



# Definitional skill in school-age children with specific language impairment

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the definitional skills in children with specific language impairment (SLI). Fifteen children with SLI and 15 matched control participants were asked to define 10 common high-frequency nouns (e.g., *apple*, *horse*, and *boat*). Definitions were scored for both content and form. Children with SLI scored significantly lower than children with typically developing language for both content and form. Results suggest that lexical access and/or lack of metalinguistic knowledge were potential causes for the lower scores earned by the children with SLI when defining common nouns. Implications for assessment of and intervention for definitional skill are discussed.

**Learning outcomes:** The reader will be able to explain the importance of definitional skill and how this skill generally develops in typically developing children. The reader will be able to describe the performance, in terms of content and form, of children with SLI and their typically developing peers in defining common high-frequency nouns. The reader will also be able to discuss what possible impact linguistic knowledge, metalinguistic knowledge, and lexical access have on children with SLI in defining the common nouns in this study. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Language development; Vocabulary; Metalinguistics; Academic achievement

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## 1. Introduction

It is currently a wide standing belief that definitional skills are closely related to academic success and the development of literacy (e.g., Snow, 1990; Snow, Cancini, Gonzalez, & Shriberg, 1989). Watson and Olson (1987) suggest that schooling experience is critical in the development of definitional skill. In fact, it has been observed that classroom teachers encourage and expect students to provide “good” definitions that include superordinate terms (Watson, 1985; Snow et al., 1989). When a child does produce a “good” definition, it seems to be reliable evidence that he knows that particular word quite well and can use the word for linguistic purposes (Johnson & Anglin, 1995). Consequently, many investigators believe that children’s definitions provide indirect evidence of the important process of vocabulary acquisition, with vocabulary acquisition or the size of the child’s vocabulary in turn being a strong predictor of reading skill (e.g., Anderson & Freebody, 1983; Nagy & Herman, 1987).

Snow et al. (1989) believe that definitional performance is evidence of decontextualized language abilities. They contend that academic tasks such as reading and writing in upper elementary, middle and high school cannot be achieved without both productive and receptive decontextualized language skills. Snow and colleagues analyzed definitions of typically developing children in second through fifth grades. In addition, they analyzed the children’s performance on the total reading, total language, and total math score of the California Achievement Test (CAT). Definitions were scored as either formal or informal, with formal definitions containing an equivalency statement (“X is a Y”) and a superordinate term. Results indicated that formal definitional scores correlated positively with the reading and language CAT scores, but the informal definitional scores did not. This is evidence that definitional skill is closely tied to academic achievement and literacy.

To study definitional skill, researchers have most often analyzed definitions of concrete nouns in children with typically developing language skills. Development of definition is a gradual process, taking place from early school years through adolescence (Wolman & Barker, 1965). Generally, there is a progression from highly personal, concrete, functional, and action-oriented definitions in early childhood to more abstract, formal, and socially shared definitions in later childhood and adulthood (Al-Issa, 1969; Anglin, 1977; Benelli, 1988; Feifel & Lorge, 1950; Storck & Looft, 1973; Swartz & Hall, 1972; Werner & Kaplan, 1963).

Early studies focused on developmental change in the semantics of children’s noun definitions (e.g., Al-Issa, 1969; Swartz & Hall, 1972). Subsequent investigations have focused on development of conventional form or syntax (e.g., Benelli, Arcuri, & Marchesini, 1988; Watson, 1985; Wehren, De Lisi, & Arnold, 1981). These studies suggest that content and form are two separate dimensions of definitional development, at least for nouns. A recent study by Johnson and Anglin (1995) found that children were generally more successful in using precise semantic content than producing “conventional syntactic form” (p. 613) in a

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