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Beyond the Red Pen: A Functional Grammar Approach to Evaluating the Written Language of Deaf Students

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Abstract

Deaf students often differ from their hearing peers in written language development. Providing developmentally appropriate instruction is ideal, yet current methods of writing assessment do not provide teachers with sufficient information regarding the written language (i.e., syntactic) development of deaf students. In this research, we use a Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) approach to language analysis to provide teachers with a new way to evaluate deaf students' writing. This project consisted of two studies. The first study focused on determining whether SFG analysis could be helpful for teachers of the deaf. The second study focused on mapping a trajectory of the written language development of deaf students and the development of written language inventory for teachers of the deaf. This inventory, along with additional evaluation tools, has the potential to impact both objective setting and instruction.

Keywords: deaf education, language, assessment

Beyond the Red Pen: A Functional Grammar Approach to Evaluating the Written Language of
Deaf Students

Written language development is a complex process, that begins, for most children, with spoken language development. Children with normal hearing acquire spoken language skills naturally through authentic communication in their environment. However, deaf children, have limited access to spoken language. Factors such as age of hearing loss identification, age of intervention, use of hearing technologies, and chosen mode of communication all impact access to and development of language for deaf students (Antia, Ree, & Kreimeyer, 2005). While sign language does allow deaf children uninhibited access to language through a visual pathway, for the majority of deaf children who use sign language, access is limited and delayed. Sign language is only used in the home of 22.9% of the deaf students in the United States (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013) and less than 5% of deaf children are born to deaf parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2002). Regardless of the mode of communication, unlike hearing children, the vast majority of deaf children do not have full access to language models from birth. It is not surprising that research has found that language deficits exist for deaf children learning regardless of the chosen language, including American Sign Language (ASL; Schick & Hoffmeister, 2001; Strong & Prinz, 1997), English-based sign language (Geers, Moog, & Schick, 1984; Schick & Moeller, 1992), and spoken English (deVilliers, 2003; Geers et al., 1984). Easterbrooks and Baker (2002) write that the most challenging aspect of deafness is not the hearing loss, but the language development delays that result from language deprivation due to insufficient visual input and/or inaccessible auditory input. Expressive and receptive language delays have major implications for school learning (Hartmann, 1996), which occurs “through the medium of language” (p. 34, Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005).

Reading and writing can be a struggle for deaf students (Schirmir, 2000), since early language access and development are essential to later literacy development (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Hart & Risley 1995, 2003; Tabors, Snow, & Dickenson, 2001). The reading challenges of deaf students have been well documented (Allen, 1986; Dew, 1999; Traxler, 2000). There is evidence that deaf students continue to graduate with reading levels below those of their hearing peers (Commission on Education of the Deaf, 1988; Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989; Paul & Quigley, 1990; National Agenda, 2005). Notable delays and differences in the written language development of deaf students have also been well documented (Ivimey & Lachterman, 1980; Kretschmer & Kretschmer, 1986; Moores & Sweet, 1990; Yoshinaga-Itano et al.,1996).

Studies have found differences in the rates of syntactic development between hearing and deaf students (Antia, Ree, & Kreimeyer, 2005; Musselman & Santo, 1998). The writing of deaf students contains more basic structures, less advanced structures (Koutsoubou, 2010; Rose et al., 2004), and more syntactic errors (Van Beijsterveldt & van Hell, 2009; Yoshinaga-Itano & Snyder, 1985) than their hearing peers. Research has not yet comprehensively examined or described the syntactic development of deaf students. Furthermore, there is no assessment available that is capable of providing detailed information regarding the syntactic development of deaf students.

Developmentally appropriate instruction must be informed by assessment (Coffin, 2010; Bredekamp, 1987; deOliviera & Schleppegrell, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978), yet current assessments provide insufficient information for guiding the construction of written language objectives (French, 1999; Mayer, 2010; Musselman & Szanto, 1998). Language is made up of 5 main components: phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and semantics. Assessments of written language can measure any one, or all, of these components as well as various constructs

of writing (e.g. ideas, cohesion, organization). There are both formal and informal options for written language assessment. The primary disadvantage of formal assessments is that they tend to measure comprehension and use of language that is decontextualized or contrived.

Additionally, they provide quantitative information comparing a student's performance to a specific criterion or to the performance same-age or same-grade peers. This type of information is valuable for some purposes, but it does not help a teacher plan instruction. On the other hand, informal written language assessments are able to measure comprehension and use of language in context and provide a more direct link between assessment and instruction. Informal measures of written language include the cloze procedure (see Moores, 1970), Curriculum Based Measures (see Rose, McAnally, & Quigley, 2004), skills checklists, and rubrics. Still none of these assessments provide teachers with meaningful information about the language resources students are using in their writing. Teachers of the deaf need to know more about the syntactic development of deaf students. They need both an understanding of how deaf students in general progress in acquisition of syntactic structures and also a way to determine where their students are in that progression.

Literacy development inventories (See, for example, *Qualitative Reading Inventory-5*, *Bader Reading and Language Inventory (7th edition)*, and the spelling inventories found in *Words Their Way*.) provide teachers with a way to take inventory of the skills their students have mastered, as well as a way to use "miscue analysis" (Goodman, 1969) to inform their understanding of the ways in which students are approaching literacy processes (i.e., decoding and encoding). The purpose of this research was to develop a written language inventory that could provide vital information to teachers who are providing writing instruction to deaf students. This inventory can provide teachers with a way to identify the linguistic structures

students are using, using but confusing, and not yet using. Further analysis of the structures they are using in partially correct or confused ways can provide insight into the process through which a student is constructing meaning, and can illuminate areas of need for targeted instruction. In this way, the inventory will be able to guide written language instruction, allowing it to be more developmentally appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987).

Systemic Functional Grammar

SFG provides a way to consider how language works in context, as well as what language options are available (Fontaine, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In this study, SFG acts as both the theoretical framework and the method of analysis. It was chosen as a framework to guide the development of the written language inventory because it allowed us to ensure that the inventory focuses on both form and function. When teachers use an SFG approach, evaluation and feedback are focused (first) on function, or meaning. Because meaning and form are connected, students will learn form implicitly. The goal of an SFG perspective is not to fix the errors in student writing, but to expand the options students have for making meaning (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015). It is assumed that errors are a natural part of language learning. In other words, before a student masters a particular linguistic structure, they will first make attempts in which they use the structure with confusion (i.e., error). An SFG approach allows teachers to focus on teaching students how to use the meaning-making resources they have and on teaching them about the choices available to them (de Oliveira & Schleppegrell, 2015).

Words occur in patterns, groups, phrases, and clauses. An SFG analysis accounts for these patterns and captures how linguistic structures are used to construct meaning. SFG analyzes a clause, but instead of traditional labels, such as subject and predicate, it uses functional labels. These labels differ according to the metafunction that is being analyzed. SFG

names three metafunctions of language: *textual*, *interpersonal*, and *experiential* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Each metafunction has its own system of choices (Thompson, 2004). In this study, we use an experiential analysis. The experiential metafunction has to do with the representation of the writer's experiences in the external world (i.e., entities, events, qualities, etc.) and internal world (i.e., thoughts, beliefs, feelings, etc.)

In an experiential analysis, a clause is a representation of a particular situation involving *participants* and *processes* against a backdrop of *circumstances* (Fontaine, 2013). *Participants*, the persons or things involved, are realized by nominal groups. *Processes*, the ways of happening, doing, sensing, saying, being, or having, are realized by verbal groups. *Circumstances*, the manner, location, and time in which processes occur, are realized by adverbial groups and prepositional phrases. Together participants, processes, and circumstances are used to represent entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act on or relate to each other (Fontaine, 2013). Both participants and processes are inherent or obligatory components of a clause. On the other hand, circumstances are almost always optional augmentation. An experiential analysis can be used to identify the resources students are using to represent their ideas.

Figure 1 is an example of an experiential analysis of the sentence “The last unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone”, a quote from Peter S. Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn* (1968). In this analysis, the language used to organize an imaginary happening is labeled and the labels provide information about how the author used specific linguistic structures to construct a text that declares to the reader who (‘the last unicorn’) did what (‘lived’), where (‘in a lilac wood’), and how (‘all alone’).

Study 1

Background

This research developed out of a larger three-year federally funded research project to more fully develop Strategic and Interactive Writing Instruction (SIWI; Wolbers et al., 2018), an approach to writing instruction designed for use with deaf students. One of the primary responsibilities of the teacher participants (N=6) in the study was setting discourse-level objectives (e.g., genre traits and organization) and language-level objectives (e.g., grammar/syntax) for their students. We found teachers struggled most with setting appropriate language-level objectives. They tended to choose skills like verb tense, capitalization, punctuation, etc. The skills they chose were things they were able to easily measure and address through mini-lessons; however, they were rarely aimed at helping students understand how words function together in groups and phrases. In our weekly meetings with teachers, they reported that it was difficult to set objectives because their students' writing contained so many errors and that they were not sure of the best way to determine if an objective was appropriate for a student's current level of development. This dilemma led the research team to wonder if a functional approach to writing analysis could be helpful for teachers.

In Summer 2013, we asked the participating teachers to engage in SFG experiential analysis of a few writing samples, labeling the participants (i.e. nouns and noun phrases), processes (i.e. verbs and verb phrases), and circumstances (i.e. adverbs and adverbial phrases). Together, the teachers and members of the research team, discussed how the analysis informed our knowledge of the students' language development. During this discussion, we noted that the analysis allowed us to pick up on characteristics of the students' language development that we had not noticed previously. In fact, it allowed us to shift our focus from identifying errors to identifying structures that students were using.

Experiential Analysis

The purpose of the first study was to determine if SFG experiential analysis could be used to identify a general trajectory of deaf student written language development and to determine if this information and type of analysis could impact the language assessment and instruction for deaf students. At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, we collected both recount and information report writing samples from 26 deaf students, resulting in a total of 52 samples from deaf students. These students were divided into low (N=9), middle (N=11), and high (N=6) groups based on language proficiency levels reported by their teachers. In order to add a hearing peer group to the analysis, narrative and expository samples were retrieved from the Oregon Department of Education Website (<http://www.ode.state.or.us>). The medium-low, medium, and medium-high 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade anchor papers were downloaded from the site, resulting in a total of 18 samples from hearing peers.

I (Jennifer Renée) conducted a SFG experiential analysis of the language in these samples (N=70). I coded the participants in red, the processes in green, and the circumstances in blue. After these linguistic structures had been identified, I used traditional grammar labels (e.g. 1st person pronoun, definite article + noun, noun + prepositional phrase) as inductive sub-codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) to further categorize the structures in tables. Next, I compared the findings between groups and between genres, looking for differences in the linguistic structures used. I found that there were clear differences across groups. For example, students in the low group were most likely to use one-word nouns while students in the high group often expanded before or after the noun. There were also differences between genres. For example, in recount writing students used more structures containing personal pronouns and more structures containing past tense verbs than they did in information report writing. We

concluded that experiential analysis was an effective way to identify and compare the syntactic structures used by students at varying levels of language proficiency.

Development & Field-Testing of Evaluation Tools

In Fall 2013, we shared the findings with the teachers, and one teacher stated that it would be beneficial for her to have this information in “some sort of ladder” to help her identify what types of skills might be “appropriate next steps”. Using her idea and the findings from the analysis, I developed *Language Progression Charts* to depict the general progression of the noun, verb, and adverb structures students used to construct sentences. In Spring 2014, we introduced a group of teachers (N=4) to the charts. During a weekend professional development, the teachers used them to analyze their students’ writing samples and set language objectives with us. They then continued to use them to analyze student writing throughout the remainder of the semester. At the end of the year, we conducted interviews and asked teachers to reflect on their use of the charts, SFG experiential analysis, setting language objectives, and their instructional practices. The following themes emerged from an analysis of these interviews:

1. Engaging in experiential analysis informs teachers’ understandings of students’ present levels of performance.
2. Using a progressive chart that includes grammar structures of proficiency groups and of typically developing students contextualizes students’ performance and guides the development of next objective.
3. Bridging knowledge gained from experiential analysis and changing instructional practices requires modeling of application-based strategies.
4. Applying experiential analysis and setting next objectives based on the analyses requires substantial time.

The first study demonstrated that findings of SFG experiential analysis could be used to map out a general progression of written language development. It also demonstrated that the information gained from this type of analysis helps teachers set instructional objectives for deaf students. However, the time required to learn and engage in this type of analysis is substantial, making it a somewhat impractical method of evaluation for classroom teachers. These conclusions led to a second study aimed at developing a written language inventory informed by SFG analysis. This type of inventory has the potential to allow teachers to benefit from the advantages of SFG analysis, without requiring extensive time for training and analysis.

Study 2

Analysis Methods

The purpose of the second study was to use SFG experiential analysis to map out a general trajectory of deaf student written language development and to use this information and feedback from current teachers to develop a written language inventory for deaf students. While the first study had begun to map out a trajectory of written language development using SFG experiential analysis, the sample size was small and all of the deaf students attended the same school. A second SFG experiential analysis was necessary to ensure that the content of the inventory would be based on findings more representative of the population. For the second study, we collected samples from a larger, more diverse group of participants. While the findings from the first study indicated that genre does impact the use of syntactic structures, we needed to limit the analysis to one genre. We selected information report because we felt this information would be relevant for all teachers of the deaf. Students are expected to use information writing not only in Language Arts, but also in content area classes (e.g., Social Studies, Science).

In Fall 2014, we collected information report writing samples from a total of 106 participants in 3rd-5th grades. These students were participants in the experimental or comparison groups in the 3rd year of the SIWI development project. Seventy-four of the students had a hearing loss ranging from mild to profound, while thirty-four of the students had normal hearing. The deaf students attended school in a variety of settings (i.e., neighborhood schools, site-based programs, day schools for the deaf, and residential schools for the deaf) that used a variety of communication philosophies. The participating deaf classes included five bilingual classes, four Total Communication classes, and four Listening and Spoken Language classes. These classes were located in urban, suburban, and town areas in eight states. The participating hearing comparison classes included one 3rd grade class, one 4th grade class, and one 5th grade class at an elementary school located in a large urban metropolitan area in the Southeast. According to Public School Review (n.d.), the school had a minority enrollment of 46%, and 72% of the students attending the school were eligible for free or reduced lunch in 2012-2013.

Before coding the data, the samples were organized into 4 equally sized groups based on written language proficiency. Grade level standard scores on the Broad Written Language cluster of the *Woodcock-Johnson III Achievement Test* (WJIII; Woodcock, Schrank, Mather, & McGrew, 2007) were used to create the groups. Students with a standard score of 1-50 were placed in the low language proficiency group (N=25). Students with a standard score of 51-70 were placed in the mid language proficiency group (N=24). And students with a standard score of 71-110 were placed in the high language proficiency group (N=24). Because writing samples had been collected from 32 hearing students, we needed to eliminate samples from the hearing peer group to have an equal group size. Z-scores were used to identify the 7 students whose WJIII scores were the farthest from the mean and eliminated samples from students with a z-

score larger than +/- 1.13 to create an approximately equally sized hearing peer group (N=25).

All of the deaf groups included 5 or more students from each grade, indicating that there was not a strong correlation between deaf students' grade levels and written language maturity.

I (Jennifer Renée) then used the qualitative and mixed methods research software program, NVivo for the analysis. I uploaded the 98 writing samples to the program and divided each sample into clauses. Then, I began a 2-level experiential analysis using nodes (i.e., codes) to label syntactic structures. In the first level of analysis, experiential metafunction labels (*participant, process, and circumstance*; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) were used as a predetermined coding scheme. In the second level of analysis, inductive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) were used to describe the structures. These codes consisted primarily of traditional grammar labels. For *circumstances* (i.e. adverbs), question word labels (e.g. *when?, where?, how?*) were also used.

Because deaf student writing typically contains errored attempts to construct syntactic structures, I had to determine how errored constructions would be coded. I decided to code word groups according to the targeted structure that a student attempted. For example, one student wrote “My brother want play Candyland”, instead of “My brother wanted to play”. Although “want” should have been a past tense stative verb, I coded the *process* “want play” as *other stative—present* rather than *other stative—past* because the student had not made an attempt to construct a past tense verb. However, I also coded it as *verb + infinitive* because the student had made a clear attempt to combine the two verbs (want and play) in this way. In addition to the two tiers, I also coded for errors. In the example above, I also coded “want play” as *incorrect tense*. In addition to the experiential analysis, we compared the samples between groups, looking at writing level differences.

Findings

There were clear qualitative differences between the writing of each group. The students in the low group were emergent writers--four students drew pictures and did not write any words; four students wrote lists of words; and sixteen students combined words in an attempt to construct simple sentences. The students in the mid group were beginning writers--the majority conveyed their ideas through simple sentences; about half organized their sentences into paragraphs with a beginning, middle, and end; and three students wrote multiple paragraphs. The students in the high group were more developed writers--the majority organized their sentences into a paragraph with a clear beginning, middle, and end; six students wrote multiple paragraphs; and the majority used one or more complex sentences. The students in the hearing peer group were more independent writers--the majority wrote multiple paragraphs, and almost all students used complex sentences in their writing. In addition to these qualitative differences, the experiential analysis revealed quantitative differences in the language of each group.

Nouns/Participants. The majority of the words written by students in all groups were classified as participants. Furthermore, all of the students who wrote words in their sample used participants. As expected, the number of participants used by each group and total number of words used to construct those participants increased between each group. Additionally, the variety of structures used by the students increased at each level of proficiency. See Table 1.

Students in the low group used mostly 1st person subject pronouns, proper nouns, and common nouns without expansion. When they did use expansion, they were most likely to use classifiers before the noun (e.g. race car).

The students in the mid group used 147% more participants than the low group, and the average length of their participants was 23% longer. They were more likely than those in the low

group to use plurals and 3rd person subject pronouns and to join nouns with conjunctions and comma series. Students in the mid group were also much more likely to expand before nouns, primarily with describers and possessive pronouns.

Although the students in the high group used only 8% more participants than the mid group, the average length of their participant word groups was 39% longer. Students in the high group were more likely than those in the low and mid groups to use 2nd person subject pronouns and object pronouns. They were also more likely to use indefinite and definite articles and quantifiers to expand before the noun. For example, a student in the low group might write, “*I saw cars.*”, but a student in the high group might write, “*I saw the cars.*” or “*I saw many cars.*” Additionally, while incidents of expansion after the noun were rare in the low and mid group, 57% of students in the high group used expansion after the noun, by adding prepositional, nonfinite, and finite phrases. For example, instead of “*I saw cars.*”, a student in the high group might write, “*I saw many cars lined up in the big field.*”

The hearing peer group used 125% more participants than the high group, and the average length of their participants was 27% longer. The average (mean) length of a participant written by d/hh students in the mid group was 1.85 words, while the average length of a participant written by hearing peer students was nearly double at 3.28 words. Hearing peer students use several structures that were not often used by the d/hh students in any group. They used the existential there (e.g. *There* are four types of sharks.), used demonstrative pronouns and partitives to expand before nouns, and used examples to expand after nouns. They also used imbedded clauses as participants (e.g. Ms. Galloway, *who is very funny and nice*, is my math teacher.)

Verbs/Processes. With the exception of the students in the low group who drew pictures or wrote lists, all students used processes in their writing. After participants, processes made up the second highest percentage of word use for students in the low and mid groups. The number of uses of processes increased between each group; however, the difference in the average length of processes did not follow a consistent pattern. See Table 2.

Students in the low group primarily used present tense action (e.g. run) and stative verbs (e.g. is) with some uses of modal helping verbs (e.g. should run). The students in the low group did not use a wide variety of verbs. The verbs *is*, *have*, *like*, *eat*, *play*, *see*, *work*, and *run* accounted for over half of the verbs used by the group. The average length of processes used by students in the low group was longer than the average length of those used by students in the mid group and slightly longer than those used by students in the high group. While the majority (76%) of the processes used by students in the low group were only one word, several longer structures used positively skewed the mean word length of processes because there were only 98 processes used by this group. For example, one student wrote, “But you guy *have to do take turns and do not cut in the line.*” The construction of the process is errored but is an attempt at using a very complex process structure with many words.

The mid group used 67% more processes than the low group, but the average length of their processes was 11% shorter, which may indicate that the processes written by the mid group contained less errors. Students in the mid group were more likely to use the present tense of the stative verbs “to be” and “to have” and to use processes containing infinitives, such as *like to play*.

The high group used 32% more processes than the mid group, and the average length of their processes was 11% longer. Students in the high group were more likely to use processes that contained prepositions, such as *give up*.

The hearing peer group used 144% more processes than the high group, and the average length of their processes was 31% longer. Students in the hearing peer group were more likely to use helping verbs including primary helping verbs and semi-modal helping verbs.

Adverbs/Circumstances. While participants and processes are necessary components of a sentence and therefore used by the majority of students in all groups, the use of circumstances is “optional” and was not demonstrated in all students’ writing. Similar to participants, the number of uses and the average number of words of circumstances increased significantly from low to high and hearing peer groups. And, the largest differences found between groups was in this area. See Table 3.

Only 29% of students in the low group used circumstances. Students in the low group primarily used one-word circumstances to tell *where* (e.g. here, upstairs, outside).

Approximately 56% of students in the mid group used circumstances, and they used them 211% more than the low group. The average length of their circumstances was 47% longer than those of students in the low group. Students in the mid group used circumstances to tell both *where* and *when* and were more likely to use prepositional phrases (e.g., on the couch, in class).

About 84% of students in the high group used circumstances. The high group used 166% more circumstances than the mid group, and the average length of their circumstances was 89% longer. Students in the high group used circumstances to tell *where*, *when*, *why*, *how* (e.g., quickly, in one gulp), or *with what condition* (e.g., when we run, if I need help). Students in the

high group were 58% more likely, than those students in the low or mid groups, to use circumstances to compose dependent clauses (e.g., After we won the game, we went to eat.)

All students in the hearing peer group used circumstances. They used 75% more circumstances than the high group, but the average length of their circumstances was only 8% longer. The hearing group used circumstances for one additional reason: to tell *how often* (e.g., always, sometimes). However, hearing peer students were 28% more likely than students in the high group to use dependent clauses. Furthermore, they wrote more than twice as many complex sentences. After participants, circumstances made up the second highest percentage of word use for students in both the high group and hearing peer group.

Development and Field-Testing of Written Language Inventory

The findings of the experiential analysis were used to map out a basic trajectory of the written language development of deaf students, by placing the structures found in the analysis in order of frequency of use from low, to mid, to high, to hearing peer group. This trajectory was used to create a *Written Language Inventory (WLI)* that contained both an *Individual Student Checklist* (see Figures 2-4) and a *Class Objective Setting Guide*. See Kilpatrick (2015) for the full inventory. In the 2014-15 school year, the eight teacher participants in the third-year of the SIWI project field tested a draft of the WLI. They were introduced to the this type of analysis during a professional development session in Summer 2014, using the tools developed in Study 1. During Fall 2014, a member of the research team visited each of the teacher's classrooms and brought a draft of the WLI. With support from the research team member, each teacher used the WLI to evaluate their students' writing and set language-level objectives. During this process they provided feedback on the inventory sharing initial questions, comments, and suggestions which were documented in the research team's shared field notes. Throughout the year, they

continued to provide feedback during bi-weekly virtual meetings and email messages. All feedback was added to the field notes. A review of these notes, showed that participants perceived the inventory as a helpful assessment tool. They indicated that the inventory provided them with a clearer picture of their students' linguistic repertoire, allowing them to identify areas of need. Kendall said, "I think this format is very user friendly, it is easy to see what skills are needed for each child and the class." They also indicated that using the inventory helped them to set objectives and plan instruction. Jane reported, "They (the components of the inventory) are helpful because I was able to target some quick fix goals like increasing adjective + noun and prep phrases to tell when." She went on to say, "I like it (the inventory) because it gives me very concrete ways to increase their writing abilities. The teachers provided suggestions for change, and revisions were made to the inventory based on their feedback.

Ongoing Research

Although Study 2 concluded in May 2015, this research project is ongoing. In Summer 2015, we held the final professional development workshop for the SIWI development project and introduced a group of teacher participants (N=14) to the WLI. Some of these teachers had been involved in Study 1 and/or Study 2; however, more than half of the teachers had not seen earlier drafts of the Written Language Inventory. At the beginning of the workshop, participants were given 3 writing samples and asked to make observations about the writing sample and to set objectives based on these observations. During the workshop, the teachers were introduced to the WLI and engaged in guided practice using the inventory with their own students' samples. At the end of the workshop, they were again given the 3 writing samples and asked to make observations about the writing samples and to set objectives based on these observations. A comparison of the pre- and post- observations and objectives showed distinct differences. The

pre-observations and objectives focused on general skills, such as capitalization, spelling, “English word order”, “sentence structure”, and subject-verb agreement. The post- observations focused on the use of specific language structures, such as past tense action verbs, present tense stative verbs, pronouns, and prepositional phrases. These findings indicate that using the WLI could impact instructional practices.

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of the analysis were used to construct an inventory that reflects a “scope and sequence” of the written language development of deaf students. This was done with developmental variation in mind. We acknowledge that individual children are unique. They pass through the stages of language and literacy development in a variety of ways, taking different paths to proficiency (Clay, 1982, 1998, 2001; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Hierarchies are a way of understanding the general progression that occurs in language learning. However, language is extremely complex, variable, and nonlinear. Educators turn to hierarchies because they need some sort of guidance to set objectives and plan instruction. They need to know what the logical “next steps” might be. When hierarchies are used, educators must use them responsibly by keeping in mind that they are a framework and not a rigid sequential checklist. Easterbrooks and Baker (2002) wrote, “Any attempt to align all the components and systems of language into one overall sequence would violate this basic premise of child development. Be that as it may, teachers need a framework for decision making.” The purpose of this inventory is to provide such a framework.

We are continuing to refine the inventory to reduce the time and effort it takes teachers to evaluate students’ writing. A syntax assessment like the WLI requires teachers to have sufficient knowledge of grammar, or it can seem confusing or lengthen the time needed. We have

continued to make revisions to the inventory and have added visual scaffolds that make the inventory more accessible for both teachers and students. We are also working to develop an indexed resource manual that would allow a teacher to easily locate descriptions and examples of unfamiliar constructions, and thus identify the presence or absence of constructions in their students' writing more readily.

Our study findings suggest that the WLI gives teachers a new tool for evaluating their students' written language that allows them to describe students' language strengths and needs in new ways, and this results in teachers setting different kinds of language objectives than they had set previously. It's unclear, however, if using the WLI has an indirect impact on their instruction. Future studies should examine this. Without instructional resources that are aligned with the WLI, it may be challenging for teachers to address objective areas during instruction. Next steps would be to develop instructional resources and materials that could support the instruction of WLI-based objectives, similar to the instructional materials available for other literacy assessments such as the Qualitative Reading Inventory and Words Their Way. This will involve the development of lesson and video examples in English and ASL, as well as mentor text resources with the language constructions embedded and identified. Since the use of language is genre and context specific (Schleppegrell, 2007), we also plan to develop genre-based recommendations and resources for the WLI.

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Table 1 Participant Use

Group	# of students	# of uses	total # of words	avg # of words	% of total words
Low (N=24)	20	174	264	1.51	58.3%
Mid (N=25)	25	429	794	1.85	68.0%
High (N=25)	25	464	1198	2.58	52.9%
Hearing Peer (N=24)	24	1044	3433	3.28	58.4%

Table 2 Process Use

Group	# of students	# of uses	total # of words	avg # of words	% of total words
Low (N=24)	16	98	154	1.57	34.5%
Mid (N=25)	24	164	228	1.39	19.5%
High (N=25)	25	216	333	1.54	14.7%
Hearing Peer (N=24)	24	525	1062	2.02	18.1%

Table 3 Circumstance Use

Group	# of students	# of uses	total # of words	avg # of words	% of total words
Low (N=24)	7	18	32	1.77	6.2%
Mid (N=25)	14	56	146	2.61	12.5%
High (N=25)	21	149	733	4.92	32.4%
Hearing Peer (N=24)	24	261	1385	5.30	23.6%

"The last unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone." (Beagle, 1968)												
The	last	unicorn	lived	in	a	lilac	wood,	and	she	lived	all	alone.
Participant		Process	Circumstance				Participant	Process	Circumstance			
article + adjective + noun		past tense action verb	where? prepositional phrase				3rd person subject pronoun	past tense action verb	how?			

Figure 1. Experiential Analysis Example

Individual Student Checklist

	Structure	Correct Uses	Incorrect Attempts & Other Notes
Tier 1	1 st Person Subject Pronouns <i>(I, we)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Proper Nouns <i>(Ashley, New Jersey, Disneyworld)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Common Nouns <i>(tree, car, summer)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Plural Nouns <i>(classes, iPads, cheerleaders)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Classifier/Describer + Noun <i>(small dog, good book, dirt track, car crash)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Multiple Nouns/Pronouns <i>(cats and dogs; Dad, Mom, and Jill)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Possessive Noun/Pronoun + Noun <i>(Torii's pencil, Mom's car)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense Action <i>(jump, kick, go)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense Stative Verbs (except "to be") <i>(have, like, know, think)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense "to be" <i>(is, am, are)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Will or Can + Verb <i>(will walk, can walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Would or Could or Should + Verb <i>(would walk, could walk, should walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Verb + Infinitive <i>(try to dance, like to play, tend to smile)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Where? <i>(here, downstairs, outside)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Figure 2. WLI Individual Student Checklist Page 1

Tier 2	*When? <i>(later, before, last year, one day)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Where? Prepositional Phrases <i>(at home, in class)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*When? Prepositional Phrases <i>(on Dec 25th, at 5pm)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	2nd & 3rd Person Subject Pronoun <i>(you, he, she, it, they)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Object PN <i>(me, you, him, her, it, them)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Demonstrative Pronoun <i>(this, that, these, those)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Article + N <i>(the zoo, a book, an author)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Quantifier + N <i>(four kids, some days, many cats)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	N + Prep Phrase <i>(the girl with blonde hair, the book on the table)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	N + Relative Phrase <i>(the woman who lives there, the dog that barks)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Past Tense Stative <i>(was, were, had, have, liked, seemed, knew)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Past Tense Action <i>(jumped, kicked, went)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Verb + Preposition <i>(clean up, sit down, breathe in)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Simple Future Stative Verbs <i>(will be, will have, will know)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Simple Future Action Verbs* <i>(will jump, will kick, will walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
With what condition? Dependent Clause <i>(if I need help, when we run)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		

Figure 3. WLI Individual Student Checklist Page 2

Tier 3	When? Dependent Clause <i>(after they won, when he called)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Why? Dependent Clause <i>(because I like dogs)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	How? & How Prepositional Phrase <i>(fast, with one gulp, in a good way)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	N + Nonfinite Phrase <i>(the boy swimming in the park)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Partitive + N <i>(a piece of pie, a slice of pizza)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Demonstrative + N <i>(this bag, that box)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Existential There <i>(There are 50 states.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Question Word N Clauses <i>(Knoxville is where I live.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Other N Clauses <i>(I think he plays football.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Perfect Tense Verbs <i>(have run, will have run)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Continuous Tense Verbs <i>(is walking, was walking, will be walking)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Semi-Modal Helping <i>(be able to, have to, going to, used to)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Verb + Noun + Verb <i>(let us read, make you work)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Perfect Progressive Verbs <i>(have been walking, will have been walking)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Like who or what? <i>(like Ms. Smith, like a diamond)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
How often? <i>(always, never, once, sometimes)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		

Figure 4. WLI Individual Student Checklist Page 3

Written Language Inventory for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students (Kilpatrick, 2015)

Purpose: This assessment tool was developed to provide teachers of d/hh students with a way to take inventory of their students' written language repertoire by documenting the syntactic (grammatical) structures a child is using and attempting to use. Using this inventory can help teachers set written language objectives and provide developmentally appropriate written language instruction.

Development: The inventory was developed using the findings of a Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) experiential analysis of the information writing samples of 74 d/hh and 24 hearing 3rd-5th grade students. The analysis identified the syntactic structures used most frequently by students at different stages of written language development. It was published in 2015 and revised in 2018.

Syntactic Structure Labels: In the inventory, structures are labeled in 2 ways. They are grouped by function into 3 groups represented by colors: nouns and noun phrases (red), verbs and verb phrases (green), and adverbs and adverbial phrases (blue). Within each functional group, structures have been named by their form using traditional grammar labels.

Inventory Components: There are three major components:

- **Individual Student Checklist** – to be used to take inventory of the structures a student is using in his/her writing
- **Class Objective Setting Guide** – to be used to group students and set class, group, or individual objectives
- **Written Language Features Ladders** – to be used to allow students to see how language progresses in complexity.

Important Notes:

- **Language Development** - Language development is a complex process; children are unique and do not all take the same path to proficiency. Evaluators and teachers should keep in mind that this inventory is a guiding framework and students will not acquire the syntactic structures at the same pace or in the same order.
- **Impact of Genre** - Language features of different genres vary. For example, past tense verbs are more likely to be used in recounts and narratives than they are in information report or persuasive writing. Teachers should keep the language needs of each genre in mind when setting objectives.

- **Overlap of Categories** - There could be overlap of some noun structure categories. For example “three cars” would be both *quantifier + noun* and *plural noun*.

Definitions: Traditional grammar labels have been used throughout the inventory. Examples have been provided to assist evaluators and teachers. Some labels with which professionals may be less familiar have been defined below. (A more complete reference manual is currently under development. It is being designed to provide detailed information and examples of each of the structures.)

- **Classifier** – an adjective or noun that modifies a noun by further classifying the noun (ex. dirt track, car crash, science class)
- **Describer** - an adjective that modifies a noun by providing information about the quality of the noun or the writer’s attitude towards the noun (ex. small dog, good book, horrible day)
- **Relative Phrase** – a postmodifying phrase that follow a noun and begin with a relative pronoun (who, whom, which, that), also referred to as relative clause (ex. the dog that barks)
- **Nonfinite Phrase** - postmodifying phrase with the relative pronoun deleted, also referred to as reduced relative clause (ex. the dog barking)
- **Partitive** – a structure which consists of two nouns linked by “of”, allows a mass noun to be counted (ex. a piece of pie)
- **Stative Verb** – a verb that expresses a state rather than an action, usually related to thoughts, emotions, relationships, senses, and states of being (ex. am, is, are, have, has, like, know, see)
- **Modal Helping Verb** – a verb used in conjunction with a main verb to modify the verb in some way by expressing necessity, possibility, or time (ex. can run, should run, must run)
- **Semi-Modal Helping Verb** – a combination of words which functions in the same way as a modal helping verb (ex. be able to run, have to run)
- **Infinitive** – “to” followed by the simple form of a verb (ex. to run, to walk, to read)

Verb Tenses: In the English language there are 3 main verb tenses: *past*, *present*, and *future*. Each of these main tenses has 4 sub-tenses: *simple*, *continuous*, *perfect*, and *perfect continuous*. These 12 tenses are the tenses that are most commonly used and taught in English. Below there is a chart displaying examples of each of these verb tenses. Students begin to use simple present verbs in Tier 1, simple past and simple future verbs in Tier 2, and the remaining sub-tenses in Tier 3.

		Past	Present	Future
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Tiers 1 & 2	Simple	I <u>played</u> baseball last year.	I <u>play</u> baseball.	I <u>will play</u> baseball next year.
Tier 3	Continuous	I <u>was playing</u> baseball this morning.	I <u>am playing</u> baseball right now.	I <u>will be playing</u> baseball tonight.
	Perfect	I <u>had played</u> baseball for 2 years when I decided to quit.	I <u>have played</u> baseball for 3 years.	I <u>will have played</u> baseball for 10 years when I graduate.
	Perfect Continuous	I <u>had been playing</u> baseball for 2 years when I decided to quit.	I <u>have been playing</u> baseball for 3 years.	I <u>will have been playing</u> baseball for 10 years when I graduate.

Tier 3	Simple Past Tense Action Verbs																		
	Verb + Preposition																		
	Simple Future Stative Verbs																		
	Simple Future Action Verbs*																		
	With what condition? Dependent Clause																		
	When? Dependent Clauses																		
	Why? Dependent Clauses																		
	How? Adverbs – Level 2																		
	Noun + Nonfinite Phrase																		
	Partitive + Noun																		
	Demonstrative + Noun																		
	Existential There																		
	Question Word Noun Clauses																		
	Other Noun Clauses*																		
	Perfect Tense Verbs																		
	Continuous Tense Verbs																		
Semi-Modal Helping Verbs																			
Verb + Noun + Verb																			
Perfect Progressive Verbs																			
Like who or what?																			
How often? Adverbs																			

Use the chart to help you set objectives. You might consider grouping students who are using and attempting to use structures around the same level of development. You can use the area below to note observations about students' syntactic development and to write language objectives.

Individual Student Checklist

	Structure	Correct Uses	Incorrect Attempts & Other Notes
Tier 1	1st Person Subject Pronouns <i>(I, we)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Proper Nouns <i>(Ashley, New Jersey, Disneyworld)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Common Nouns <i>(tree, car, summer)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Plural Nouns <i>(classes, iPads, cheerleaders)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Classifier/Describer + Noun <i>(small dog, good book, dirt track, car crash)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Multiple Nouns/Pronouns <i>(cats and dogs; Dad, Mom, and Jill)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Possessive Noun/Pronoun + Noun <i>(Tori's pencil, Mom's car)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense Action <i>(jump, kick, go)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense Stative Verbs (except "to be") <i>(have, like, know, think)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Present Tense "to be" <i>(is, am, are)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Will or Can + Verb <i>(will walk, can walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Would or Could or Should + Verb <i>(would walk, could walk, should walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

	*Verb + Infinitive <i>(try to dance, like to play, tend to smile)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Where? <i>(here, downstairs, outside)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*When? <i>(later, before, last year, one day)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*Where? Prepositional Phrases <i>(at home, in class)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	*When? Prepositional Phrases <i>(on Dec 25th, at 5pm)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 2	2nd & 3rd Person Subject Pronoun <i>(you, he, she it, they)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Object PN <i>(me, you, him, her, it, them)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Demonstrative Pronoun <i>(this, that, these, those)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Article + N <i>(the zoo, a book, an author)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Quantifier + N <i>(four kids, some days, many cats)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	N + Prep Phrase <i>(the girl with blonde hair, the book on the table)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	N + Relative Phrase <i>(the woman who lives there, the dog that barks)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Past Tense Stative <i>(was, were, had, have, liked, seemed, knew)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

	Past Tense Action <i>(jumped, kicked, went)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Verb + Preposition <i>(clean up, sit down, breathe in)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Simple Future Stative Verbs <i>(will be, will have, will know)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Simple Future Action Verbs* <i>(will jump, will kick, will walk)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	With what condition? Dependent Clause <i>(if I need help, when we run)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	When? Dependent Clause <i>(after they won, when he called)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Why? Dependent Clause <i>(because I like dogs)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	How? & How Prepositional Phrase <i>(fast, with one gulp, in a good way)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 3	N + Nonfinite Phrase <i>(the boy swimming in the park)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Partitive + N <i>(a piece of pie, a slice of pizza)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Demonstrative + N <i>(this bag, that box)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Existential There <i>(There are 50 states).</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Question Word N Clauses <i>(Knoxville is where I live.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Other N Clauses <i>(I think he plays football.)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Perfect Tense Verbs <i>(have run, will have run)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Continuous Tense Verbs <i>(is walking, was walking, will be walking)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Semi-Modal Helping <i>(be able to, have to, going to, used to)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Verb + Noun + Verb <i>(let us read, make you work)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Perfect Progressive Verbs <i>(have been walking, will have been walking)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Like who or what? <i>(like Ms. Smith, like a diamond)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
How often? <i>(always, never, once, sometimes)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	