

Essential Language for Autism (ELA) Quick Start Guide

<http://thespeechumbrella.com/>

What is Essential Language for Autism?

Essential Language for Autism, or ELA, is a method for teaching foundational skills essential for developing grammar. Without these basic skills, many children with autism stall in their progress, and don't develop enough grammar to express themselves to their full potential.

What are these foundational skills?

They are developmental sentence types, described in Brown's Grammatical Morphemes as stage one sentence types (a copy is available at thespeechumbrella.com). These early child-like sentences express the same concepts and word relationships that more mature speakers express. However, speakers with mature grammar are able to add nuances with grammatical morphemes. Without a firm foundation in these sentence types, it is next to impossible to express concepts such as negation or possession and so forth. Children without these concepts find it very hard to develop more complex language. Though they may use echolalia to try to express themselves more fully, their memorized language is not truly generative.

Who is ELA for?

ELA is for children who use words but lack spontaneous generative language. Most often, these children are on the autism spectrum. They struggle to hold conversations and often use repetitious language. While they may use many words at times, the words they use don't convey a lot of information to the listener. ELA can be used with clients who are using single words or who combine words.

How do I start?

1. Begin by taking a language sample of the child in free play. The sample should be taken without prompting or deliberate modeling of language by anyone, but in a conversational play setting.
2. Analyze the language sample to determine which stage one sentence types occur spontaneously in their speech and which ones are absent or occur rarely.
3. From the sentence types that occur rarely or never, choose 2-3 to target. Give equal weight to operations of reference and semantic relations as needed. The three types of negation and recurrence in operations of reference are extremely valuable in early generative language.

How do I implement therapy?

There are two techniques for implementing therapy: 1) variation around the constant and 2) concentrated doses.

Variation Around the Constant

The central theme of modeling ELA is “variation around the constant.” In other words, model the targeted sentence types in as many ways as you can think of, keeping the sentence type constant and the surrounding words variable. For example, when targeting negation-non-existence in an activity where you make things go away, model sentences like “It left, it’s gone, she went away, he disappeared, they’re not here” etc. Words such as “left, gone, went away, disappeared” are the constant that express negation-non-existence and the other words (it/its, that’s, she, he, they etc.) are variable.

Concentrated Doses

In addition to variation around the constant, the second critical aspect of ELA is concentration of dose. This is based around research on statistical learning. When you give someone with a language disorder many varied examples in a short period of time, their brains have a better chance of recognizing the pattern. Typically developing children hear examples of how language should be used throughout their day, spread out over time, and that’s enough for them to learn the pattern, but statistical learning research suggests language disordered children need concentrated doses AND varied examples.

Do I ask the child to repeat me?

No. Just model as many examples as you can while responding naturally to their conversation. Some children will start to use the modeled sentence types right away while others absorb them and then produce them in later sessions.

What kinds of activities will work for ELA?

Almost anything! Choose something highly motivating for your particular client. There is an extensive list of highly motivating activities appealing to a variety of ages, matched to the sentence types, along with suggested sentences to model at thespeechumbrella.com. Free resources are in the Resource Library, and other materials are in the store.

Do I correct my client's grammatical errors e.g. “it not fit” when my model was “It doesn’t fit”?

Not at all! Immature grammar signals that the child is truly using generative language, and learning it in the same way all children learn language. Celebrate the immature, developing grammar.

How many sentence types should I model per activity?

When beginning, it is suggested to stick to one sentence type. Both you and your client are getting used to the method and you don't want to dilute the concentrated dose of a target. As the client becomes more adept at using sentence types spontaneously, you may want to add an additional one. If you find yourself occasionally modeling two sentence types because of the variations you choose, that is fine, as long as you keep your focus on the target.

How do I monitor progress?

Take periodic language samples of your client during free play, as you did when first analyzing their language. You may also find it useful to write down some of the language your client produces during therapy sessions. Track how many stage one sentence types are emerging, often present, and mastered.

When do I move on to targeting new sentence types?

When your client is producing a sentence type generatively in a different activities without any modeling on your part, choose a new target. Continue to revisit the old targets or incorporate them from time to time with the new targets.

Is it OK to model partial sentences?

Partial sentences are okay, and in some cases optimal for a particular client. A mix of partial and complete sentences are fine. You will not be in the stage of modeling partial sentences forever, there is a time to move past them. However, if your client is struggling to combine two words, try bringing your model down to two words, and then moving back to complete sentences once they are consistently using the sentence type.

What is the next step when my client has mastered, or nearly mastered, all the sentence types?

Further information on incorporating their language into stories and assessing developmental sentence types is coming soon!

Are there additional resources on ELA?

There are some podcasts about ELA from The Speech Umbrella and more will be coming. You may also find the book [Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum](#) by Marge Blanc helpful. If you have questions about modeling partial sentences, Blanc's book present a clear research base for doing so.

Disclaimer

Essential Language for Autism is a method discovered by Denise Stratton, MS CCC-SLP. While Stratton developed her method independently, others may have also discovered similar methods. ELA is a work in progress and will change, grow, and improve as Stratton continues to develop it.

