Expository Discourse Intervention for Adolescents With Language Disorders

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Speech-language pathologists play a crucial role in helping adolescents with language disorders improve their ability to comprehend and produce the language of the curriculum (i.e., expository discourse) and, thus, enhance their potential for academic success. The purpose of this article is to present numerous treatment techniques and strategies for increasing both spoken and written expository discourse skills in this population.

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who work with adolescents are frequently presented with the challenge of assisting students in developing skills in oral and written expository discourse. Expository discourse refers to academic, factual, informational language that is typically found in textbooks, classroom lectures, technical papers, and the like. Some of the major types of expository discourse include: comparison (compare/contrast), causation (cause/effect), procedural (temporal sequence), problem/solution, collection/description (descriptive), and enumeration (definition/example; Ward-Lonergan, 2010a). Given these different organizational structures, along with the inclusion of more literate and technical vocabulary, comprehending and producing expository discourse can be very challenging for students with language disorders (Ward-Lonergan, Liles, & Anderson, 1999).

It is important for the SLPs working with students with language disorders—as well as for the students' special education teachers, general education teachers, and other professionals involved in their education—to have a thorough understanding of expository discourse abilities and deficits in adolescents with language disorders so that effective intervention can be implemented. The primary purpose of this article is to provide the reader with practical intervention techniques and strategies designed to help adolescents with language disorders master the complex language of the curriculum (i.e., expository discourse) and, thus, achieve academic success. This article provides information related to intervention for both spoken (i.e., listening and speaking) and written expository discourse abilities (i.e., reading and writing).

Intervention for Improving Spoken and Written Expository Discourse Abilities

Although adolescents with language disorders are at greater risk for failing to comprehend and produce the language of the curriculum (Ward-Lonergan et al., 1999; Ward-Lonergan, 2010a), there have been no known published research studies to date that have...
validated procedures for improving listening comprehension and verbal production of expository discourse in these students. Despite the fact that there is a lack of research in this area, SLPs and teachers are still faced with the reality of needing to facilitate expository discourse abilities in these students immediately (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). Therefore, SLPs may wish to consider some treatment strategies and techniques that have been proposed to address the treatment goal of increasing awareness and use of expository discourse structures.

Though there is a lack of evidence-based spoken expository discourse intervention strategies, there has been a great deal of research that indicates that students who have greater awareness of expository discourse structure demonstrate better recall after reading expository passages (Elliot, 1980; Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980; Newcomer & Barenbaum, 1991) and are able to produce written expository discourse samples of superior quality (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987; Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986) as compared to those who lack awareness of these structures. The following metalinguistic strategy (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b) is designed to heighten students’ awareness of expository discourse structures used in spoken or written language.

**Teaching Awareness and Use of Expository Discourse Structures: A Metalinguistic Strategy (Ward-Lonergan, 2002):**

1. Identify which organizational discourse structure(s) are typical of your students’ classrooms by examining textbooks, lectures, written assignments, and the like.

2. Determine which discourse structures are particularly difficult for the individual students on your caseload through discussions with students and teachers, curriculum-based assessment, and reviewing performance on school assignments. It may be helpful to introduce one that they are more skilled with and then move on to other, more difficult ones.

3. Locate samples from classroom materials to provide as examples of these structures to the students. It may be necessary to initially create some of your own brief examples that illustrate very explicit use of a given structure.

4. Provide students with opportunities for practice in identifying these structures. For example, have students look for key signal words/phrases, use expository discourse structure diagrams to show how material is organized, discuss critical elements that comprise the discourse structure, and so on.

5. When students are required to produce oral presentations or written assignments, provide them with an opportunity to use a graphic organizer to help them plan and produce well-organized, cohesive discourse.

6. Encourage classroom teachers to be explicit when they use—or expect students to use—a particular expository discourse structure, to the greatest extent possible.

Diagrams can be used to highlight the critical components of different types of expository organizational structures. These diagrams can help increase students’ awareness of various types of expository discourse that they encounter. They can also be used to introduce students to a particular type of expository discourse structure by making its critical elements very explicit. Ward-Lonergan et al. (1999) present the following diagrams depicting the comparison and causation expository discourse structures (Figure 1).
Adolescents with language disorders need instruction that explicitly demonstrates how concepts are connected or related to each other (Alexander, Schallert, & Hare, 1991; Prawat, 1989). Graphic organizers are frequently recommended to assist students in understanding relationships among concepts. A graphic organizer is a visual display that depicts relationships among the major concepts involved in a learning task (Hudson, Lignugaris-Kraft, & Miller, 1993; Moore & Readence, 1984). Graphic organizers can help students plan and organize their spoken and written discourse. SLPs can use graphic organizers to assist adolescents in identifying salient details and eliminating extraneous information from the most important content (DiCecco & Gleason, 2002), as well as highlighting high-level knowledge embedded in a
text and providing a foundation for comprehending the material (Bernard, 1990). Graphic organizers may be used to help students with language disorders prepare to produce an expository discourse sample, such as an oral or written report, by providing them with a tangible, visual means of planning and organizing their thoughts prior to speaking or writing. Many of these students frequently experience difficulty extracting relationships from expository text, especially if these relationships are implicit (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). Graphic organizers may also heighten students’ awareness of various types of expository discourse structures. Following SLP modeling, we suggest that students and SLPs or teachers work together collaboratively to co-construct graphic organizers. As students gain more proficiency in their creation and use of graphic organizers, adult assistance can be faded out and students can be instructed to fill in increasingly larger portions of graphic organizers, ultimately constructing them independently (i.e., the “I do it; we do it; you do it” instructional approach).

Consider the following example given by a SLP working with an adolescent who is struggling academically in her social science class. The student was required to write a comparison essay on the topic of life in a small town. She was instructed to compare the advantages and disadvantages of living in a small town and then give an oral presentation to the class based upon the paper. In order to successfully complete this assignment, the student was required to read and comprehend a selection of factual information, organize key points, and produce the written paper, and then further organize the information for the oral presentation. The first example in Figure 2 is a graphic organizer that could be co-constructed by a SLP or teacher with this student to compare the advantages and disadvantages of life in a small town.

The second example in Figure 2 is a causation graphic organizer that could be used to help students complete an assignment related to discussing and writing about the possible effects of the intensive training required for athletes to compete in the Olympics.
Figure 2. Graphic Organizers Representing Comparison and Causation Expository Discourse Structures

**COMPARISON ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE STRUCTURE**

**ADVANTAGES**
- Sense of community
- Safe environment
- Quiet surroundings

**DISADVANTAGES**
- Inconvenient for shopping
- Limited access to city resources
- Lack of privacy

**TOPIC**
Life in a small town

**CAUSATION ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE STRUCTURE**

**CAUSE**
Athletes train intensively to compete in the Olympics

**EFFECT**
- Win a medal
- Limited free time
- Injuries
- Endorsements

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Intervention to Improve Reading Comprehension of Expository Discourse

In the upper elementary grades and beyond, reading comprehension of expository texts can be integral to academic success (Mason, Meadan, Hedin, & Corso, 2006). Given the difficulties that adolescents with language disorders have with comprehending expository text, it is necessary for clinicians to give explicit instruction in strategic practices that provide the basic foundation needed for good reading comprehension (DiCecco & Gleason, 2002; Durkin, 1978–1979; Moody, Vaughn, Hughes, & Fischer, 2000; Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998). SLPs should not assume that these students are receiving this type of explicit instruction in the classroom. For example, students are often assigned chapters to read and comprehension questions to answer, with minimal specific instruction on how to decipher text structure and interpret information (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1998; Durkin, 1978–1979; Gillespie & Rasinski, 1989).

The demand for adolescents to read expository materials such as textbooks, essays, lab reports, and newspaper articles dramatically increases from what was required of them during their elementary school years (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). Coutant and Perchemlides (2005) discuss the following strategies to help struggling adolescent readers comprehend expository texts, which can be used before, during, and after reading the material.

Pre-Reading Strategies

SLPs or teachers can orient students to an expository passage by discussing the general topic and explaining how it is organized. Students’ attention may also be directed to key words or phrases that signal the type of expository discourse structure of the passage (e.g., as a result and because for a causation structure; in contrast and similarly for a comparison structure; Ward-Lonergan, 2010a). In addition, students can complete a standard outline or a set of fill-in-the-blank notes to list the main idea and supporting details while reading a passage. If headings and subheadings are present, students can copy these directly into their notebooks, leaving space to fill in important information. If standard headings or subheadings are not present, then they can create their own set of notes using the familiar Wh- questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how (Coutant & Perchemlides, 2005; Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

Strategies Used During Reading

During the reading process, students may fill in details under each heading or subheading in their notes or on their outlines (e.g., the people and places discussed, dates, and definitions). Adolescents can be instructed to mark portions of a text that they find to be confusing, surprising, or important with specific symbols (e.g., question marks, exclamation points, and asterisks), and they can also identify unfamiliar key signal words and phrases. Students can also identify important content words that are used frequently in a passage (Coutant & Perchemlides, 2005). Identifying high-frequency content words helps students focus on main ideas and improves their recall of important facts (Connecticut Teachers, 2004). While students are reading, they can also pause and write a brief summary of what they have just read. This practice helps students solidify their understanding of the main ideas discussed and determine the purpose of the text (Coutant & Perchemlides, 2005; Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

Post-Reading Strategies

After reading an expository passage, adolescents may be instructed to reorganize the essential information that they listed on their preconstructed outlines. SLPs and teachers can facilitate discussions among students related to confusing or significant points that they noted during reading. These discussions may be used as a means to promote reading comprehension, helping students draw conclusions about what they have read. An additional advantage is that this may provide students with an opportunity to use evidence to support their opinions in writing (Coutant & Perchemlides, 2005). The SLP or teacher can also encourage students to engage in discussions with their peers related to questions that they had raised while reading.
the passage. By sacrificing a little academic content for additional strategic instruction, it is possible to create a generation of students who can generalize what they have learned and become more proficient readers by applying these types of strategies to any expository text (Coutant & Perchemlides, 2005; Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

Researchers from The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) have developed some language-learning strategies that have been found to be effective with adolescents who are struggling to master the language of the curriculum. The Paraphrasing Strategy (Schumaker, Denton, & Deshler, 1984) is a language-learning strategy that is designed to facilitate reading comprehension in struggling readers by teaching them to restate, in their own words, the main idea and important details in each paragraph of a passage (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). In this strategy, the mnemonic device RAP (i.e., Read a paragraph; Ask yourself, “What were the main idea and details in this paragraph?”; Put main ideas and details into your own words) is used to help students recall the strategy steps. The RAP Strategy helps students focus on the most essential information in a passage. The Self-Questioning Strategy (Schumaker, Deshler, Nolan, & Alley, 1994) is designed to help students develop their own purpose for reading by formulating questions in their minds about information that has not been initially shared by the author, predicting the answers to those questions, searching for answers to those questions while reading, and paraphrasing these answers. Both of these strategies can be used to improve expository reading comprehension abilities in adolescents with language disorders (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

The TWA Strategy (Think before reading, think While reading, think After reading; Mason, Meadan, et al., 2006) combines previously validated reading comprehension strategies into a nine-step, multiple-strategy expository reading program that is also used before, during, and after reading an expository passage (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). Researchers who have examined the use of the TWA Strategy have reported improvement in reading comprehension for struggling readers (Mason, 2004; Mason & Bentz, 2004; Mason, Hickey Snyder, Jones, & Kedem, 2006). Prior to reading, students’ prior knowledge is activated by the SLP or teacher, who encourages them to think about the author’s purpose, what they already know about the topic, and what new information they would like to learn about the topic (Ogle, 1989). During reading, students are encouraged to monitor their reading rate, connect their prior knowledge to what they are reading, and review confusing parts of the passage (Graves & Levin, 1989; Hansen & Pearson, 1983).

After reading an expository passage, students are encouraged to identify main ideas using a modified version of the RAP Strategy (Read the paragraph; Ask yourself: “What is the sentence in the paragraph that tells the gist of the paragraph?”; Put the main idea into your own words; Ellis & Graves, 1990). Subsequently, students are taught to apply Brown and Day’s (1983) Summarization Strategy (i.e., delete trivial information, delete redundant information, substitute superordinate terms for a list of terms or actions, select a topic sentence, and invent a topic sentence). Finally, practice opportunities are provided for students, in which they verbally retell the information contained in the passage, with support provided from the teacher as needed (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

The SQ3R Strategy (Cheek & Cheek, 1983; Just & Carpenter, 1987; Robinson, 1970; Schumaker et al., 1982) is a five-step strategy that students can use to facilitate their reading comprehension of expository text. The following steps comprise this strategy (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

**SQ3R Strategy Steps:**

1. **Survey:** Get a general idea of what the text is about by skimming chapter titles, headings, subheadings, illustrations, graphs, chapter introduction, and chapter summary.

2. **Question:** Read any study questions in the text or given by the teacher or create your own questions by turning titles and headings into questions.
3. **Read:** Read the text, keep study questions in mind, and keep track of main ideas.

4. **Recite:** After reading, recite answers to study questions and write a few notes to help remember important ideas.

5. **Review:** Look back at study questions and try to answer them without using notes and, finally, study notes to remember the content later on.

Similar to the SQ3R Strategy, the POSSE Strategy (Englert & Mariage, 1991) is another option that SLPs or teachers can use to promote reading comprehension and recall of expository passages. This strategy includes the following sequence of steps (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

**POSSE Strategy Steps:**

1. **Predict:** Scan the text for headings, boldface print, pictures, and the like, and for information that can be used to develop a preparatory set, activate background information, and generate pre-reading questions.

2. **Organize:** Brainstorm the pre-reading questions into a set of categories of information that the passage will contain, possibly through use of a semantic map or graphic organizer.

3. **Search:** Read the passage while keeping the pre-reading questions and organizer in mind.

4. **Summarize:** Give an oral summary of the passage, including the main idea, supporting ideas, and most important details, and ask additional questions.

5. **Evaluate:** Identify gaps in understanding and compare what has been learned with predictions, clarify misunderstandings encountered, and predict the topic of the next section of the passage.

Hall (2004) conducted a very thorough review of the existing research studies that have attempted to help increase reading comprehension of expository text for students who are struggling readers and/or those who have a learning disability. Hall (2004) reviewed a range of intervention approaches reported in numerous studies, which are as follows: revising texts (Le Sourd, 1985; Weiss, 1983); using study guides (Horton, Boone, & Lovitt, 1990; Horton, Lovitt, Givens, & Nelson, 1989); modifying presentation of text (Montali & Lewandowski, 1996); teaching vocabulary (Bos, Anders, Filip, & Jaffe, 1989; Lyda & Duncan, 1967); teaching comprehension skills (Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Spence, Yore, & Williams, 1999); and using reciprocal teaching (Klingner et al., 1998; Lederer, 2000).

Based on the results of these investigations, it was concluded that students with reading disabilities have been shown to increase their reading comprehension significantly when they are provided with definitions of vocabulary words prior to reading social studies text and are given the opportunity to predict how these words are related to concepts in the text (Bos et al., 1989; Lyda & Duncan, 1967). Struggling readers were found to increase their comprehension significantly when they (a) read science and social studies texts that were presented to them on a screen while simultaneously being read aloud (Montali & Lewandowski, 1996); and (b) were provided with definitions of mathematical vocabulary words prior to reading (Lyda & Duncan, 1967). Both struggling readers and students with reading disabilities increased their comprehension significantly when they (a) used study guides with social studies text and (b) were explicitly taught how to apply comprehension skills to science and social studies text (e.g., how to preview texts, monitor their comprehension, locate and state main ideas, and summarize what they have read; Bakken et al., 1997; Spence et al., 1999).

Bakken et al. (1997) describe treatment strategies that may be used to facilitate reading comprehension of five different types of expository passages. The following is a modified summary of these strategies (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).
Table 1. Treatment Strategies to Facilitate Reading Comprehension of Expository Passages

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Paragraph Type</th>
<th>Treatment Strategy</th>
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| Main Idea        | Step 1: Underline the main idea.  
                   | Step 2: Write down the main idea and other important information in your own words. |
| List             | Step 1: Underline the general topic.  
                   | Step 2: Write down the general topic and subtopics in your own words.             |
| Order            | Step 1: Underline the topic of the passage.  
                   | Step 2: Write down what is different from one step to the next.                   |
| Classification   | Step 1: Underline the general topic.  
                   | Step 2: Write down categories and related information in columns.                 |
| Compare/Contrast | Step 1: Underline the general topics.  
                   | Step 2: Write down general topics and what is similar and/or different between them. |

**Intervention to Improve Written Expression of Expository Discourse**

In order for students with learning disabilities to develop confidence in their written expression abilities, writing programs must provide for opportunities to engage in sustained writing, as opposed to programs that solely focus on sentence-level writing tasks (Thomas, Englert, & Gregg, 1987). These researchers emphasize that students need to be made aware of the purposes of writing and provided with more specific instruction in writing strategies, with less focus on writing mechanics. For example, the following strategy for writing a summary paragraph was developed by Sheinker and Sheinker (1989) and can be applied in any situation in which students are required to write a paragraph (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

**Strategy for Writing a Summary Paragraph:**

1. Read the passage.
2. List key points.
3. Combine related points that could be written as single statements.
4. Eliminate least important points by crossing them out.
5. Reread list.
6. Combine and cross out additional points to further condense the list.
7. Renummer points in a logical order.
8. Write listed points into a paragraph in the numbered order.

According to Ward-Lonergan (2010b), some key components of effective writing strategy instruction include (a) modeling of cognitive strategies through the think-aloud technique (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1984; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983); (b) an interactive instructional sequence in which teachers and students engage in the cognitive process and dialogue interactively (Brown, Palincsar, & Armbuster, 1984; Palincsar, 1985; Palincsar & Brown, 1984); (c) development of inner speech or metacognitive skills through self-instruction, focusing on the coordination of behavior and strategies during the writing stages (Wong & Jones, 1982; Wong & Sawatsky, 1984); and (d) an emphasis on what the writing strategy is, how and when
it should be used, and why it is important (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Brown & Palincsar, 1982; Roehler, Duffy, & Meloth, 1986).

Researchers from the KU-CRL have developed four detailed, sequential strategies (i.e., Sentences, Paragraphs, Error Monitoring, and Themes) designed to improve written expression skills in school-age children and adolescents who exhibit significant writing difficulties. These strategies may be applied across various types of written discourse including expository, narrative, and persuasive texts.

The Sentence Writing Strategy is comprised of two components: (a) the Fundamentals in the Sentence Writing Strategy (Schumaker & Sheldon, 1998), which is the basic, developmental version designed to teach students how to write simple sentences; and (b) the Proficiency in the Sentence Writing Strategy (Schumaker & Sheldon, 1999) is the more advanced version, designed to teach students to use 14 different formulas for writing a variety of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. To improve the overall quality of written work, teachers and SLPs may wish to provide instruction in the Error Monitoring Strategy (Schumaker, Nolan, & Deshler, 1985) to help students identify and correct errors in their writing. This strategy teaches students to proofread and edit their writing for both content and mechanical errors prior to submitting their final written papers (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

The Paragraph Writing Strategy (Schumaker & Lyerla, 1993) facilitates students’ ability to write well-organized, cohesive paragraphs that contain a variety of sentence types (i.e., topic, detail, and clincher sentences), with consistent point of view and verb tense. The final strategy in the sequence is the Fundamentals in the Theme Writing Strategy (Schumaker, 2003), which instructs students in the composition of themes or essays that are at least five paragraphs in length (refer to www.kucrl.org/sim/strategies.shtml for descriptions; Ward-Lonergan, 2010b).

Concluding Remarks

Due to the serious negative consequences that can result from poor oral and written expository discourse abilities, it is essential that SLPs and teachers support adolescents by providing intervention focused on improving these skills. Adolescents with language disorders are at a significant disadvantage, as compared to their typically developing peers, for mastering the language of the curriculum and achieving academic success (Ward-Lonergan, 2010b). As a profession, we are currently at the “tip of the iceberg” with respect to our knowledge about best practices in expository discourse intervention. Therefore, the future is likely to hold great promise for adolescents with language disorders through continued intervention and research in the area of expository discourse.

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References


