Language-sensitive SIM: Part 1

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"I have this kid who just doesn't seem to get it. He's frustrated, I'm frustrated, and I can't figure out how to help him."

Have you ever heard a comment like this from teachers that you are training as learning strategy teachers? If your experience is like that of other trainers, then you have heard teachers speak about students who have been unsuccessful with various aspects of strategy acquisition or use. The students may have had difficulty with learning strategies in general or in acquiring a specific strategy. They also may have had trouble with specific aspects of acquisition or use across strategies; for example, they may have trouble using verbal practice as a method of remembering strategy steps.

Is the problem related to general level of cognition, lack of background knowledge, or basic academic skills? Could it be lack of motivation? Or could the culprit be underlying difficulties with language processing or production?

How often have you considered the last possibility as you have tried to help teachers increase their success rates with teaching learning strategies to students? If your answer to the last question is "Not often," your response is pretty typical. When most trainers encounter reports of difficulties with strategy acquisition or use, underlying language disorder is not usually the first hypothesis they generate about the source of the problem. Yet, it should be one of the first considerations in explaining poor performance of students. Better yet, language ability should be considered up front as a factor in all strategies intervention. Our understanding of language and its disorders should guide our training and teaching approaches with both the Learning Strategies Curriculum and the Content Enhancement Series.

The purpose of this article is to pique your interest in exploring ways in which attention to the language variable can enhance your effectiveness as a SIM Trainer, the effectiveness of teachers who teach Learning Strategies and use Content Enhancement Routines, and most importantly, the success of adolescents in the acquisition and use of strategic approaches.

This article is the first in a series dedicated to **Language-Sensitive SIM**, an approach to the training and implementation of strategies intervention that ➤

In our race to provide effective interventions, we can't lose sight of the characteristics of the students we want to help. Students with learning disabilities and many other learners who are at risk for school failure have language problems that significantly affect how they learn and what they learn. We see this all the time as we use many of the components of SIM. Strategic instruction involves paying attention to and addressing the underlying language difficulties that challenge these students. To increase our awareness, understanding, and skills in this critical area, we would like to use this special issue of *Stratenotes* to introduce a series on "Language-Sensitive SIM." During the next two years, we would like to continue learning about and discussing issues related to how we can better address the underlying problems of students. Our discussion will take place in additional issues of *Stratenotes* and *Strategram* and at our regional and national conferences. Barbara Ehren from the School District of Palm Beach County in Florida has written this introductory article to soundly launch our effort. Anthony Bashir from Emerson College in Boston will join her in the future to expand this discussion through various forums. We are extremely fortunate and grateful that they are bringing their experience and expertise to this series.

—*Keith Lenz*

Calendar

March 26-27, 1999
Northeast Regional
Update Meeting
Marriott Hotel,
Charleston, West Virginia

April 21-24, 1999
Update Meeting
St. Johns Island, Virgin
Islands

May 25-29, 1999
Pedagogies for Academic
Diversity in Secondary
Schools Workshop for
Preservice Educators
Lawrence, Kansas

July 8-10, 1999
National SIM Trainers'
Conference
Holidome
Lawrence, Kansas

July 19-21, 1999
Strategic Instruction Model
(SIM) Workshop Level I
Lawrence, Kansas

July 19-23, 1999
Strategic Instruction Model
(SIM) Workshop Content
Enhancement
Lawrence, Kansas

July 22-24, 1999
Strategic Instruction Model
(SIM) Workshop Level II
Lawrence, Kansas

August 2-6, 1999
Workshop for Potential
SIM Content
Enhancement Trainers
Lawrence, Kansas

August 2-6, 1999
Workshop for Potential
SIM Learning Strategies
Trainers
Lawrence, Kansas

incorporates our knowledge of language in adolescents with the research-based practices of the Center for Research on Learning. Part 1 will provide the rationale for a language-sensitive approach in both the training of teachers and the teaching of adolescents. In it, we will do the following:

- Explain the relationship between language and learning disabilities
- Describe language disorders in adolescents
- List ways in which language disorders interfere with acquisition and use of Learning Strategies
- Pose key questions to address practical implications of the language variable

Although Part 1 will focus on Learning Strategies, the basic concepts presented are applicable to Content Enhancement as well. This is an introductory piece; subsequent parts will provide more in-depth information to assist you in your training and leadership efforts.

What is the relationship between language and learning disabilities?

That adolescents with learning disabilities often have serious language problems is not a new idea by any means, especially when we consider that the major definitions of learning disabilities specifically refer to difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Practitioners, however, do not always understand:

1. The nature of the language disorders that often exist within the constellation of disorders known as learning disabilities
2. The relationship of language disorders to overall functioning of the person with learning disabilities

For most students with learning disabilities, language incompetence will be a major component underlying their profile (ASHA, 1982). In fact, as Wiig and Semel noted in 1984, "Of all the

problems experienced by students with learning disabilities, language may be the most pervasive." Three different patterns of student performance emerge in this regard:

1. Students have a history of language disorders and the corresponding academic difficulties that persist into adolescence.
2. Students have a history of academic difficulties, but their problems have not been attributed to underlying language disorders. The language disorders were manifested in more subtle ways when they were younger and began to interfere seriously with academic success only in the secondary setting, as academic school demands required greater language competence. In some cases, their language problems may have been missed entirely when they were younger.
3. Students have performed satisfactorily in early grades, but they fail to develop higher-level language skills in adolescence. They begin to have serious academic problems in secondary schools when the academic content becomes significantly more difficult.

(Ehren, 1994)

What kinds of language problems are involved?

There are a number of different ways to describe the

LEVELS
Word
Phrase
Sentence
Discourse/Text

language problems encountered by adolescents with language learning disabilities. One way is to describe difficulties at various language complexity levels; that is, at the word level, the phrase level, the sentence level, and the discourse/text level. These difficulties may be evident in both oral and written language, although the demand for written language tends to increase the task complexity and, therefore, the likelihood of breakdown. ▶

Word meaning and relationships

- Gaps in vocabulary recognition or use for content that adolescents should typically know greatly interfere with acquisition of academic information. For example, not knowing what the word "investigate" means is daunting to a seventh-grade student studying science, when her textbook has a section in every chapter called "Let's Investigate."

- Lack of flexibility in interpreting multiple-meaning words can create misunderstanding in interpersonal communication and confusion in deciphering subject information. For example, a twelfth-grader has learned the word "rank" in the context of military standing during social studies but may not be able to attach a different meaning to the word to describe a rank odor encountered in chemistry.

- Mismatch of information given to information requested often results in incorrect responses when the student is asked to explain, describe, or compare information. For example, a sixth-grader answers "1492" to the question "Where did Columbus land?" or an eleventh-grade student states personal information about a character in literature (birthplace, career, interests, etc.) when he is asked to describe physical characteristics.

- Imprecise relationships among categories and the inability to use language to elucidate similarities, differences, and distinguishing features of concepts thwarts

concept mastery and learning of subject knowledge. For example, an eighth-grader does poorly on a test when he cannot use language to explain how basic science and applied science are similar and different.

- Difficulty defining words

WORD LEVEL

Q: Where did Columbus land?

A: 1492

negatively affects vocabulary learning and demonstration of vocabulary acquisition. The student may be able to use a word correctly and give information about meaning but not give a definition. For example, when a tenth-grader is asked on a test to define "plot," he might write, "The plot of a novel I read involved a soldier going to war and what happened to him."

Word structure

- Failure to attend to morphological forms in listening and reading, or to use them in speaking and writing, can cause confusion in meaning. These forms may include tense markers on verbs, plural and possessive markers on nouns, "er" or "or" on verbs to make them nouns. For example, a ninth-grader may write "The train (for trainer) helped the athlete after the game." Another example is a high school student who listens to

advice from the art teacher to "use a different shade" in reference to a painting and then comes into class the next day with a different pair of sunglasses (i.e. shades for shade).

- Imprecise use of word forms interferes with the communication of ideas in speaking and writing. For example, the ninth-grade student who describes the activities of our "democracy (for democratic) president" confuses her listeners.

- Incorrect use of words also can interfere with communication of ideas. Some instances can cause embarrassment to students. For example, a student of American Government says that the founding fathers were dedicated to the "prostitution (for Constitution) of the United States."

- Misdiscrimination of speech sounds may lead to misunderstanding of words and meaning. For example, a student puts his backpack on the ocean life display in the classroom instead of on the shelf because he interprets "shelf" as "shell." This problem also may be at the root of incorrect word use as in the prostitution for constitution example given previously.

- Lack of segmentation rule knowledge for analysis of words can lead to difficulty with decoding and spelling. For example, a student can't sound out words effectively when he reads because he doesn't know that they are made of syllables, individual sounds, and sound clusters.

Word retrieval

Trouble calling forth the exact word when needed can be exhibited as use of overly general words, ➤

circumlocution (i.e. talking around a concept), or use of neologisms (i.e. made-up words). Word finding difficulties, as they are sometimes called, can be related to ineffective storage of information or difficulty accessing a specific word at a given time. For example, a student who is relating an incident that occurred at home over the weekend and cannot use his sister's name in the story says, "uh, you know, my sister, she has a boyfriend..." He may also use a gesture, such as finger-snapping.

Phrase structure

- Lack of implicit or explicit knowledge of noun and verb phrase structure rules may be at the root of failure to make the linguistic predictions required to read fluently. For example, a middle school student who reads the phrase "the will" and doesn't realize that "will" in this case is not a future tense marker because it is preceded by "the" may lose time trying to close with a word to complete the future tense. (Please note that students with intact language skills will not necessarily be able to discuss this information metalinguistically; that is they will not articulate the rule, but they will know implicitly that "the" comes before a noun and will use that knowledge to assist with fluent reading.)
- Tendency to "lose" small or structural words in phrases leads to misinterpretation of discourse/ text. For example, a student who fails to note the word "not" in a math lesson when the teacher says that "six is not a prime

number" later gives "six" as an example of a prime number.

Sentence structure

- Difficulty using constructions to

PHRASE LEVEL

xxx the will to complete xxxxxx xx x

Will what?
What will happen?

combine thoughts can lead to overly simple sentence constructions, especially in written work. For example, a middle school student in language arts writes, "I liked the book. It was about whales. The whales were orcas."
- Difficulty with comprehension and formulation of clauses,

SENTENCE LEVEL

You're barking up the wrong tree.

Huh?
What tree?

especially embedded clauses, can hinder interpretation and manipulation of complex thoughts. For example, an eleventh-grade student who reads in her history textbook the sentence "It was not until 1440, when Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type in

Germany, that modern printing began in Europe" cannot answer the question "When did Gutenberg invent movable type?" She may be better able to answer "When did modern printing begin?"
- Inflexibility in constructions results in difficulty expressing an idea in more than one way. For example, a teacher accuses an eighth-grade student doing research for a social studies project of plagiarism because he copies text from the resource materials. Even though he can read the material, he can't put the ideas into his own words.
- Lack of comprehension of metaphors and idioms causes difficulty with content understanding in lectures and textbook reading as well as with understanding the language of instruction. For example, the high school student discussing a science fair project with the teacher fails to understand that her proposed project is not a suitable one when the teacher says, "You're barking up the wrong tree."

Discourse/text

- Tendency to process ambiguities at the sentence level only is often associated with difficulty using context to decode ambiguities. For example, if a student is reading a long chapter in a novel involving two characters, both of whom are female, he may become confused as to the referents for pronouns "she" and "her" if the name is not in the sentence.
- Lack of flexibility in ➤

DISCOURSE/TEXT LEVEL

Well, you know, the thing is, we did this stuff, and all that.

manipulating text often results in single interpretations and literal interpretations. For example, as a social studies textbook addresses the events that led up to the Civil War, the student may understand the immediate causes stated in chronological order but may not understand the more subtle aspects of remote or underlying causes that also are discussed.

- Difficulty synthesizing information to obtain a central message is often the reason a student has difficulty identifying a main idea. He may tend to zero in on details as opposed to global meaning. For example, if a high school student is taking notes from a lecture, she may write down little pieces of information without writing down the key concept presented by the teacher.

- Poor topic elaboration will adversely affect fluency of expression. For example, a tenth-grade student asked to write an essay on the genre of fiction may write just a short paragraph.
- Poor topic maintenance often results in hard to follow speech and writing. The student may go around the topic or insert irrelevant information. For example, a student who is asked to make a presentation on the effects of smoking on health digresses to talk about his mother, who smokes.
- Inadequate information supplied to the listener/audience promotes confusion in understanding the message. In speaking, this is often associated with the use of overly general words such as "thing" or "stuff" or with the use of fillers such as "you know." For example, the dean asks a student to explain a problem encountered on the school bus, and the student supplies sparse information, perhaps in confusing sequence, with a lot of "you knows." The dean has to ask someone else for the story.

(Ehren, 1994)

Although this is not an exhaustive list of all the language difficulties encountered by adolescents, this summary should contribute to your understanding of language problems encountered by adolescents with learning disabilities.

How may language disorders interfere with strategy acquisition and use?

The language problems described in the previous section may interfere with strategy acquisition and use in a variety of ways. Students may have difficulty with the following:

- *Understanding the language of instruction*
  They may lack understanding of the vocabulary or the language structures the teacher uses to teach the strategies. For example, the teacher may use complex constructions with embedded clauses in his or her presentations to students: "I have knowledge of the *Paraphrasing Strategy* and I have taught it to several other students who, as a result of mastering the strategy, have achieved the kinds of success you seek."
- *Understanding the strategy steps*
  They may have trouble interpreting the words used to describe steps or in translating ➤

Effect of Language Problems on Strategic Instruction

Language Problems		Strategic Instruction
Word Phrase Sentence Discourse/Text	may lead to difficulty	Understanding the language of instruction Understanding the strategy steps Benefiting from a model of strategy use Remembering the strategy steps Executing strategies Using practice materials Generalizing use of strategies

the meaning of the words to actions in that particular context. For example, in the *Self-Questioning Strategy*, Step 3 is "Keep predictions in mind." A student with a language disorder may not be clear on the meaning of the word "predictions" in general or in this context.

- *Benefiting from a model of strategy use*
  They may not be successful in using oral models alone, especially if presented in large segments. For example, in the Model Stage of the *Error Monitoring Strategy*, when the teacher is thinking aloud while demonstrating the strategy, the demonstration may contain too much oral language to process at once for the student to get a good idea of how the strategy works.
- *Remembering the strategy steps*
  Verbal practice alone may not assist students in memorizing the strategy steps. For example, students who are not comfortable with their language abilities may get lost and discouraged with trying to learn the seven steps of the *Test-Taking Strategy* by repetition alone.
- *Executing the strategy*
  They may not be able to perform the complex

Question	Rationale
What is the difference between language skills and language strategies?	A student lacking specific language skills may have to be taught them directly before she or he can learn any kind of strategies. Then again, a strategic approach to language acquisition and use can, in some cases, be used to circumvent some language skill deficits. In either case, an operational definition of each is needed to guide intervention.
What is the relationship between metacognitive strategies and language strategies?	What we call metacognitive strategies (thinking about thinking) often require verbal mediation, or use of language. For students who have difficulties in metacognition and language, understanding the relationship can assist us in designing appropriate intervention.
Is it appropriate to conceptualize certain language skills or language strategies as prerequisite or corequisite to specific learning strategies?	A central focus in SIM has been to provide an alternative to basic skill remediation, beyond the point at which it is productive to take that approach. However, specific language skills or strategies may be necessary to learn specific SIM learning strategies.
What are the language problems typical of adolescents with language learning disabilities that may interfere with using complex strategy systems such as the SIM learning strategies?	The specific nature of language problems in adolescents with language learning disabilities has been documented by research. Predicting how these problems may interfere with acquisition and use of the Learning Strategies Curriculum will help teachers design instructional approaches to enhance student success.
What language processing and production requirements are consistently present across specific strategies?	Analysis of the language components generally present in the Learning Strategies Curriculum coupled with an understanding of the language problems of adolescents with learning disabilities can guide strategy instruction.

Table 1

language manipulation and production required to actually use the strategy. For example, the *Paraphrasing Strategy* calls for students to "Ask yourself, 'What were the main idea and details in this paragraph?'" Students who have difficulty synthesizing ideas into a cohesive whole may not be able to use this approach to reading comprehension in exactly the way the steps are described.

- *Using practice materials*
  They may encounter difficulties in reading and understanding ►

Question	Rationale
What language demands are embedded within the content of each strategy?	Analysis of the language demands of specific strategies coupled with an understanding of the language problems of adolescents with learning disabilities can guide both the selection and teaching of a strategy.
What language demands are inherent in strategy teaching methodology?	For adolescents with language disabilities, the language of instruction can provide a major roadblock to learning any content, skill, or strategy. Understanding the requirements for language processing and production in the Learning Strategies teaching methodology provides a foundation to instructional modifications for students with language disorders.
Should language intervention and learning strategy intervention occur simultaneously for adolescents with language disorders? If so, which elements?	For students with severe language learning disabilities, the sequence of intervention components can mean the difference between success and failure in strategy acquisition.
Is there a sequence of learning strategy instruction that should be recommended based on students' language competence?	Some strategies by their nature may be more or less difficult for adolescents with language learning disabilities. Sensitivity to the choice of strategies to teach at a given point might be crucial to the overall success of SIM with some students.

Table 1, cont.

materials written at a particular grade level, used for controlled and advanced practice, especially if the material may be more linguistically complex than the student can handle. For example, a history textbook containing metaphors and idioms may be more difficult to use to practice the *Paired Associates Strategy* than a science book with more literal language.

• *Generalizing the use of the strategy*
They may not understand other situations and contexts sufficiently to apply a strategy successfully, especially if the situation or context is heavily weighted with linguistic information. For example, in trying to use the *Word Identification Strategy* to assist in conducting research for a project, a student may be thrown by the language complexity of the reference material.

This reaction may confound his attempt at using the strategy.

What are the key questions to be addressed?
As stated in the introduction, there are many reasons why students may have difficulty in learning or using strategies. The interrelationship of language and metacognition is intricate, to be sure. We could engage in "chicken or egg" discussions of language

deficits and cognitive/metacognitive deficits, but it is probably not productive for trainers and practitioners to do so. "Which came first?" is not a question that will necessarily yield fruitful directions for intervention. If a student has a language disorder and is not an effective learner, we need to ask questions that will guide our training and teaching of learning strategies. There are a number of questions whose answers have practical implications for the implementation of a **Language-Sensitive SIM** approach to training and teaching. Table 1 on page 6 lists key questions and a rationale for asking each.

What would Language-Sensitive SIM entail?
If we have interested you in **Language-Sensitive SIM** and you want to learn more about this approach, the articles to follow will address the questions outlined in Table 1 and provide you with more specific information. However, you may be wondering how this information may actually affect the way you train. Are we suggesting that you totally restructure your training? No. Are we asking you to consider enhancing your training approach by viewing strategies intervention through a language lens? Yes.

SIM Training in California

Barbara Glaeser, SIM Trainer and assistant professor at California State University at Fullerton has organized a full-day SIM training session, followed by a SIM in Southern California network dinner. Training will take place May 1 at CSU Fullerton and will cost $20 a person, payable in advance. Lunch is not included. Registration must be received by April 15.

Agenda

9 a.m.-11 a.m.
    Overview
11 a.m.-noon
    Lunch
Noon-3 p.m.
    Break-Out Sessions:
    Word Identification
    Paraphrasing
    Concept Mastery
    Test-Taking

For more information, contact Barbara: Department of Special Education, California State University-Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, CA 92834-6868

Request for information

Are you aware of anyone who has done or is doing research regarding Strategic Instruction Model strategies and students who have traumatic brain injuries? If so, please contact Jennifer Jones at the Center for Research on Learning. Her e-mail address is jenno@ukans.edu, or you may call her at (785) 864-4780.

Where do we go from here?

Hopefully, this introductory piece has left you wanting more! If so, we invite your participation in shaping the subsequent parts. We would like to make this an interactive series. Although we have a general layout planned, we would like to hear from you, so that we can make this series relevant to you and your training needs. Tell us your experiences related to the topic, as well as your specific questions and concerns. Please contact Barbara Ehren at the following snail-mail address:

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Wiig, E. & Semel, E. (1984*). Language assessment and intervention for the learning disabled* (2nd ed.) New York: Merrill/Macmillan.

CRL

Share your views on StrateNet!

• Language-Sensitive SIM

Help shape the rest of the series and share your ideas with fellow SIM Trainers by joining the Language-Sensitive SIM discussion group on StrateNet.

A folder has been set up on StrateNet specifically for discussion of Language-Sensitive SIM issues. To post a message to the discussion group, create a new message and type "language" in the "To:" field. StrateNet will automatically complete the address.

• Florida Network

At the request of SIM Trainers in Florida, we have established a special folder on StrateNet dedicated to discussion of Florida Trainers' issues.

To post a message to this discussion group, create a new message and type "Florida" in the "To:" field. StrateNet will automatically complete the address.

• How to join

You must have a valid StrateNet user ID and password to participate in these discussion groups. If you do not, contact Andy Barker, StrateNet administrator, at the Center for Research on Learning. You may e-mail Andy at abarker@ukans.edu, or you may call him at (785) 864-4780.

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