Getting to the Core of the Common Core

The role of the speech-language pathologist and oral language development
Executive Summary

Oral language skills are the “Core of the Core” because they are foundational to students’ ability to grasp the curricular materials related to all of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As a result, special education leaders expect increased demand for Tier II interventions. But how can school districts address reading and social-skills deficiencies in light of budget cuts and other CCSS challenges?

The CCSS impact everyone involved in delivering the curriculum, including speech-language pathologists. The standards emphasize college and career readiness while ensuring consistency and quality from state to state. Students are expected to acquire skills at each grade level so that by the time they finish high school, they are prepared to succeed. The CCSS stress the student’s communication competence, which is at the heart of an SLP’s work.

It is important to understand how the unique contributions of SLPs to the implementation of the CCSS relate to their expertise in language and communication. SLPs can focus on the language underpinnings of the new standards during direct intervention with students and when working with teachers.

Material for this paper was drawn from a webinar by Maryellen Rooney Moreau, M.Ed. CCC-SLP. Moreau is the president of MindWing Concepts (the creator of popular speech language program, Story Grammar Marker®), and internationally recognized for special education professional development. The webinar was moderated by Barbara Moore, Ed.D. CCC-SLP. Moore is the ASHA Vice President of Planning and former president of the California Speech/Language Association, and an expert on issues related to special education, RTI and school-based SLP services.

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The Common Core and the SLP

The CCSS specify what students are expected to learn to prepare for their college career and the workplace. But there is a problem that we as administrators and practitioners know: guidance is intentionally missing as to how we should help students with disabilities and learning challenges and what we should do to support those who are at risk or are not making progress. One solution is to provide SLP services for oral language development, supporting what the Common Core calls the interrelated language processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

What do researchers say about SLPs and the Common Core? In an article in the ASHA Leader titled “The Core Commitment,” by Barbara J. Ehren et al, it is argued that the CCSS place speech pathologists in a prime position to assist students. Likewise, based on their focused expertise in language, ASHA says SLPs offer special assistance in addressing the language foundations of the curriculum. Specifically, ASHA suggests that SLPs can strengthen the linguistic and metalinguistic foundations of learning for students with disabilities, for learners who are at risk for school failure, and for those who struggle in school settings.

SLPs have often been called “speech teachers.” But speech-language pathology goes far beyond the articulation of sounds. It gets into the concept of oral language development as it relates to literacy. If literacy levels are to improve, the aims of the English language arts classroom, especially in the earliest grades, must include oral language in a purposeful, systematic way. That’s because mastery of oral language helps students master the written word. Oral language development precedes and is the foundation for written language development. Oral language is primary and written language builds on it. In this way, oral language is really at the core of the Core. And for that reason, there is a powerful new role for SLPs in making the goals of CCSS a reality.
Communicative Competence in the Common Core: Language, Syntax, and Discourse

Language, syntax, and discourse are levels of oral language development that go beyond phonemic awareness and basic vocabulary building. This is a focus for the changing role of the SLP with the shift to CCSS and its goal of communicative competence. CCSS defines communicative competence as the ability to express oneself using all kinds of words and text, but the foundation is in oral language development.

There are many formal definitions of language. For SLPs, language is any accepted structured symbolic system for interpersonal communication used to express thoughts, intentions, experiences, and feelings. This is an important definition to grasp because it is the language of the text or its expression that the CCSS really focus on. There are the oral language processes of listening and speaking and the written language processes of reading and writing. All of these are related: you must be able to speak or write to communicate what you comprehend from reading.

Oral language is more than just talking. As an example, I was doing a consultation with a teacher about a child’s comprehension in writing and I asked her about his oral language. She said that we did not have to discuss oral language because he talks all the time. I asked her, “What does he say?” and she responded that he could answer questions if asked, but she didn’t know beyond
that. That was my way of introducing this teacher to the fact that what we say is the key to whether or not we will be literate when it comes to oral language.

Literate oral language is the basis for academic language, which is a specialized language. Academic language, both oral and written, relates to disciplinary content. There have been several research articles recently that are devoted to topics of language development disorders and the journey of adolescent and adult literacy. The question for us is: How can SLPs help children develop literate oral language?

Literate oral language progresses along a continuum. Carol Westby, ASHA fellow and widely published expert on language-literacy relationships, is well known for her understanding of the oral literate continuum. Children begin developing oral literacy as infants, with personal and informal language guided by conversation with adults. They progress to being able to tell a story to someone, and progress further to talk about a historical event or something that they have learned about by reading a book. The CCSS requires preparing students with academic language for college and career; we must assist children who participate in curriculum guided by the CCSS in the development of oral language competence.

The CCSS were developed by back-mapping skills from the workplace to the classroom. Those who developed these new standards looked at what people do in college and in the workplace and then decided what skills children need to acquire in order to be successful when they graduate from high school. One of the things that they need to be able to do is to communicate using academic and literate oral language.

As an example, if a student wants to speak to a professor, or a coworker wants to speak to his manager, he knocks on the door and he might say “Hey-- got a sec?” But what if the situation requires more formality? It would be, “Excuse me, may I interrupt you for a moment to discuss a concern?” There are many students who are not able to get to the more formal way of using language, even though these skills can be taught from the beginning of life.

As children come into the world, they are born into an en-
environment and people start to interact with them by making eye contact and gestures. This is the pragmatic element – the social realm of language. As the child develops, he makes known his words (the area of semantics) and puts those words into sentences about a situation that is going on. Over the years, the child has to develop a more complex type of sentence structure in order to succeed in school and ultimately in life.

Sentences get turned into what SLPs call the **discourse language of oral language development**. Syntax and discourse prepare students for the more advanced communications they need to develop in middle and high school. The building blocks of oral language form the basis for the language processes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. I add three others:

1. Gesturing
2. Viewing (because we can view things and interpret them)
3. Thinking

The development of the sentence is extremely important as far as text. Syntax from simple sentences to complex sentences depends on word order, and of course children coming to us with other languages and speaking other languages as their first language often have a problem with the word order of English. Cohesive ties are the conjunctions that almost have to be directly taught to students to formulate their complex sentences.

Often we see students who mix up their verb tenses. The term morphology is used for things like plurals and verb tenses that children add to their basic sentence structure to make it more complex. We often assist children in this area of syntax development by using sentence combining. This is an area where the SLP can assist because he or she can instruct using the basic conjunctions that are used to enable syntax development.

Lexile measures of text complexity are one way to measure reading competence. The SLP is well poised to look at measures of text and syntax complexity and also the discourse to enable a child to move forward. An article called “Going Beyond the Fab Five: Helping Students Cope with Unique Linguistic Challenges of Expository Reading in Intermediate Grades,” includes an example about DNA, the molecule of life. I wanted to take it apart to look at the complexity of the sentences that students face as they read the disciplinary texts of science or history. In this text, we read that
DNA is the molecule from which genes are made. The text starts with the passive voice and includes subordinate clauses and an embedded clause that a student would have to read and understand. Just one sentence alone is extremely complex. There are so many things that our students really need to be explicitly taught relative to syntax complexity that need to be addressed early on as students become developmentally ready.

The Common Core has a focus on the discourse level of language. In other words, it is a focus on text complexity. It’s about helping students develop communicative competence. I always add the word confidence to that goal because the more students are able to communicate confidently, the more they will feel competent in expressing themselves. But what is discourse?

**Discourse** is putting together words, phrases, and sentences to create conversations, speeches, emails, newspaper articles, and books. It goes from person-to-person talk to personal experience narratives, using a story grammar structure that is very common in social communication. At the formal end of discourse development, there is exposition through academic vocabulary and academic language.

Those of you who have read a lot about narratives have read that narratives form a bridge as a guide from the more simple conversations to the more complex expository text. Without discourse there is a developmental gap. It is often said that children can answer “wh” questions, and I always start my workshops by giving an example of how my students could answer the “wh” questions, particularly “who, what, when, where – and sometimes why.” With my guidance, they could answer “why,” but when I asked them to tell me the whole story or to tell me all the information, they were unable to do it on their own because they were missing the area of discourse development.

It was in 1991 that I developed the Story Grammar Marker because I felt that my students with language impairment needed direct instruction beyond just knowing the beginning, middle, and end of the story. I researched story grammar and I capitalized on that because I found that it made such a difference. Additionally, in 1998, I wrote a book about expository text because of problems my students were beginning to have in their academic experiences.
CCSS in Action: How SLPs Can Help Meet Your Curriculum Demands

Many students do not have enough practice communicating at home. In order to have a broader focus on discourse, SLPs have to really intervene on narrative and expository text. One wake-up call I had as I studied the CCSS was that narrative and information text, or as we call it, expository text, is going to be 50-50 in grades K-5. Not so long ago the standard was strictly narrative. Under the CCSS, middle school expository text will be 70% of the curriculum, so students must be able to tell and retell stories, and develop progressively more complex expository text. SLPs can help meet this demand.

As I look at it, and if you look into the research, narrative development is a bridge that can help a child converse. When a child can’t think of a topic or think of a story to tell, we can help him in narrative development and we can help him to converse. Consequently, if we look at narrative development and we teach perspective taking and theory of mind through narratives – how characters feel, how they think, and what their plans are – we are better able to see that Paul Revere and King George III had very different perspectives as we read the expository text about the American Revolution.

Let’s look at an example of the Common Core in action in the elementary curriculum and where the SLP can be a valuable resource. There is a popular children’s book called Clifford’s Pals. You could pick just two pages of the book and have the student talk about it and get a pretty good idea as to where the students are in their story.

For instance, the book it says “Susie, Lenny, and Nero jumped down into a big pit. The work crew didn’t see the dogs. They started to pour cement on them. Clifford knocked the cement chute aside.” If we take that excerpt as an example of the happenings in the story, there are narrative development stages that are tied into the Common Core standards for reading.
We will see that each of the stages has more elements related to the Common Core. For example, stage one of the narrative development is called the descriptive sequence and the important parts of it are the character and the setting as well as the setting in general. What does the third Common Core kindergarten reading standard say? It says, “With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.” Well, what if the child can’t do that? The teacher can turn collaboratively to the SLP who can help the child meet that standard. As we progress up to fourth grade with this, we will see the second stage narrative development where the actions become specific. Here we are looking at the character, the setting, and two major events. The major events are when the work crew starts to pour cement and when Clifford pushes the cement chute aside. What does the standard look for? In first grade, it describes characters and major events in a story using key details.

Narrative Development Correlated to the CCSS for Reading, Key Idea and Detail #3 Using Clifford’s Pals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1: Descriptive Sequence</th>
<th>Stage 2: Action Sequence</th>
<th>Stage 3: Reactive Sequence</th>
<th>Stage 4: Abbreviated Episode</th>
<th>Stage 5: Complete Episode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clifford and his pals</td>
<td>At the work site in the cement pit playing, jumping and barking.</td>
<td>The work crew starts to pour cement on Susie, Lenny &amp; Nero.</td>
<td>All of a sudden, Clifford sees the work crew start to pour cement on Susie, Lenny &amp; Nero.</td>
<td>All of a sudden, Clifford sees the work crew start to pour cement on Susie, Lenny &amp; Nero.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the work site in the cement pit playing, jumping and barking.</td>
<td>So, Clifford pushes the cement chute aside.</td>
<td>He is worried about his pals, because they could get hurt.</td>
<td>So, Clifford pushes the cement chute aside.</td>
<td>Clifford pushes that his pals will get hurt if the cement fills the pit, so he decides to save them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifford pushes the cement chute aside.</td>
<td>So, Clifford pushes the cement chute aside.</td>
<td>He is worried about his pals, because they could get hurt.</td>
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<td>Clifford pushes the cement chute aside.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CCSS Kindergarten**
RL.K.3. With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

**CCSS Grade 1**
RL.1.3. Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

**CCSS Grade 2**
RL.2.3. Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.

**CCSS Grade 3**
RL.3.3. Describe in depth a character, setting or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (character’s thoughts, words, actions).
What if a fourth grader is at narrative stage two and the reading standard for grade four is that the student will be able to describe in depth a character, a setting, or event in a specific story drawing on specific details in the text. What are the details that they have put out in parentheses? The details are the character’s thoughts, the character’s words, and the character’s actions. This goes way beyond what the child in fourth grade is able to do if he or she is functioning at a stage two of narrative development. In this case, the SLP can work in the zone of proximal development and assist the teacher in bringing the child to stage three, where it describes how characters in a story respond to major events. The major event here was that Clifford sees the work crew start to pour cement. So what does he do? He pushes the cement chute aside. This example from the Clifford book shows the direct relationship between the CCSS and the narrative development that speech and language pathologists are very well schooled in.

Now let’s consider a couple of other standards using the Boston Tea Party as an example topic. Obviously it is not a story per se; it’s facts and expository text, and certainly was a problem. Here’s an example of how an SLP and a teacher collaborated to turn a field trip into a learning experience. Our students were headed to the Freedom Trail in Boston and they were much more excited about the doughnuts they were going to have on the bus than what they had read about in their social studies book and what they were about to see. So we thought we would use this collaboration between a teacher and a SLP to talk about the reading standards and literature.

Look at the Common Core standards for grades 6-12. What do the students have to do? They have to analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Look’s use an example of a textbook lesson about the Boston Tea Party to illustrate how expository text can be a collaborative opportunity between an SLP and a teacher. The first paragraph in the social studies book is about King George and Sam Adams of the Massachusetts colony. King George lived in England and he had
a problem. His government didn’t have any money. The reason they had the problem was that there was a war called the French and Indian War. The king was desperate and needed to get some money, so what did he do? He decided to tax the colonists. When he taxed them, he thought that he would solve the problem, but did he?

The expository text structure of problem/solution in the first paragraph presents the perspective of King George, as opposed to the second paragraph, which was the perspective of the colonists. King George’s actions are what made the colonists angry. Sam Adams was one of the colonists who were angry. What did that anger over the actions of King George cause the colonists to do? They made a decision to protest and throw tea into Boston Harbor. When they did this, they thought they solved their problem, but did they?

We could progress all the way through the conflict, but just a few short paragraphs can illustrate my point. So what are we doing? We are showing how the CCSS can be addressed with an SLP and teacher collaborating on how to connect and make the connections. So this brings us back to the king who was furious about the Boston Tea Party. So what did he do? He decided to do three things to get back at the colonists, and of course it didn’t solve his problem. With discourse-level interventions, we have oral language and communicative competence. We have them through conversation, narratives, and expository text. That is what I have been described using the Clifford book. The choice of book, or the passage, is not the issue: it is the thought process through language comprehension and expression that makes the difference.

Next, let’s consider an example of a tornado that came to Massachusetts that affected my granddaughter, Lauren. There is an expository news article about this on the CNN web site. It is written in a very impersonal way. It has just the facts. The title, “Massachusetts Tornadoes Kill at Least Four,” sums up the problem. Now let’s look at how you might have a conversation about this with Lauren. She had one of the scariest days of her life at her house. An SLP or a teacher working with an SLP could ask her to structure a story or structure a narrative out of her experience that would bring the story and the facts together.
Here’s how the conversation might go:

**Q:** What happened to you?
**A:** My neighborhood was hit by a tornado.

**Q:** How did you feel when that happened?
**A:** We were devastated and frightened. It was horrifying to see the damage.

**Q:** How did you recover (in other words, what was your plan)?
**A:** The community worked together.

**Q:** What kinds of things did you do?
**A:** Lauren could list the kinds of things that were done, the consequences.

**Q:** Did it work and did this have any affect on your life and how did this affect you?
**A:** and so on...

So first, we had a strictly expository text piece from CNN. After the conversation about the event with the teacher and SLP, my granddaughter wrote about the tornado experience. What she wrote is not the same facts as the CNN article, but what she experienced herself. She wrote in her own voice. So what do the CCSS expect of children when they are in third grade? We are trying to get them to have voice in their narratives. To have students write about a personal experience—how they felt, who said what, what they did—just wonderful. So this is a personal narrative, but what did it do? It incorporated the facts as well as how the character’s feelings changed from the beginning to the end of the story.

A common question on high stakes tests involves the ability to communicate the critical elements of initiating events: what happened, the thoughts, feelings, intents, and plans of characters. I did this with Lauren after the tornado to help her think about how she felt before the storm and how she felt after everything was over, but also to help her think about the events and facts that made up the day: the alarm on TV, the debris passing by the windows, and all of that type of thing and how that affected her with her own feelings. There are so many times that children get a question like this in their high stakes test and they do not know how to trace their feelings. With narrative development, when you’re talking about experiences, you are able to do that.

By focusing on syntax and discourse within oral language development we’ve looked at the very core of the Common Core. Critical to the CCSS is the discourse level of intervention. The SLP is able
to deliver that intervention collaboratively or in small groups or in therapeutic sessions. For every student – for those who are at risk and for all of children who have different challenges – the SLP can help meet the goals for communicative competence, academic and social success, and prepare them for college and career.
About the Author

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