

Collecting Informal Assessment Data

Speech-language pathologists with large caseloads need to be able to collect assessment data efficiently and often rely on tests to determine eligibility for speech and language programs. Because of the dangers inherent in the use of norm-referenced tests, language observation procedures and structured language tasks should always be included in the assessment process.

Language observations can be completed as the student describes pictures, tells stories, and in other situations. Activities in which the student talks about action pictures can be helpful in assessing descriptive language skills and use of basic grammatical forms in the present tense.

Describing Pictures

Tasks in which students are asked to talk about pictures are often used in assessment. When asked to describe a picture in detail, some children tend to focus specifically on the action of the individual characters using simple sentences such as "The boy is running." Prompts may need to be provided frequently to elicit other types of responses. Students who are more advanced in their language capabilities are more likely to focus on how characters interact with one another for specific purposes and may describe sequences of events that typically occur in the situation depicted. When assessing language skills using picture description tasks, it is important to examine what the student says and how it is said. The Picture Description Record Form (attached) can be used to record observations related to language functions.

Story Retelling

Tasks in which the student is asked to retell a short story after hearing it read provide valuable information about the student's ability to communicate events accurately and in sequential order. It is often helpful to ask the student questions about the story before requesting that he/she retell the story. Students with language learning disabilities tend to recall less information from the story than students who are developing language normally (Crais & Chapman, 1987). The following questions should be considered when evaluating performance:

1. Does the student use correct grammar?
2. Does the student use vocabulary effectively when telling the story?
3. Does the student describe the story setting?
4. Does the student describe the roles of the story characters?
5. Does the student recall the important events of the story?
6. Does the student describe story events in the appropriate sequence?

Use simple stories at the student's most comfortable reading level. Read each story and the ask the student to retell it. Observations related to vocabulary, grammar, and story sequencing skills may be recorded on the Assessment of Storytelling form (attached). The student should be asked to retell several stories before recording observations on this form. Most simple stories do not provide sufficient information to evaluate the student's ability to make inferences, identify main ideas, etc. Stories from the classroom curriculum should be used for a more in-depth assessment of listening comprehension skills. Probe questions regarding more complex comprehension abilities can be added in the "Comments" section.

Observational Protocols (Pragmatics, Attention, Nonverbal Communication)

Observational protocols can be used in the classroom and in other settings to record specific problems that have been observed, and will help the speech-language pathologist to identify specific problems that are affecting social interactions or learning within the classroom setting. The observational checklists attached provide a means to observe pragmatic language, attention, memory, and listening skills, and nonverbal communication.

Selected Structured Tasks

Structured language tasks can also be used to assess listening, speaking and verbal reasoning skills. The results of these tasks can be helpful in identifying *possible* problems. Speech-language pathologists need to be aware that the performance of students on structured tasks may yield results different from those obtained when a spontaneous language sample is analyzed. Grammatical forms produced incorrectly on sentence completion tasks, for example, are not necessarily produced incorrectly during conversational speech, and vice versa. The tasks included here (attached) make it possible to assess a wide variety of skills in a short period of time. When a student performs poorly on these tasks, the results should be compared to data obtained from natural communication samples and/or other performance measures.

In addition to scoring responses as correct or incorrect, it is important to examine *how* the student uses language to perform each of the tasks. By carefully observing the student's behavior during the testing, much can be learned about the language strategies that he/she uses in various situations.

Modified from:

Mattes, Larry J. (1996). *Sourcebook for speech and language assessment*. Oceanside, CA: Academic Communication Associates.