

Gestalt Language Processing



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The ability to communicate effectively with others is an essential function of daily life and human interaction. However, many people in society do not possess this communicant ability and require therapeutic assistance with certain language, pronunciation, and speech disorders. Numerous varieties of speech disorders and impediments exist, and a variety of methods to treat them with measured results. Each type impacts speech in its own unique manner. Throughout my process of researching information concerning Speech Language Pathology and its various treatments, I discovered a unique type of treatment called “Gestalt Language Processing.” This specific treatment is a method that predominantly helps people with autism work through their speech disorders. This treatment inspired my curiosity and gave rise to several questions: What are the various components that comprise Gestalt Language Processing and can it be a helpful alternative to treatment that can be utilized by a Speech Language Pathologist?

In most cases, Speech disorders and impediments have no singular cause of origin. However, there are a variety of factors that they can stem from including “hearing loss, neurological disorders, brain injury, mental retardation, drug abuse, physical impairments such as cleft lip and palate, and vocal abuse or misuse” (Harrison, 2010, vii). Additionally, speech impediments can also include lisps, stuttering, and mutism. Furthermore, speech disorders are described as one having trouble pronouncing various speech sounds.

Managing speech disorders or impediments is imperative for the reason that allowing a speech problem to be left untreated can affect numerous aspects of a person's life in a negative way. For instance, having a speech disorder is considered a “public health concern, as it is associated with an increased risk of school failure, poor employment outcomes, and behavioral, emotional, and social problems” (Hu, 2024, p.1). Thankfully, speech disorders and impediments can be managed with the help of a dedicated team comprised of a Speech Language Pathologist, school or medical resources, parental figures, and a motivated patient.

Simply stated, Speech language pathologists help to diagnose and treat people who have speech disorders and impediments. The abbreviation most used to represent a Speech Language Pathologist is SLP. SLPs are employed in a variety of places like hospitals and private practices; however, most SLPs tend to work in educational settings like schools. Additionally, SLPs can work with patients across all age groups including babies, children, and adults. Furthermore, some SLPs choose to work with deaf people who have cochlear implants and desire to develop better speaking techniques. According to Willard (2025), working with SLPs can result in an “accelerate language growth in children; in one recent study of children receiving language intervention, 8% of growth in vocabulary was attributable to the individual SLP” (p. 881). Since SLPs mainly work one-on-one with patients, treatment is uniquely different for everyone, catering to each person’s needs, thus making it even more effective. Many people receive successful outcomes from working with a speech language pathologist and by continuing to follow their recommended treatment plans.

Gestalt Language Processing can be utilized as a helpful alternative to managing speech disorders for people specifically with autism. Compared to regular forms of language processing, this specific type utilizes an exclusively specific approach. For instance, typically speech language pathologists help people with speech disorders learn how to pronounce individual words before combining the words together into sentences or chunks of language also known as “gestalts.” Alternatively, Gestalt Language Processing, according to Schwartz & Caldwell-Harris (2025), helps people with autism “learn language by memorizing and using larger “chunks” of language (like phrases or sentences) before they fully understand the individual words within those chunks” (p. 3). This type of processing is what is called a “Top-Down Approach.”

The concept of Gestalt Language Processing and its stages were created by Ann Peters and Barry Prizant. For this specific type of language processing, they created approximately four to six distinct stages that “outline the progression from echolalic utterances to self-generated sentences with complex grammar” (Urwiler, 2025, p. 24). In order to deepen my understanding of the GLP stages, I investigated Dr. Mary Barbera’s website (2024) to learn more about this specific process. Dr. Barbera is a registered nurse, a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst, author, and course creator that helps children diagnosed with autism. Based on my understanding of Urwiler (2025) and Dr. Mary Barbera’s website, the first stage of Gestalt language processing is echolalia, which occurs when a child speaks in whole gestalts or chunks of language. The second stage consists of the child starting to use partial gestalts/shorter chunks with other partial gestalts/shorter chunks. During the third stage, a child will begin to combine single

words from a whole gestalt with other words. When a child reaches the fourth stage, they start to piece together words to make their own phrases or sentences. The last two stages were added by Marge Blanc, in order to incorporate grammar into the process. Keeping these two additional stages in mind, the fifth stage happens when a child creates their own original sentences, while adding more complex grammar. Lastly, the sixth stage is when they use original sentences with a complete grammar system.

When a speech language pathologist chooses to utilize Gestalt Language processing, there are a number of different strategies and tactics they can consider within this specific processing method. One example of a technique SLPs could apply is modeling a phrase or sentence and perhaps adding additional or different words to the phrase. An SLP could create various sentences that relate to the patient's preferences to generate patient interest. For example, if the patient likes princesses or cars, the SLP could create a sentence incorporating those topics. This is a helpful approach in order to form a trusting relationship between the patient and speech language pathologist.

Another practice that many speech language pathologists make use of under the Gestalt Language Processing umbrella is Natural Language Acquisition. Within NLA, there are six stages that demonstrate the natural development of the Gestalt Language Process. Stage One of NLA involves "storing, using, and accessing whole language gestalts" (Urwiler, 2025, p. 15). In this stage, SLPs are just conscientiously observing the patient's natural way of communicating. In Stage Two, the patient will start to create their own combinations of gestalts. This stage happens naturally as the patient starts to socialize and talk to other people, gradually learning new words and phrases. Stage

Three occurs when the patient starts to “isolate and recombine single words” (Urwiler, 2025, p. 16). During Stage Four, the patient will start to form their own sentences or phrases. The patient will start to add new “verbs, articles, pronouns, negatives, question forms, adverbs, conjunctions, and a greater variety of nouns and adjectives” (Urwiler, 2025, p. 16). The fifth stage of NLA occurs when the patient makes use of more complex grammar to create their own sentences. Lastly, Stage Six happens when the patient begins applying a complete grammar system into the sentences and phrases they create.

In addition, Speech Language Pathologists can employ another segment of Gestalt Language Processing that is referred to as the “SCERTS Model.” SCERTS stands for social communication, emotional regulation, and transactional support. By targeting these specific challenges, this particular model aids individuals specifically with autism to improve in these areas. To aid in this type of therapy, an SLP could address a patient’s sensory overload by providing a quiet location, a weighted blanket, or a visual communication system or chart.

Alternatively, there are language processing approaches that are not as effective for Gestalt Language Processing. For instance, utilizing typical behavioral and development milestones, and one-word focused approaches are not as helpful when applying the Gestalt Language Process. When using these approaches, some SLPs try and motivate patients to adhere to what they deem as ““normal” language development and social acceptance” (Urwiler, 2025, p. 13). These specific approaches are not known

for working with several types of learning abilities, which can be an issue for Gestalt Language users and people who are neurodivergent.

Many professionals have taken the time to research and explore Gestalt Language Processing to determine whether it can actually be a helpful therapeutic alternative. While most professionals find this type of language processing effective, there are still some who are skeptical of its applicable worth. It is important to evaluate both the positive and negative characteristics found when using all therapies, even Gestalt language processing.

Gestalt Language Processing can contribute positively to many areas of communication and speech development, particularly to individuals with autism. The main highlight of GLP is that it helps in creating and displaying a more inclusive environment for neurodivergent learning. Furthermore, it focuses on providing a space where diverse types of learning, communication, and speaking skills are accepted and addressed. Even though some critics state there is a lack of evidence in clinical settings of the use of Gestalt Language Processing, the response from “clinical expertise and client perspective is often overshadowed by external scientific evidence” and should be taken into consideration (Urwiler, 2025, p. 25). Additionally, using Gestalt Language Processing allows Speech Language Pathologists an opportunity to clearly evaluate their patients and verify that Gestalt Language Processing is the proper treatment for the patient’s speech disorder. Lastly, since the patient will be memorizing gestalts or larger chunks of sentences, they are able to understand and comprehend the meaning

of the sentence faster. This technique comes into use when the patient is learning the individual words of the chunks or gestalts.

Despite being positively effective for people with autism, Gestalt Language Processing can also possess certain negative attributes. To start, this type of processing might not be helpful for all people with autism. For example, some people might not prefer working on larger chunks of words to begin with because they can tend to “struggle to see the coherent whole because they are overly focused on the details” (Schwartz & Caldwell-Harris, 2025, p. 3). It is important to keep in mind that this process might not be effective for all people on the autism spectrum. For this reason, it is essential to evaluate each patient properly in order to come up with the correct treatment. Additionally, some researchers including Urwiler (2025) would “argue that not enough external scientific evidence has been collected” (p.25). I believe it would be helpful to conduct additional experiments using Gestalt Language Processing and gather supplemental scientific evidence. Furthermore, there have been many studies conducted on Gestalt Language Processing that “have small sample sizes and lack diverse participant representation, limiting the generalizability of findings” (Urwiler, 2025, p. 25). Lastly, before a Speech Language Pathologist recommends GLP, they need to determine if their patient is a Gestalt Language Speaker. Trying to evaluate if a person is this specific type of speaker can be particularly challenging and can take additional time to clinically determine.

Drawing on insights from seasoned professionals and researchers’ opinions, Gestalt Language Processing appears to be highly effective for individuals on the autism

spectrum. However, it is essential to understand that every patient is unique and what proves effective for one person might not be effective for another. Speech therapy serves as a productive tool for assisting individuals with different backgrounds who live with a variety of speech disorders or impediments. When applied correctly, Gestalt Language Processing can be another constructive way for people, especially ones with autism, to manage their speech disorders or impediments.

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