**Hyperlexia in Students with ASD**

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Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to demonstrate an overall strength in word reading skills along with challenges in overall reading comprehension (cf., Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006). Although there are individual differences in reading profiles, one profile often associated with students with ASD is strong word reading capability without comprehension, which might be described as hyperlexia. Nation and her colleagues note that not all students with ASD have hpyerlexia, although there is a strong association between ASD and hyperlexia.

**What is hyperlexia?**

While there is some disagreement about the precise definition of *hyperlexia*, it is frequently defined as a syndrome wherein students possess superior word-reading skills that are coupled with poor reading comprehension, significant difficulty understanding verbal language, and sometimes challenges with overall cognitive function (Nation et al., 2006). In addition, this superior word recognition skill appears to develop without instruction, and for some students with ASD, this precocious word reading ability might be perseverative in nature.

**Implications for Practice**

***Assessment.*** For students with developmental disabilities like ASD, the components of reading might disassociate (Nations et al., 2006), or function differently compared to students without developmental disabilities. For this reason, it is important not to rely solely on measures of word reading ability and fluency, as it is likely that these measures alone might over-estimate students’ reading competence. The use of reading assessments that are direct measures of vocabulary and comprehension (both reading and listening) help teachers develop more accurate understandings of overall reading competence for students with ASD.

***Instruction.*** For students with hyperlexic tendencies, comprehensive literacy instruction should focus on building oral language skills, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Strengths in word reading to support oral language development should be embedded into instruction. For example, Craig and Telfer (2005) explicitly taught the meanings of *wh-* questions in books first and then generalized them to taking turns during a game. Similarly, vocabulary instruction for concepts and other words should include printed words *and* pictures. Further, if the target word is *they*, it would be important to present multiple pictures of groups of people to build an understanding of the word *they*. Reading comprehension strategy instruction might also focus on words related to concepts. For example, teaching students key words associated with text structures (e.g., *because* signals the author’s use of the cause/effect structure), along with associated graphic organizers (e.g., cloud with arrows), explicitly illustrates the cognitive path from the printed word to meaning in a section of text (see Carnahan & Williamson, 2016 for details on text structure instruction).

**Summary**

Hyperlexia is generally defined as exceptional word reading abilities in spite of difficulties with oral language and reading comprehension. Although hyperlexia is often associated with ASD, not all learners with ASD have hyperlexia. To accurately assess reading competence, assessments should include direct measures of vocabulary and comprehension. Instruction should incorporate the use of students’ strengths in word reading to develop oral language skills. There is evidence this approach will also develop reading comprehension.

**References**

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