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Struggling Adolescent Writers- Syntactical Characteristics and Considerations

Lynne Telesca, PhD, CCC-SLP



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Learning Outcomes

After this course, participants will be able to:

- List characteristics of students who are struggling with the syntactic demands of written text.
- Explain why written language is so challenging for this population.
- Identify therapy practices/activities that target syntax for students who are struggling with the syntactic demands of written text.



Population-definition

- Adolescent = person in the transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood
- The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) defines an adolescent as any person between ages 10 and 19
- For the purpose of this course, we will be focusing mainly on adolescents who are in middle and high school



Which adolescents struggle with writing?

- Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): writing at or above proficient was the same for both 8th and 12th grade = 27% (70% of students are not proficient)
- Same Assessment - 95% of students with disabilities are not proficient in writing (5% are proficient)
- Answer: Most adolescents struggle with writing
- (NCES, 2019)

The Importance of Writing for Adolescents

- It is important for adolescents to have strong writing skills because they:
 - are writing more than ever to express themselves - email, social media, text messaging etc.;
 - are writing to document acquisition of academic skills;
 - use writing as a tool for academic learning;
 - are expected to meet the writing requirements for state assessments, college entrance exams/applications, and future employment

(Graham, Harris & Santangelo, 2014; Graham & Perin, 2007)



Why is Writing So Difficult?

- It is a complex process
- Writing demands increase with each year of middle and high school
- Written language is very different than spoken language



I. Writing is a complex process

- Multiple skills working together:
 - Attention
 - Memory-working & long-term
 - Organization
 - Self-regulation
 - Motor skills
 - Spelling (phonology)
 - Semantics, morphology, syntax, pragmatics
 - Writing conventions (punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing)
 - Many stages (planning, drafting, revising, editing)



II. Writing demands increase from middle to high school

- Writing across multiple subject areas
- Writing may be narrative or expository genre
- Within expository-multiple structures such as:
 - Descriptive or enumerative
 - Cause & effect
 - Compare & contrast
 - Problem/solution
- Writing may require cited evidence
- Older students also are expected to write persuasive or argumentative essays

III. Written Language is Different than Spoken Language

- Written language related to academic text is markedly different from spoken language used in everyday lives (Fang, Schleppegrell & Cox, 2006)
- Written language has a specific organizational structure and complex sentence structures not found in spoken language



Illa. Written language requires a specific organizational structure

- The writer must convey their message without the spontaneity to change their message, or the ability to repair communication breakdown (Farrell, 2013)
- This must be achieved through writing components such as:
 - Clarity-Introduction, body, conclusion
 - Paragraphing
 - Transition words
 - Capitalization and punctuation
- Each academic subject will require its own organizational structure (e.g., English vs. Science)



IIIb. Written language for academics may have nonlinear sentence structure

- Written language is not always in linear order (non-linear), meaning the sentence structure may not be in the order of subject + verb + object or phrase
- Written language contains these structures that are non-linear:
 - increased distance between the main noun and verb clause due to embedded phrases or clauses
 - passive voice

Example of increased distance between main noun and verb

- Jane, who my brother used to date back in high school, recently moved to Paris.



Example of Passive Voice

- The experiment was conducted by the scientist.



The Importance of Syntax for Writing

- For adolescents, written language requires students to be able to comprehend, organize, formulate, manipulate, and edit complex syntax
- If a student struggles with one or more than one aspect of syntax, it may negatively impact their ability to write
- These aspects of syntax are areas that can be specifically targeted in therapy



Characteristics of students who struggle with the syntactic demands of written text

- Use of short, simple or incomplete sentences
- Use of run-on sentences
- Issues with writing conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, or spelling

Characteristics of students who struggle with the syntactic demands of written text

- Omission of words or word endings
- Overuse of the same conjunctions (e.g., "because")
- Difficulty with phrases and clauses



Characteristics of students who struggle with the syntactic demands of written text

- Less sensitivity to genre
- Less sensitivity to audience



Where do I begin?



Therapy Practices/Activities that Target Syntax

- Explicit instruction of syntactic rules IN CONTEXT
- Explicit instruction of genre IN CONTEXT
- Sentence Formulation IN CONTEXT
- Sentence Manipulation IN CONTEXT
- Use of the reciprocal process - listening, speaking, reading, writing
- Use of a metalinguistic approach



I. Explicit instruction of syntactic rules IN CONTEXT

- Discuss why rule is needed - how it affects the reader
- Rules to consider:
 - Parts of speech - nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs-definitions-identification for discussion
 - Morphemes and their meaning - plurals, possessives, verb tensing
 - Capitalization and Punctuation - what they convey
 - Phrases - type and what more information they provide
 - Clauses - type and what more information they provide



Clauses

- Nominal (noun clause) - is the noun of the sentence that is paired with the verb or action. Why you did that is a mystery.
- Relative (adjective clause) - provides more about the noun or pronoun. He is the one that I used to date.
- Adverbial (adverb clause) - provides more information about the action. When she is angry, she turns red in the face.

(Justice & Ezell, 2016)



II. Explicit instruction of genre IN CONTEXT

- Each academic subject will have syntactic differences
- These may be related to:
 - Person - Who is speaking?
 - Structure - How will it be organized?
 - Transitions - What connections need to be made?
 - Clauses - What additional information is being provided?

(Jetton & Shanahan, 2012)



	ELA	Science	History
Person	First/Third	None	First/Third
Sentence Overall Structure	Linear order Narrative- chronological- beginning, middle, end	Passive Voice Expository- introduction, body conclusion	Will have elements of both a narrative or expository structures
Transitions	Sequence of story: Initiating event, attempts, resolution	Sequence/compare/ effect/solution of: Procedures Argue/Persuade- defending w/ current data	Sequence/compare/ effect/solution of: Events Argue/Persuade: defending data from past or present
Dependent Clauses	Provide more detail to paint the picture of the story	Provide more about terms or procedures	Provide more about terms or events

III. Sentence Formulation-IN CONTEXT

- Begin by collecting a variety of writing samples (e.g., narrative, expository) to determine student's areas of weakness at the sentence level
- Target the student's areas of weakness by working on writing those types of sentences in the context of relaying information in academic subjects
- Work should begin at the lowest level of difficulty for the student, and then slowly increase in complexity



Collecting Writing Samples

- Collect one or more samples to analyze the student's written language skills
- These should be close to the type of writing that the student is being asked to do in their academic courses
- Consider narrative, expository, and persuasive



Narrative Writing Sample

- Have the student write a retell a story (e.g., episode of a TV program, part from a movie, part from a book).
- If the student struggles with developing a story, then provide a picture that the student will be able to create a story about. Be sure in the directions to state “write a story” to ensure that the student knows not to just provide statements about what is happening in the picture.



Expository Writing Sample

- There are a variety of expository samples that can be elicited
- This could be to provide factual information about a topic (“Tell me how to play your favorite game”)
- This could also be to provide a summary of something that has been read (Scott, 2020)



Other Expository Structures to Consider

- Sequencing - procedure
- Compare and Contrast - tell how two things are the same or different
- Cause and Effect - tell how one thing causes another
- Problem/Solution - give a problem and have them provide a solution
- Persuasive/Argument - choose a position and defend it
- If using academic material, you can also have them use cited evidence if this is what is required in class



Analysis after writing samples
are collected



Determining areas of weakness at the sentence level

- Examine:
 - Sentence length - How many words in the sentences? Are they short or run on?
 - Sentence types - Are they simple or complex?
 - Use of writing conventions - Correct use of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling?

(Farrell, 2013)



Determining areas of weakness at the sentence level (continued)

- Examine:
 - Sentence Structure
 - Is there noun/verb agreement?
 - Are there morphological errors?
 - Are there phrases? Are there multiple clauses? What types are used? Are they correct?
 - Are transitions or conjunctions used?
 - Do they facilitate the flow of content?

(Farrell, 2013)



Determining areas of weakness at the paragraph or whole level

- Paragraph level examine:
 - Are there transition sentences at the beginning of paragraphs?
 - Is there cohesion? (order and transitions between sentences)
- Whole level examine:
 - How is the general structure? How is this portrayed syntactically through the use of paragraphing and transitions?



Now onto working on Sentence Formulation



Sentence Formulation Hierarchy

- Simple sentences
- Sentences with embedded phrases (elaborative noun phrases, prepositional phrases, participles, infinitives, gerunds)
- Sentences with coordinated clauses (FANBOYS)
- Complex sentences with dependent clauses (relative, adverbial, and nominal clauses)
- Complex sentences with embedded dependent clauses [between the main noun and verb clause]

(adapted from Nelson, 2013)



Example - Verb tense or variety

- Altering verbs in sentences:
 - School closes. (Present tense)
 - School closed. (Past tense)
 - School was closed. (Past participle)
 - School was closing. (Present participle)
 - School has closed. (Present perfect tense)
 - School had closed. (Past perfect tense)
 - School is going to close. (Infinitive)



More Examples

- School is closed.
 - In this sentence closed is an adjective!

- School closings are on the calendar.
 - Here closing is a gerund!

- The school is close to my house.
 - Here the word close is in an adverbial phrase!



Example 2 - Beyond simple sentences

- School was closed. (simple sentence)
- Our brand new beautiful school was closed. (elaborative noun phrase)
- School was closed in the summer months. (prepositional phrase)
- School was closed, but security was still working. (coordinated clause)
- When I was a kid, the school that I attended was closed. (adverbial dependent clause & embedded relative clause)



IV. Sentence Manipulation IN CONTEXT

- Sentence Combining - the practice of manipulating two or more simple sentences into one sentence (Saddler, 2012)
- Sentence Decombining or Parsing - the practice of breaking down complex sentences into simple sentences or phrases



Sentence Combining Teaching Variations

- Prompts - closed (syntactic choices are restricted) or open (syntactic choices some or no restrictions)
 - Closed prompts
 - Restricted prompts - student cannot use certain conjunctions
 - Parenthesis cue - word provided in parenthesis must be used to connect the sentences
 - Open prompts
 - Choice prompts - give choice between two conjunctions
 - Full open prompts - student makes all the choices
- (Saddler, 2012)



Different Cue Examples

- You cannot use the word “because” [restricted prompt]
- The potential energy of the two atoms is zero.
- There is no attraction between atoms (;therefore,) [parenthesis cue]
- You can use “as long as” or “therefore” [open prompt]
- Combine these two sentences into one sentence [full open prompt].

(Telesca, 2019)



Answer

- The potential energy of the two atoms is zero.
- There is no attraction between atoms.
- As long as the potential energy of two atoms is zero, there is no attraction between atoms.
- The potential energy of the two atoms is zero; therefore, there is no attraction between the atoms.

(Telesca, 2019)



How to Sentence Decombine or Parse (Telesca, 2019)

- Find the verbs (clauses) and their tense
- Determine:
 - if there is any compound structures (e.g., 2 nouns, verbs, adjectives)
 - if the sentence has independent or dependent clauses
- Remove transition words
- Reduce to a simple kernel sentences
 - Dependent clauses should be come independent cause sentences
 - Phrases should become a separate kernel sentences
 - Be careful of words that appear to be verbs but may be serving in an adjective or adverb function such as infinitives, participles, or verbs within subordinate clauses. These may reduce to its own sentence.



Sentence Decombining Example

- While Athenian women were considered lower than slaves, ↙ Spartan women were independent and could own property.
- Athenian women were considered lower than slaves.
- Spartan women were independent.
- Spartan women could own property.

(Telesca, 2019)



V. Use of the reciprocal process- Listening, speaking, reading, writing

- When working on one of the language processes, it is best to try to target all four of the language processes since they work together
- Research has shown that working on writing can:
 - Improve reading skills (Graham & Herbert, 2011)
 - Improve content knowledge (Graham & Perin, 2007)
 - Improve the ability to list relationships related to academic content (Telesca et al., 2020)



Using Reciprocal Processes While Writing

- Therapist and/or students brainstorm aloud and speak the anticipated structure of the sentence
- Therapist and/or students read aloud
- Therapist and/or students listen for the syntax of the sentence
- Therapist and/or students make edits, and then repeat the process



VI. Use of a metalinguistic approach

- Metalinguistics - talk about the language
- While constructing sentences, therapist and students should talk about each aspect of the sentence
 - What structures are needed and why?
 - Where should certain aspects of the sentence be placed and why?
 - Do the writing conventions (capitalization, punctuation) send the message you want to convey to the reader?



Metalinguistic Example

- Protons have a negative charge, but electrons have a positive charge.
- What do we need to remember at the beginning of the sentence? Why?
- What is relationship between the nouns? What word do you need to signal that relationship?
- Why do we need a comma? What does it tell the reader?
- Why do we need a period? What does it tell the reader?



Summary

- Many adolescent students struggle with writing
- Knowledge and use of syntax contributes to written language skills which is a complex task, especially for adolescents
- There are several characteristics of students who struggle with writing that indicate difficulty with syntax
- Some general therapeutic practices/activities can help target written syntax in therapy, which can improve adolescents' written language



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