

Public-School Assessment Could Assist Children's Language Development

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. V. Gordon Rose's Psychology 300W course *Critical Analysis of Issues in Psychology*. The assignment asked students to write a thesis-based research paper on any topic related to the course lectures and assigned readings; a lecture on the development of communication was the inspiration for this writing. The paper uses APA citation style.

Humans have evolved to use speech, language and behaviour to communicate information with one another including, thoughts, feelings, or to teach crucial social skills. Language development in children is an important area for research and understanding because these skills are learned in the child's early years and continue to develop into adulthood. Research that is aimed at identifying and understanding typical language development can inform our understanding of language delays and provide early markers for interpreting when language may be delayed in children. Language delays/disorders have greater prevalence rates than many may realize.

In Canada approximately one in ten Canadians have a speech, language or communication disorder with slightly higher incidences occurring in males than females (Reed, 2018; National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2017). Children who are not diagnosed at an early age for language delay/disorder are at a greater risk for several other challenges besides communicative problems which may include social, academic and behavioural problems. When language is delayed, children may be rejected by peers, struggle to succeed in school and have difficulties expressing their needs which can result in children acting out in frustration or other behavioural challenges (Reed, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial for children to be assessed as soon as possible so that if there are signs of communication problems, they can receive appropriate intervention/support to improve social and behavioural outcomes associated with

these communication problems. Children entering the public-school system are not currently being assessed prior to classroom placement which can prolong the identification of any language problems a child may have or what classroom supports they may need in order to improve their communicative abilities. This paper suggests that children should be assessed for language development prior to entering the public-school system so children are placed in classrooms that facilitate language development depending on students' communicational abilities.

There is a need for assessment at the public-school level because an accurate predictor for identifying an individual's future academic and social success is through their language development (Young et al., 2002). Students will typically spend 13 years learning and developing these skills in the public-school system. Research has been able to identify some typical language milestones that if missed could be an indicator of possible language delays. For, example at around 9-12 month of age an infant will have had their first utterances and an absence of a first word by 18 months indicates the presence of a language delay (Reed, 2018). Language disorder and language delay are terms that are often incorrectly used interchangeably. However, for the context of this paper language disorder is defined as the early onset of trouble acquiring and using language (written or spoken) from comprehension or production deficits (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2017). A language delay is regarded as a slower start in comparison to the typical language development but with a greater chance that the individual will catch up to their peers over time.

According to Carpendale and Carpendale (2010) pointing is a social communicational tool that children develop from interpreting adult reactions to the pointing gesture. Pointing and joint attention are necessary for language as they help to pair words with objects in the environment. Pointing can be used in the classroom by teachers to aid in student communication development for example, when introducing new words to students, teachers can point to the corresponding object or a visual picture symbol of the word as to improve word pairing and recall. Children that struggle with joint attention are more likely to have language delays which has been found in children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (Pondé, & Rousseau, 2013). Previous research has found that over 40% of children with late language emergence have lower levels of performance at the starting school age of four/five years old (Rice, Taylor, & Zubric, 2008). A language assessment for all students would assist in identifying students who are at risk or who have language challenges that may not already be

identified and can then be provided with the necessary teaching and supports to aid in successful language and social development for children throughout their academic years.

Currently, one form of language assessment is from professionals who are sought out by parents, but this can be costly and difficult to access. Professionals such as speech language pathologists assess language development and can provide intervention when needed. These assessments are more often provided to children with higher receptive and expressive deficits while children with fewer apparent signs of language delay are less likely to receive this intervention (Curtis, Kaiser, Estabrook, & Roberts, 2019). This means children with less identifiable signs of a language delay/disorder are not likely receiving needed supports and thus have a greater risk of experiencing academic challenges. Discrepancies have been found regarding intervention access across various cultural groups. For instance, there is a higher prevalence rate of language impairment that has been observed in the United States among ethnic and cultural minority groups but were found to be underrepresented and underdiagnosed in comparison to Caucasian Americans (Morgan et al., 2016). Similar findings were also found among immigrant families who had children with autism spectrum disorder (a disorder with common communicational challenges). Pondé and Rousseau (2013) found that immigrant families were less likely to seek out support or a diagnosis. Factors such as the parent's education levels and/or low socio-economic status may play a role in these findings. Furthermore, the assessment of children's communication abilities upon entrance to school would actively close this gap of underdiagnosed and treated minorities and provide greater access to intervention for all.

Another current challenge to equal access to intervention may be difficulties navigating the health care system and finding the right specialists. As Canada has a universal health care system, even if caregivers notice a language delay before the age of starting school there may be a delay in diagnosis and interventions due to long wait-times for specialist assessment and intervention. Long wait-times can then delay access to government funding that is intended to assist caregivers in funding the necessary early interventions (Reed, 2018). Research indicates that early intervention for language delays provide better academic and social outcomes but with long wait times for assessment and diagnosis this can impede access to early intervention. A required language assessment prior to entering the public-school system would ensure that students

receive a timely diagnosis and the intervention necessary for successful social and academic success across their lifespan.

To assess communication in the public-school system a multidimensional approach is necessary. Children's language acquisition and comprehension differ vastly across ages and cultures and need to be considered during assessment. Complete assessments would need to evaluate children in different aspects of communication such as reading, writing, comprehension and oral speech, to provide a more holistic, in depth understanding of a child's strengths and weaknesses/deficits in different communicational areas. Research from Schmitt, Logan, Tambyraja, Farquharson, and Justice (2017) suggested and derived an empirical benchmark for evaluating language abilities for children in comparison to their peers by analyzing expected vocabulary growth for school aged children. As part of a multidimensional approach the assessment would aim to identify possible causes and areas of deficit to assist in classroom placement and accommodations/supports needed. For example, this may include identifying alternative reasons for the language delays/impairment such as conducting additional tests such as hearing tests to rule out possible hearing impairments as a cause for language delay. Another instance where an alternative cause should be explored is for children whose first language may not be English and would be assessed as having a language delay but rather may have typically developing communicational abilities. In this case determining this prior to classroom placement would ensure English second language support is provided to the student.

After students are assessed for language development teachers should use strategies to best promote the language development needs of the students. There is growing support for the "Think before reading, think While reading, and think After reading (TWA) strategy for improving language learning (Mason, 2013). This strategy provides teachers with a checklist for students to follow when reading something new. The first thing students and teachers need to do is to find common ground or a baseline of what is already known to the child about a given topic and discuss that prior to reading (think before reading). Then while reading, students are taught to think about the speed of their reading and how sentences connect (think while reading) and lastly are given strategies to summarize any main ideas or author messages from what they just read (think after reading). In two trial studies, observing reading comprehension using the TWA instruction strategy found to be significant in improving the reading comprehension of

students with and without language disorders. Adopting the TWA approach provides a new and effective learning strategy in the classroom that can aid in the communicational development of students of all language abilities.

In addition to the TWA teaching strategy, language intervention needs to match the curricular content demands (Reed, 2018) so that individuals are learning skills that will help them to succeed in their academic journey. Implementing learning strategies in the classroom would significantly benefit from continuous monitoring and reporting progress between teachers, families and other professionals (Mason, 2013). Communication between these important domains in a child's life would help in not only the assessment but in the maintenance of recommended learning strategies. Schools could accomplish this by creating an app in which caregivers, teachers, support staff and any other professionals can all communicate and share information with one another. This communication between caregivers and professionals would help families better support the child at home and for professionals to be able to understand more about the child. Cross-domain communication can provide helpful facts to the professional including, what the child's home life and early language development are like to help guide intervention. Teachers are also then able to report back to families and professionals about any progress or areas that may need adjustments. This would allow quicker and more efficient tweaking of the strategies set in place. Communication across domains is a core component for a child's language development.

The argument that may be made against providing all students language assessment as pre-entry requirement to the public-school system is the cost of intervention as well as the time needed to assess each student. Thus, some may suggest that an assessment for all children would not be a cost-effective solution, as there may be an increased demand on professional time and resources. Just like the basic rule of business suggests, as demand increases (assessment), supply decreases (professionals) which in turn causes the rise in price of a product or service. In Law, Zeng, Lindsay, & Beecham's (2012) review of the cost-effectiveness of intervention from a sample of five previous studies examining the cost-effectiveness of intervention data found inconclusive evidence to support intervention as cost-effective. It is suggested that the demand on professional resources would be too large to facilitate an in-depth language assessment for each child entering public school.

Although cost and demand may be of concern to some a universal assessment along with intervention would have long-term cost-effective benefits. A clear demonstration of how intervention reduces costs is that it helps to reduce future costs associated with communicational challenges. For instance, language disorders without quick assessment and early intervention in childhood can lead to government funded dependency throughout adulthood. Effective communication is a requirement for most if not all jobs and the cost for intervention during school years improves academic success and these children would be more likely to attain gainful employment (Young et al., 2002). The suggestion that there would be a huge demand on professional resources is not the case. Assessments would be made for each student entering into the public-school system for the first time typically this includes kindergarteners (ages 4-5). Only more extensive and time-consuming assessments would be conducted if the initial assessment showed risk or concern for communicational challenges. This can be thought of as a screening measure to ensure there are no unnecessary or costly expenses incurred from this language assessment. Another way to potentially reduce costs and make this more feasible would be to have some teachers receive training to assess children at a basic level to identify children with potential communicational challenges in order to reduce costs of hiring or contracting a greater number of professionals than needed. Teachers would then be able to only refer the more detailed assessments needed to be conducted if risk of potential communicational challenges are present.

In conclusion, language challenges can have negative lifelong academic and social challenges which early intervention can aid to reduce. The use of gestures (pointing) and joint attention as early indicators that language may be delayed (Reed, 2018) is a useful tool for early childhood assessment. Delays in language are correlated to negative lifelong social and academic outcomes (Young et al, 2002). Having assessments for all children as a prerequisite for school can provide the necessary intervention needed to combat such outcomes. As outlined public schools need to ensure that students with language challenges have access to the necessary resources to assist in any communicational challenges they may have. Since language can have such negative consequences, an assessment provided to all students would ensure that both those students with recognized language delays as well as those students who have undiagnosed delays receive early assistance. Future research should focus on underrepresented populations of students including ethnic minorities in Canada. Focus on minority groups is needed because as evidence suggested minorities are not only underrepresented

but also underdiagnosed and thus less likely to receive intervention (Morgan et al., 2016). Researchers also should avoid studying language disorders from developmental disabilities as a homogenous group because this often doesn't fully represent the different types of developmental disabilities. The issue with grouping multiple developmental disabilities into one category is that crucial differences between groups can be missed or underrepresented and final considerations can be made in the area of classroom environment improvement. A possible suggestion may be to extend the teaching practicum to include a section specifically on language development and teaching methods for children with language challenges. Having a practicum requirement or even a small portion of the practicum dedicated to just teaching students with disabilities would be a great hands-on approach to learning how to use new and adaptive teaching techniques or even to identify neurotypically different students in their future classrooms. This may also lead to teachers having a greater knowledge and understanding about development patterns in addition to their abundant knowledge of typically developing children's needs and teaching styles.

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