1. Introduction to the Pragmatic Language Skills Inventory

The *Pragmatic Language Skills Inventory* (PLSI) is an easy-to-use instrument designed to assess children's pragmatic language abilities. This chapter presents an overview of pragmatic language and a description of the PLSI.

Overview of Pragmatic Language

The PLSI is based on the theory of pragmatic language described by Bates (1976), who defined pragmatic language as the use of language in context. More specifically, Snow (1994) defined pragmatic language as "the system of rules designed to ensure that language use is interpersonally appropriate and that it is effective in ensuring that the speaker's or author's intent is understood" (p. 169). Both definitions stem from the ideas of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), who studied the acts of communication and speech and what they accomplished.

Bates (1976) described the specifics of language use in what she called a conversational code of conduct, which is a set of "rules" (and violations) for communication:

1. Cooperate with your conversational partner, which means knowing

   - how to initiate a turn at conversing,
   - how long that turn should last,
   - how to yield the turn to another speaker,
   - how to interrupt politely, and
   - how to end a turn-taking sequence.

2. Tell the truth. That is, tell what you know or believe to be true except when you have clearly signaled you are relating something fictional, are telling a joke, or are engaging in culturally sanctioned teasing ("pulling someone's leg").

3. Offer only information assumed to be new and relevant to the listener, and provide your listener with just the right amount of background information so that he or she will understand your point. This is described as "topic-comment" knowledge.

4. Request only information you sincerely want to have. In other words, do not request information merely for the sake of asking or ask questions to which you already know the answer. Certain politeness conventions routinely violate this rule.

5. Give your listener just the right amount of background information so that he or she will understand your point.

6. Be unambiguous, which involves assessing your listener's capabilities so that your statements are clear and unlikely to be mistaken. Violations occur when a speaker uses ambiguity to generate humor. Also, polite forms, though intended to be taken figuratively, create ambiguity when they are taken literally.

7. Change your language to fit each current social situation. In what is considered mainstream American culture, people change language use according to the following characteristics of their conversational partners:

   - age
   - gender
   - perceived political importance
   - celebrity status
   - educational level
   - socioeconomic status
   - geographic region of residence
   - language facility
   - expertise in a valued field or profession

To interact and participate successfully in school, children need to be fluent in these areas of pragmatic language, which the PLSI was designed to assess.

Description of the PLSI

The PLSI is a 45-item, standardized, norm-referenced teacher-rating instrument that helps identify children ages 5 through 12 who have pragmatic language disabilities. It can be administered in a short amount of time (5–10 minutes) using a simple 9-point scale to rate the student's pragmatic language skills compared with average, below average, or above average students of the same age and gender.

In developing the PLSI, the authors incorporated the primary characteristics of pragmatic language into three subscales:

1. *Classroom Interaction Skills,* which include using figurative language, maintaining a topic during a conversation, explaining how things work, writing a good story, and using slang appropriately.

2. *Social Interaction Skills,* which include knowing when to talk and when to listen, understanding classroom rules, taking turns in conversations, and predicting consequences for one's behavior.

3. *Personal Interaction Skills,* which include initiating conversations, asking for help, participating in verbal games, and using appropriate nonverbal communicative gestures.

Norm-referenced scores are generated that provide a quick rating of the student's pragmatic language skills, and a cutoff score is provided for determining whether the student exhibits characteristics of a pragmatic language disorder

and should be referred for a more comprehensive language assessment. Guidelines are provided to assist the examiner in interpreting the results. Reliability and validity ratings are exceptionally strong and support the use of the PLSI as a diagnostic instrument.

Uses of the PLSI

The PLSI has four primary uses: identifying students with pragmatic language disorder, documenting progress in pragmatic language ability, targeting pragmatic language goals for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 plans, and collecting data for research. Each use is discussed in the following sections.

Identification of Students Who Have Pragmatic Language Disorder

One purpose of assessment is to identify those students who have a specific disorder. To be useful, a diagnostic or assessment instrument must meet two requirements (DeMeyer, Hingtgen, & Jackson, 1981): (a) Different examiners using the same instrument should make the same diagnosis, and (b) the instrument should differentiate between separate but related conditions. Further, an assessment instrument should provide data in the form of objective scores for differentiating students who are or are not likely to have a pragmatic language disorder. The PLSI provides reliable and valid scores for this purpose. It can be used by a variety of individuals to accumulate data for identifying the student's pragmatic language problems. Results from the PLSI, along with other assessment results, observations, case histories, and parent interviews, provide valuable information for the diagnosis of a pragmatic language disorder.

Documentation of Progress in Pragmatic Language Ability

Documenting progress is important because of its use for accountability purposes, program planning, decision making, and educational placement. The objective scale of measurement used in the PLSI permits educators to document pragmatic language progress made by students. Because the scale is given by teachers, it can be used as frequently as necessary to evaluate the student's progress in pragmatic language. The PLSI is well suited for annual evaluation of students in regular and special education and is particularly useful for accumulating data for decisions about extended-year schooling and transitions.

Targeting Pragmatic Language Goals for IEPs and Section 504 Plans

The PLSI is useful for determining specific pragmatic language strengths and weaknesses for individual students. The results of the inventory can be used to assist teachers and other professionals in identifying pragmatic language problems,

setting goals, and identifying targets for instruction and intervention. Improvement in pragmatic language skills described on the three subscales of the PLSI can be used as goals for both IEPs and Section 504 plans. Specific items from the PLSI can be used as pragmatic language targets for intervention.

Data Collection for Research

Research studies require valid and reliable instruments. Data produced by such instruments are objective and describe precisely the skill or ability being studied. Because the PLSI has strong validity and reliability, it is a promising instrument for researchers. In addition, the format of the PLSI permits accurate ratings of pragmatic language skills by teachers, speech–language pathologists, parents, and others in and out of the school environment.

2. Administration and Scoring

The PLSI is easy to administer and score; this chapter presents instructions for administering and scoring the PLSI. Topics include the qualifications of examiners, the qualifications of raters, specific administration procedures, and scoring procedures.

Examiner Qualifications

In most cases, the examiner will be a certified speech clinician, school psychologist, or educational diagnostician who knows how to (a) interpret quantitative and qualitative information and (b) use the information to help the multidisciplinary team reach a diagnosis. Although teacher assistants and parents can complete the ratings, other professionals generally score the scales and interpret the results. For example, schools, school districts, or other agencies may allow teacher assistants to complete the ratings on the PLSI but only allow speech clinicians, teachers, or other designated professionals to score and interpret the results.

The examiner selects the rater and supervises the use, scoring, and interpretation of the PLSI. Although all of the examiner's responsibilities are important, the selection of the rater may be the most critical. The examiner must select the most competent and experienced person who works with the student being rated and have that individual complete the PLSI. If one professional works with the student all day long, he or she will be the most appropriate person to complete the PLSI. Occasionally, however, teachers may work together in a team-teaching situation or another professional may work with the student in specific subject or content areas. The examiner must select the professional who is most knowledgeable about the student, who is the most competent observer, and who is most accurate in rating the behaviors described on the PLSI items.

Usually, the PLSI is completed by a teacher or clinician and returned to the examiner. Occasionally, the examiner can complete the PLSI by asking teachers how to score each item (as in a structured interview format). This is not difficult to do because the scale contains only 45 items and the interview can be completed in a matter of minutes. Because the examiner collects diagnostic information from a variety of sources, assimilates the data to make a diagnosis of pragmatic language disorder, and helps identify services for the child, he or she is an indispensable member of the diagnostic team.

Rater Qualifications

The PLSI rater can be a classroom teacher, parent, teacher assistant, or other qualified person who works closely with the child and who is well acquainted with the child's language characteristics. Obviously, raters should have been trained in use of the PLSI and have had sufficient time to observe closely the behaviors of the individual being rated. Concerning the latter point, Anastasi and Urbina's (1997) comments are particularly noteworthy: "It is not enough to have known