

### New Tool Assesses Narrative Structure

## The Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) measures children's overall narrative competence.

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The Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) is a new assessment tool for measuring children's overall narrative competence. NSS can be scored efficiently and accurately. It is reliable and a valid indicator of children's oral language.<sup>1,2</sup>

The NSS originally was developed as part of a large national research project funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) investigating reading and school achievement in English language learning (ELL) students. The goal of the measure was to capture their knowledge of the structure of oral narrative language in a story retelling task in English and Spanish. The new task was among a battery of reading and oral language measures using standardized tests and measures of community languages, family communication, and history of language use. The NSS was found to predict reading achievement better than all other measures, including standardized oral language.<sup>2</sup>

Narrative skill is an effective predictor of literacy for monolingual children and reading in the native and second language for bilingual children.<sup>2,3</sup>

Oral narrative skills are a part of state education standards for almost every grade. Narrative language is a central oral language skill that emerges in preschool and continues to develop through the school-age years, invoking higher-order cognitive skills and complex syntax.<sup>4,5</sup> NSS was created as a tool to accurately capture a speaker's ability to produce a coherent narrative. In the initial step of the bilingual narrative project, the measures available in the literature were identified as being too global or lacking sensitivity across age ranges.<sup>6</sup>

The NSS provides a more sensitive and objective scoring system. It is based on an earlier version, Rubric for Completing a Story Grammar Analysis, following an analysis of story comprehension in elementary schoolchildren.<sup>7</sup>

The scoring procedure combines many abstract categories of story grammar, adding features of cohesion, connecting events, ascribing mental states to story characters, and referencing. Explicit examples help establish scoring criteria. The categories are introduction, character development, mental states, referencing, conflict/resolution, cohesion and conclusion. Each category is scored using a point scale of 0-5. Five points are given for proficient use, three for emerging or inconsistent use, and one for immature or minimal use. Scores of two and four are used for intermediate performance. A zero is given for poor performance and a variety of speaker errors.

The NSS takes advantage of everything clinicians already know about narrative language, language sample analysis and oral language development. With some practice a story retell sample can be transcribed in 40 to 45 minutes, and the NSS scored in five to seven minutes. The process can be repeated as often as necessary to document progress.

The NIH research project used language sample analysis software to transcribe and analyze story retells from ELL students in Spanish and English. The NSS category template was added

to the end of the transcript to score and analyze transcripts efficiently. A score for each category was added by hand. SALT Software was modified to summarize the scores automatically, adding NSS to more than 20 other measures of the narrative transcript.<sup>8</sup>

This provided an efficient means to score the NSS measure and summarize the results across several thousands of transcripts from students in grades K-3.

The next version of SALT software will allow users to access the NSS scores from the story retell databases for primary English speakers and from the bilingual databases in Spanish and English.

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