

# Florida Center for Reading Research

Language for Learning

## What is Language for Learning?

*Language for Learning* (a revised version of SRA's Distar Language I program) is a language program designed to teach pre-kindergarten children the statements, concepts, and words that will be beneficial to them in a classroom setting. The program uses an explicit instructional approach, entailing scripted lessons, signaled responses, immediate error correction, cumulative review, and mastery learning to teach the language of instruction and reading. *Language for Learning* is comprised of six learning groups: Actions, Descriptions of Objects, Information and Background Knowledge, Instructional Words and Problem-Solving Concepts, Classification, and Problem-Solving Strategies. These groups are divided further into several strands with related concepts. A typical daily lesson might include a number of exercises drawn from any or all of the strands. The teacher directs the lessons, including a practice workbook page that accompanies each lesson, to small groups of children. One lesson lasts for 30 to 50 minutes although it can be taught in smaller sections. As the children progress through the program, the lessons become longer and may need to be taught on several days.

The materials in the *Language for Learning* program include a teacher's guide, four presentation books with corresponding workbooks for each child, language activity masters, assessment books, a box of picture cards, and a behavioral objectives booklet. Also included is a Spanish to English presentation book that provides directions and explanations for non-English speaking children before they begin a new exercise in English. A detailed scope and sequence includes the purpose of each activity and a description of the behavior demonstrated when the skill has been mastered.

The placement test is individually administered to each child to determine group placement in the program. At ten or twenty lesson intervals, criterion-referenced assessments are administered to monitor progress in the program. For children who do not score 90% or higher on the assessments, there are suggestions in the Assessment Handbook for how to provide additional help.



## How is Language for Learning aligned with Current Reading Research?

*Language for Learning* is a pre-reading program that emphasizes receptive and expressive oral language skills. It does not encompass phonological awareness or print knowledge skills. The program only focuses on one of three key early reading areas: oral language. *Language for Learning* systematically teaches commonly used vocabulary words that the authors believe will be useful in the school and community settings. For example, the Information and Background Knowledge strand contains pictures and vocabulary for: Names, School Information, Part/Whole Relationships, Days of the Week, Materials, Common Information, Months of the Year, Locations, and Seasons. To promote oral language development, teachers follow a script designed to tell them what to do and say and how to expect the children to respond. To illustrate, one exercise, involving the prepositions "on" and "over," directs the teacher to show the children a picture, point to different objects, and ask the children specific questions. The children orally respond by answering the question or repeating part of

what the teacher said. This excerpt from Lesson 31, Exercise 5 is typical of the choral response and visual images that accompany each new vocabulary word.

Teacher: "We're going to talk about this picture."

Teacher points to a leaf and asks, "What is this?"

Children respond: "A leaf"

Teacher points to the dog and asks, "What is this?"

Children respond: "A dog"

Teacher: "One of these leaves is over the dog."

Children respond: "Yes" or "No"

Teacher: "Everybody, where is this leaf?"

Children respond: "Over the dog."

Teacher: "Say the whole thing about where this leaf is."

Children respond: "This leaf is over the dog."

Each lesson involves a high degree of directed verbal interaction between the teacher and child with new concepts introduced in small increments and applied immediately with different examples. The teacher provides immediate feedback by praising the child's response or modeling the correct response then providing another opportunity to respond. While all the exercises begin with an opportunity to respond chorally, they end with individual turns to respond. Using the correction procedures and reteaching the material are a critical part of each lesson in order to teach to mastery. Once the child has learned a new skill in one strand, that skill is applied to other, more advanced concepts. Following these activities and a short workbook page to reinforce the learned skills, the lesson ends with an expanded language activity and a story written especially for the program. These stories are meant to review and consolidate the isolated skills taught in the lessons. The language activities consist of finger plays, poems or songs. The *Language for Learning* stories offer limited opportunities for the children to be involved. For instance, they may be asked to repeat in unison a short phrase or to answer several comprehension questions after listening to the entire story. Repeated readings of the stories are included but they always do the same activity and fail to give the children experience in using their expressive language skills to discuss or tell about the story. According to one research-based approach, book reading activities shown to advance vocabulary knowledge and mean length of utterance in the language of preschool children, is an interactive form of shared reading (e.g., dialogic reading). At first, the teacher reads and the child listens but the roles shift until the child becomes the storyteller and the teacher, an active listener. This process occurs by prompting the child to expand on their responses to the story. In this way, the child has many opportunities to develop oral language skills. This type of interactive shared reading promotes oral language to a greater extent than traditional shared reading in which the child is a passive participant (Lonigan et al., 1999; Whitehurst et al., 1988).

After 5 lessons, a school-home link is provided through a newsletter in English or Spanish. The information includes what the child has recently learned and how to strengthen those skills using the follow-up activities described in the newsletter. This program focuses on teaching young children the correct word to label an object, an action, and a common event. Other oral language activities that provide opportunities for the children to converse with each other and listen to books as a means of fostering oral language are not included.

*Language for Learning* offers teachers a 3-hour training session that covers the program's scope and sequence and gives them practice in teaching using Direct

Instruction. On-going professional development and coaching is provided through school visits on the following schedule: year one-3 visits; year 2-two visits; and year 3-one visit.

## Research Support for Language for Learning

*Language for Learning* is based on the Direct Instruction method for which there is some empirical support (Becker & Gersten, 1982; Lloyd, Cullinan, Heins, & Epstein, 1980; Lloyd, Epstein, & Cullinan, 1981).

A recent study in a peer-reviewed educational journal focuses on *Language for Learning* specifically. Waldron-Soler et al. (2002) conducted a study of the effects of the implementation of *Language for Learning* with 28 typical children in two separate preschool settings. All 12 children in one school formed the *Language for Learning* group and 16 children in the second school comprised the control group. Random assignment was not used in forming these groups. Initially, the instructional groups for the *Language for Learning* program consisted of one to four children; however, after four weeks all children received one-on-one instruction. Attendance was different between the treatment and control groups with most children in the treatment group attending 5 days per week and children in the control group attending between two and four days per week. All children were pre-tested and post-tested on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Edition (PPVT-III), a measure of receptive language, and the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT), a measure of expressive language. Results indicate that the groups were equivalent on both measures at pretest. After 15 weeks of intervention (on average 30 lessons), the *Language for Learning* group scored significantly higher than the control group on the PPVT-III but no significant difference was found on the EVT. Although the children who participated in *Language for Learning* achieved higher scores in receptive language, such growth cannot be attributed to the program. Given that all treatment children attended one school whereas all control children attended another school, the results are fully confounded by school and teacher influences. Further, differences in attendance and other child characteristics may have contributed to the group's different performances.

As of the date of this report, the *Language for Learning* program has not yet been evaluated in a study with a strong experimental design.

## Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Language for Learning*:

- *Language for Learning* fills an important niche in the pre-reading development of children with inadequate language skills.
- Little teacher preparation is required, as lessons are completely scripted.
- Individual progress monitoring for each child is recorded on a skills profile folder.
- The content of the *Language for Learning* curriculum is specifically written to be useful in educational settings.
- Teachers have the option of teaching children who are able to progress more quickly at an accelerated rate by only teaching starred exercises in each lesson.

Weaknesses of *Language for Learning*:

- Some teachers find it difficult to adapt to the repetitive style of instruction and emphasis on carefully following a script.
- There are no data that support the effectiveness of *Language for Learning* with preschool children.

## Which Florida districts have schools that implement Language for Learning at the Pre-K level?

Escambia	850-469-6130	Leon	850-487-7147
Gadsden	850-627-9651	Miami-Dade	305-995-1430
Jefferson	850-342-0100	Sarasota	941-927-9000
Lee	239-337-8301	Taylor	850-838-2500

### For More Information

<http://www.sraonline.com/index.php/home/curriculumsolutions/di/languageforlearning/106>

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Lead Reviewer: Mary VanSciver, M.S. and Carol Robinson, Ph.D.  
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Please send comments about this report to Marcia L. Grek, Ph.D.: [reports@fcrr.org](mailto:reports@fcrr.org)