successful strategy is to draw a picture for each verse as a mnemonic cue. Gestures to accompany each verse also help. One instructor asked each of her students to describe the most helpful strategy. Students were quite specific in reporting the number of lines they attempt at each trial, and how many times they practice each verse.
- In content courses, students are taught to write two-column notes as they read or listen to the text. The left column is for the main idea, and the right column is reserved for writing details relevant to the main idea. Therefore, students are chunking information for mastery, a strategy for memorizing that they might not recognize as such.

What else can the instructor do?

- Speak intelligibly. In the 1950s, instructors were required to pass an articulation test before they were granted a teaching license. Intelligible speech was mandatory, to the extent that a relatively minor lisp might stand in one's way of getting a license. In these more liberal times, such restrictions are no longer part of the licensing process; however, too many educators mumble. Teachers must self-monitor for intelligible speech.
- Provide interactive lessons. The lecture format is fatiguing to these students.
- Speak slowly. Many instructors, otherwise excellent, simply talk too fast. The ongoing frustration is that they rarely reduce their rate of speech, even with the best of intentions. Rapid speech is as automatic as breathing to them. A normal rate is between 130 and 250 words per minute (Emerick and Haynes

1986); 250 words per minute is far too rapid for successful processing by a typical Landmark student. Reading orally to students at about 130 to 140 words per minute is successful. Delivering verbal information, as in a lecture, should definitely be under 200 words per minute.