

# Dialogic Reading Strategy for Bilingual Child with Language Difficulties

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DOI: [10.31004/obsesi.v7i6.5451](https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i6.5451)

## Abstract

Development of language skills is an important factor in determining children's school readiness. However, problems in language development and communication in early childhood are common. Difficulties in children's language development can have impacts on social engagements, familial dynamics, and scholastic accomplishments. This study aims to assess the efficacy of dialogic reading intervention programs to enhance oral language skills in bilingual children with language difficulties. This study used a quasi-experimental research method, focused on a single participant, utilizing observation for data collection. Quantitative descriptive analysis was employed for data interpretation. The outcomes of this study found that the dialogic reading intervention program was effective in improving children's oral language skills as seen from the number of word responses on pretest and posttest. These findings can provide valuable insights for parents and educators in developing strategies to foster children's oral language skills.

**Keywords:** *bilingual; dialogic reading; language difficulties.*

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Received 9 October 2023, Accepted 22 December 2023, Published 22 December 2023

## Introduction

Communication is one way for individuals to establish relationships with the environment. It is a process of sharing information and involves many communicative functions, such as seeking social interaction, requesting and rejecting objects, sharing ideas, and rejecting other people's interactions (Hallahan, 2014). Communication can be performed using both verbal and nonverbal language (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). When individuals can use verbal language to communicate, they are able to use these words to describe objects and activities. Individuals can also express their needs, feelings, and ideas to gain more control in their lives (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). In preschool children, the development of language skills is one of the important aspects in determining children's school readiness (DPAUD, 2020; Janus & Offord, 2007; Kagan et al., 1995). There are four components of language development that can measure school readiness, including vocabulary, comprehension of stories, language development by giving opinions with understandable words, and simple reading skills (Pangestuti et al., 2018).

Previous studies have found that difficulties with the development of language and communication in preschool-aged children are relatively common (Reilly et al., 2015). Some children experience difficulties with speech, language and communication skills or show delayed development when compared to their peers (Bishop et al., 2016; Hapsari, 2023;

Herawati & Katoningsih, 2023). These difficulties can impact on the child's functionality in daily life, such as in interactions with friends, family, and even cause problems in academics (Rosenbaum & Simon, 2016).

In Indonesia, the prevalence of children with language difficulties and disorders is quite high. Based on data from Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo hospital in 2006, it was found that 10.13% of pediatric rehabilitation patients received a diagnosis of language disorder (Wangke et al., 2021). Another study related to developmental challenges in speech, language and communication in Indonesia found that 55.6% of preschool-aged children experienced difficulties in at least one of the five areas of speech and language (Hapsari, 2020). Without any interventions to child with language difficulties, they may encounter substantial obstacles in their communication skills and hindering their academic advancement, such as learning to write and in other subjects (Hawa & Spanoudis, 2014). This situation also heightens the likelihood of developing socioemotional and behavioral challenges, potentially limiting future employment opportunities (Bishop et al., 2016; Conti-Ramsden et al., 2018; Georgiou & Spanoudis, 2021; Hawa & Spanoudis, 2014).

When identifying a child with a language difficulty, it is important to note that it is not necessarily the case that the child has a language disorder. Reed explains that a language difficulty is a condition where a child is slow in developing linguistic skills but the sequence of developmental processes is the same as their peers (Heward et al., 2017). In general, language abilities of children with language difficulty are usually delayed in all language features at the same level (Bishop et al., 2016; Heward et al., 2017). Therefore, language difficulties in children need to be further addressed in order to optimize the child's ability. Early intervention programs are important to ensure that children develop effective language and speech skills in adulthood (Bishop et al., 2016; Hallahan, 2014).

There are several strategies to support children with language difficulties such as improving their vocabularies through singing, storytelling, and giving them opportunities to speak (Ardianti et al., 2021; Hapsari, 2023; Herawati & Katoningsih, 2023; Rambe et al., 2021). Providing positive stimulation by talking and telling stories can also promote language development in children (Dunlap, 2009). Other studies found that shared story reading sessions can be associated with a reduced risk of language difficulties (Wangke et al., 2021). By reading stories to preschool-aged children, parents can facilitate children's verbal language development (Towson et al., 2017). However, solely reading a story to a child does not mean that the child will receive benefits in oral language skills. The quality of the reading process is more important than the number of books and words read to the child (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994 in Towson et al., 2017). It is important that the child is involved in the book reading process conducted by the caregiver. Therefore, the caregiver can encourage the child's participation by asking questions about the book (Towson et al., 2017). The child can also be encouraged to ask questions or make comments about the story being told. Dialogic reading (DR) is one of the interactive reading intervention methods that significantly affects children's oral language skills (Towson et al., 2017; Towson & Gallagher, 2014).

Dialogic reading is an interactive reading method that is done by a companion (parent, teacher, therapist, or other companion) with the child (Towson et al., 2017, 2020; Towson & Gallagher, 2014). In this activity, the companion uses specific questions to encourage children to talk during the book reading activity. This aims to optimize children's oral language development (Towson et al., 2017). Several studies have found that dialogic reading can improve children's oral language skills, writing knowledge, expressive vocabulary and morphological skills (Towson et al., 2017). In the dialogic reading approach, the companion encourages children to become verbally active during story reading activities by using structured instructions (scaffolding). The assistant will use prompts during the process of implementing dialogic reading called CROWD which represents completion, recall, open question, wh-question, and distancing (connecting pictures and stories in books with children's previous experiences)(Towson & Gallagher, 2014).

Based on the results of the psychological examination of the subject with the initials M (a 5-years and 9-month old boy), it was found that the subject experienced challenges in language skills at school. M seems to have difficulty understanding stories and instructions given by the class teacher, especially when the instructions are delivered in Indonesian. This condition required the teacher to give personalized and repeated instructions to M during the school learning process. When speaking, M mostly responds using simple phrases in English consisting of 1-2 words such as "look mama" or "chicken". M is also still unable to describe and explain the function of objects around him with long sentences. Based on the stage of language development of children aged 5-6 years, M's condition is considered still not in line with the development of children his age. Ideally, children should be able to describe simple objects and answer "how" and "why" questions (Heward et al., 2017; Marotz & Allen, 2016; Santrock, 2011).

One of the factors that may have contributed to M's language difficulties at school is the language differences that he learns. M needs to use Bahasa Indonesia at school, while at home M prefers to listen to and watch videos in English. This situation is similar to research related to multilingual learners. Children who enter school with a language of instruction different from their primary language are likely to experience difficulties in language skills and adapting academically (Bishop et al., 2016; Guhn et al., 2016; Han, 2012; Wangke et al., 2021). A literature study stated that three out of ten studies found an impact on language development in children who learn two languages sequentially (Callan, 2008). In Indonesia, a study found that 18% of bilingual preschoolers had challenges with language development (Wangke et al., 2021).

There are internal factors and external factors that influence children's language development. Internal factors include the child's physical condition and intelligence ability (Heward et al., 2017; Masitoh, 2019). External factors include communication patterns in the family, the use of gadgets, and the use of bilingualism (Heward et al., 2017; Masitoh, 2019; Wangke et al., 2021). Children who experience less stimulation and opportunities to use language at home are more likely to experience difficulties in speaking and communicating (Heward et al., 2017). Subject M's difficulty in using Indonesian may be due to his parents' communication patterns and the use of gadgets that use more English. Therefore, M needs to adapt his communication using Indonesian in the school environment.

In this study, a dialogic reading program was used for research subject M. Dialogic reading was chosen as an intervention program to enhance children's oral language skills, especially for bilingual to improve their Indonesian language. Multiple studies have found the benefits of dialogic reading in the development of children's oral language skills, including in the use of Indonesian (Aliyah & Nurnajahah, 2022; Asrifan et al., 2022; Mustary, 2019). Dialogic reading also has been studied in various situations and across various populations (Towson et al., 2017). However, previous research on the use of dialogic reading in Indonesia has been limited to classroom use with monolingual children as subjects (Aliyah & Nurnajahah, 2022; Hidayatullah et al., 2023; Permanik, 2016). The majority of research on dialogic reading is conducted by parents, teachers, or a combination of both. Homes and classrooms are the locations where dialogic reading intervention programs are effectively conducted (Towson et al., 2017). In this study, the dialogic reading intervention program will be conducted individually to children with researchers at school.

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of the dialogic reading intervention program in improving spoken language skills in bilingual children. Spoken language ability in this study is defined by the child's ability to say words and sentences in Indonesian spontaneously during the dialogic reading session. The intervention program is considered effective if there is an increase in spoken language ability after the intervention is given.

## Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach with a single-subject quasi-experimental research design. Single-subject research is used to facilitate the evaluation of behavior change through an individual's unique case (Coffee, 2011). Repeated measurement over time distinguishes the single-subject research design from case studies and group designs, as this facilitates individual behavior change in response to an intervention. Although the use of single-subject research designs is generally limited to research, they are also appropriate and useful in applied practice (Coffee, 2011).

The participant subject in this study was M, a boy aged 5 years and 9 months. M was referred by the teacher to take part in a psychological examination program together with the first researcher because he had problems during the learning process in class, particularly related to language. Based on the results of the psychological assessment, M has language difficulties and requires intervention based on the criteria for children with language difficulties (Bishop et al., 2016; Hapsari, 2020). M needs to improve his language skills to be better prepared for primary school in the new school year. The researcher obtained written consent from M's parents to conduct the examination and intervention program for M.

During the study, M was studying at the Kindergarten B level. M had difficulties to communicate using Indonesian language during the learning process at school. He seemed to have difficulty understanding instructions and materials given by the teacher in class. The teacher needs to give instructions repeatedly and personally when talking to M until he can finally understand and do it. When communicating with the teacher, M often answers with 1-2 words in English. For example, "look" when wanting to show an item, "spin" when looking at a spinning toy, or "mama office" when answering where her mother went.

The examination found that M's difficulties in language and communication skills were not due to physical problems, but due to a lack of stimulation of Indonesian from an early age. M was mostly exposed to video content in English and lacked stimulus from adults around him to speak in proper Indonesian. M's difficulties in using Indonesian language have an impact on his school readiness. Therefore, an intervention program is recommended to help M improve his language skills to make him more prepared for school.

The intervention program in this study was conducted by the first researcher as a psychologist assistant under the supervision of the second researcher as a licensed psychologist. The intervention program was conducted with a total of 6 sessions. The program began with a psychoeducational session and demonstration of the dialogic reading intervention program to parents, followed by a pre-intervention meeting session to assess the baseline (pre-test), three intervention meetings with a duration of 30 minutes at each meeting, and one post-intervention session to assess the post-test. An overview related to the implementation of the intervention can be seen in **Table 1**.

**Table 1. Implementation of the Intervention**

| Session | Activity                                                                              | Information                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Psychoeducation and demonstration of dialogic reading intervention program to parents |                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2       | Pre-test assessment                                                                   | Tools: - Storybook "Mau Tidak Mau"<br>- Observation sheet                                                                                                                                     |
| 3       | Session 1-3: Implementation of dialogic reading program                               | Tools: - Storybook "Raja yang Gemuk dan Anjing yang Kurus; Singa Selalu Berani; Ayah-ayah Warna Apa yang Kau Lihat"<br>- Observation sheet<br>Indicator : able to respond to the prompt given |
| 4       | Post-test assessment                                                                  | Tools: - Storybook " Raja yang Gemuk dan Anjing yang Kurus Singa Selalu Berani"<br>- Observation sheet                                                                                        |

The procedure for implementing the dialogic reading program is carried out in steps called PEER (prompt, evaluation, expansion, repetition). First, the companion gives a prompt to the child to talk about what they read. The child responds to the prompt and the companion evaluates the accuracy of the child's answer. The prompts given use the CROWD technique. After that, the companion expands on the child's answers by paraphrasing and adding information. Finally, the companion repeats the prompt to ensure the child learns from the additional information the companion provides.

These stages can be done on each page of the book that is read. The companion can also read the text in the book and give a prompt to the child to talk about the passage that has been delivered. Here are some prompts that can be used in dialogic reading, including CROWD (completion, recall, open-ended, wh-question, and distancing questions) (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998 in Fleury & Schwartz, 2017; Towson et al., 2020).

In completion, the companion asks to complete the sentence that was spoken before. For example, when reading a story about a kitten, the companion can say "He is an adorable cat, not too small, but also not too ..." the hope is that the child will answer with "big". Completion is expected to help children to get information about language structures. Recall is done by asking children to recall information/stories that have been read before. One of the uses of recall when reading in the middle of the story, the companion can say "Who did the cat go home with?". Recall is expected to help children understand the storyline and describe a sequence of events. Open-ended prompts are used in books that have interesting detailed pictures. The assistant can open by asking "tell me what happens in this picture?". The use of open ended helps the child to improve expressive language fluency and pay more attention to details. In the Wh- questions prompt, the assistant can ask using 5W+1H questions. Like open ended, wh-questions focus on the pictures in the book. For example, the helper can point to an object in the picture and say "what is this?". Wh-questions will help children to expand their vocabulary. Distancing questions are used by relating what is being read to experiences that occur in everyday life. For example, while reading a book about kittens, the assistant can ask, "remember yesterday we saw a cat in front of the school. What color was the cat?". Distancing questions help children to relate what is in the storybook to the real world and help children in conversational, narrative, and fluency skills (Fleury & Schwartz, 2017; Towson et al., 2020).

This study was conducted in private in a quiet room, such as the library or the school health center, to avoid distracting the child and to help the child fully engage in the dialogic reading intervention program. All communication between the child and the researcher was conducted in Indonesian. If the child answered in English, the researcher responded in Indonesian and asked the child to use Indonesian. The book used in this intervention program came from a book translated by Badan Bahasa (Language Agency) of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The researcher chose books with reading level 1 where there are more pictures than writing and the stories chosen are in accordance with the interests of subject M.

Data collection techniques were conducted using the observation by counting word responses given by the subject during the dialogic reading intervention program. The observation guide was adapted from the Teacher Screening Observation Checklist (Hapsari, 2020) to see an overview of language ability skills in 5 year old children. The language ability observation indicators are attached in **table 2** (attached). This study used quantitative descriptive using visual analysis techniques in the form of tables and graphs. Visual analysis is a form of systematic examination used to interpret graphically displayed data (Cooper et al., 2019). The data collected from the pre-test and post-test results will be described to see if there is a change in the child's language ability, including word count response.

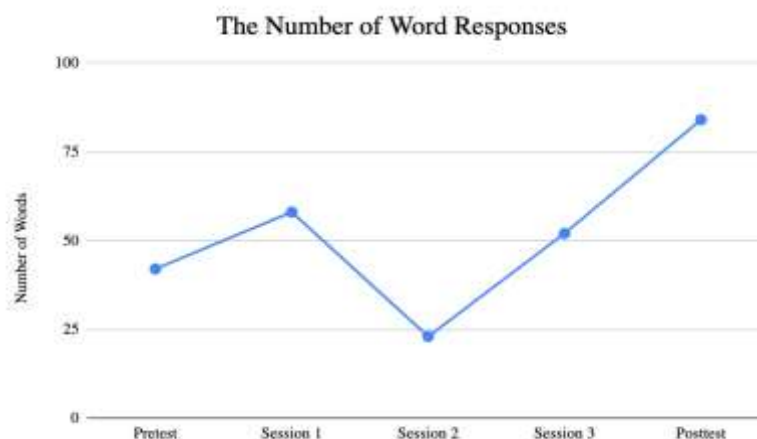
## Result and Discussion

As shown in table 3, the results of the pre-test and post-test showed an improvement in subject M's language ability in four of the five language ability indicators measured.

**Table 3. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest**

| Categories              | Achievements      |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                         | Pre-Test          | Post-Test         |
| Speech/ Articulation    | Age Appropriate   | Age Appropriate   |
| Grammar                 | Mild Difficulties | Age Appropriate   |
| Storytelling/ Narrative | Mild Difficulties | Age Appropriate   |
| Vocabulary              | Mild Difficulties | Age Appropriate   |
| Understanding           | Mild Difficulties | Mild Difficulties |

Based on **table 3**, subject M was able to improve his articulation, grammar, narrative, and vocabulary skills. He met the standard competence for 5 years old after the dialogic reading program. After the intervention program, subject M was able to respond to the story with longer sentences and use a wider range of vocabulary, for example “*warna anjing sama boneka*”; “*kakinya ada satu, dua, tiga, empat*”; “*satu burung kuning di atas*”. He was more capable of describing the pictures in the storybook with the vocabulary learned in the previous session. He was also able to follow instructions like point the picture from the book and answer “what”, “where”, and “when” questions. Children can also take the initiative to mention objects in the picture without being asked. However, he still had difficulty answering “why” questions because he has not been able to elaborate the answer.

**Figure 1. Words Spoken Each Session**

Based on **Figure 1**, the increase in the number of word responses looks quite significant where the number of words in the posttest doubled from the pretest. However, there were variations in the number of words spoken in each intervention session. Looking further, M responded with a higher number of words to storybooks that have novel words and talk about daily life such as story that related to pets, favorite colors and school related activity.

The results showed that the intervention program using dialogic reading was effective in improving children's spoken language skills. This finding is aligned with previous research (Hargrave et al., 2000; Ramsey et al., 2021) which showed that dialogic reading intervention programs were successful in increasing vocabulary related to books read in children with expressive language difficulties. Through dialogic reading strategies, children get the opportunity to be more actively participate in the reading process. These opportunities give children the confidence to speak up and the space to practice improving their skills because often children with language difficulties are not confident to speak (Rustan, 2019). This condition makes children actively improve their language skills and gain their confidence, especially in expressive language and vocabulary (Fleury & Schwartz, 2017).

Previous research, particularly in Indonesia, has focused on the use of dialogic reading in classroom settings for preschool children with language difficulties (Aliyah & Nurnajahah, 2022; Asrifan et al., 2022; Permanik, 2016). On the other hand, children with language difficulties are often reluctant to speak due to fear and shyness (Rustan, 2019). In this case, program adjustments need to be made to increase the effectiveness of dialogic reading interventions. The adjustment made in this study is to conduct dialogic reading sessions personally so that children get a full opportunity to be actively involved. Turns out that dialogic reading program can be effective to bilingual preschoolers who have language difficulties with personalized approach.

The study also found an improvement in children's narrative and grammar skills in Indonesian. The child can narrate the story with the learned vocabulary and using proper grammar. In terms of grammar skills, at the beginning of the dialogic reading session, the child was only able to mention sentences consisting of 2-3 words. After the intervention, the child was more able to mention longer sentences consisting of 5-7 Indonesian words to express more complex ideas. In terms of narrative skills, the child is able to add details to the sentences he speaks after the dialogic reading sessions. For example, mentioning details of the color, shape, and nature of the object being talked about. He also can add stories from previous experiences and mention the similarity of pictures in books with objects around him.

This result aligned with previous studies that showed interactive reading can have an effect on other aspects of children, such as narrative comprehension ability, vocabulary depth and breadth (Grolig et al., 2020), spoken language skills (Farver et al., 2009; Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023). Dialogic reading interventions can improve other aspects of language skills, such as narrative and grammar, when compared to other strategies such as singing (Ardianti et al., 2021). Dialogic reading can also help bilingual children in the language learning process, which is supported by previous research (Huennekens & Xu, 2016). The result can add new knowledge and alternative strategies that can be used to improve language skills in children with language difficulties, especially bilingual learners in Indonesia.

Previous research showed that the benefits of dialogic reading intervention programs can have an impact on children's school readiness. When children have appropriate language skills, they will be more adaptable and better prepared for school. According to Permanik's research (Permanik, 2016), the implementation of a dialogic reading program was able to improve children's ability to listen to stories from teachers and friends in class and children's ability to speak in front of the class. Children's ability to pay attention to teachers and friends is one aspect of school readiness in children (Faqumala & Pranoto, 2020). Children can also improving letter recognition and writing skills with regular dialogic reading session (Farver et al., 2009; Kim & Riley, 2021). In relation to this research, dialogic reading can be one of the effective strategies that support the improvement of school readiness, especially for bilingual children who have language difficulties.

Moreover, this intervention program is also quite easy to implement because it can be carried out by the child's companion, either the teacher at school or the parents and caregivers at home, including being able to be carried out in various socio-economic conditions of the family, and the language of instruction of the family (Cohen et al., 2012; Farver et al., 2009; Huennekens & Xu, 2016; Knauer et al., 2020). The dialogic reading intervention program is also fun for children because they are involved in the reading process (Cohen et al., 2012). Therefore, dialogic reading intervention programs are suitable to be given to early childhood, especially to improve language skills and prepare children to be more prepared for school.

The limitation of this study is the duration and number of sessions were quite short, which was conducted in 3-5 sessions within a span of 1 month. Previous study found that the short duration of dialogic reading intervention programs can be effective for short-term goals, such as increasing vocabulary related to the story being read (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). However, to get more effective results in the long term, the duration and sessions of dialogic

reading intervention can be made longer and integrated with other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers (Cohen et al., 2012).

Parental involvement in dialogic reading intervention programs has a positive impact on the development of children's expressive language skills (Brannon & Dauksas, 2010; Knauer et al., 2020). Repetition at home will help develop children's language skills. This study has limitations in terms of parent and teacher involvement. Therefore, future researchers should consider integrating the dialogic reading intervention program with schools and parents to increase the effectiveness of the program.

## Conclusion

The results showed that there was effectiveness of a dialogic reading intervention program to improve language skills of bilingual children with language difficulties. The effectiveness of the program can be observed from an increase in the number of word responses and an increase in 4 abilities in the aspect of spoken language after the intervention program is given. The results of this study can be used and implemented for parents, teachers, and other parties to improve oral language skills in early childhood.

## Acknowledgments

The researcher is grateful to the parents of M for giving permission to deliver the intervention program and publish the results in an academic journal.

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## Attachment

Table 2. Teacher Guidelines For Five-Year-Old Children

| Categories                    | Age Appropriate                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Mild Difficulties                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Moderate/Severe Difficulties                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Speech/Articulation</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- uses most sound correctly</li> <li>- some difficulty with multisyllabic words (eg. spaghetti) and consonant blends (splash) and some sounds (eg. rabbit, yellow)</li> </ul>                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- usually able to be understood</li> <li>- may have difficulty with some sounds eg. r, s</li> </ul>                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- always difficult to understand</li> <li>- frustrated by inability to say sounds and words</li> <li>- may have difficulty with many sounds</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Grammar</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- uses longer sentences to express complex ideas</li> <li>- may make errors with some past tense endings eg. runned for ran</li> <li>- other occasional errors</li> </ul>                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consistent pronoun errors</li> <li>- often confuses verb tense</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- omits words and word endings</li> <li>- puts word in the wrong order</li> <li>- has difficulty forming questions</li> <li>- doesn't use "and" or join sentences</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Storytelling/Narrative</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- participates in shared book sessions</li> <li>- tells stories with a range of connecting words (e.g. "and then", "because", "when")</li> <li>- includes details (eg. descriptive language and direct speech)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- able to tell you about recent events or retell a simple familiar story. Sentences may be simple with very little detail included. Poor sequencing.</li> <li>- only connect sentences with "and"</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- little experience with books</li> <li>- can't tell you about recent events</li> <li>- can't retell a simple familiar story</li> <li>- labels each picture, doesn't tell a story</li> </ul>                                                                                                                |
| <b>Vocabulary</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- large vocabulary</li> <li>- uses new vocabulary in sentences</li> <li>- interested in words</li> </ul>                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- beginning to learn new vocabulary</li> <li>- sometimes difficult to follow</li> </ul>                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- frequent use of the word, "that". "this".</li> <li>- Difficult to follow</li> <li>- limited vocabulary</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Understanding</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- generally follows instructions and 237 questions without needing further explanation</li> <li>- gives full answers to complex questions</li> </ul>                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- some difficulty following instructions</li> <li>- able to answer most questions although may have difficulty with why and how questions</li> <li>- inconsistent listening skills</li> </ul>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- usually has difficulty following instructions</li> <li>- gives incomplete, irrelevant or no response to questions</li> <li>- poor knowledge of concepts eg. in, on, under, size concepts</li> <li>- does not ask for clarification when failing to understand</li> <li>- poor listening skills</li> </ul> |