

During a recent assessment, one of the authors showed a student with ASD a picture of a girl and boy on the playground and asked her to create a sentence using the word *playing*. The student initially said, "The slide is big." When the author prompted her to look at the picture again and asked her to use the word *playing*, the child said, "The boy has a bat." This example demonstrates the difficulty the child was having not just with appropriately understanding the context but also with the unfamiliar assessment task.

Other Types of Assessments

To accurately assess the language skills of a student with ASD, it is extremely important to observe the student's communication and social interactions during spontaneous exchanges in the natural setting of the classroom and other school environments with familiar communication partners (children and adults) to validate their language skills within a familiar context.

Commonly, authentic assessments are used in the classroom and are integrated with classroom instruction. These may be formal assessments where the teacher, in a systematic way, evaluates how well the student is progressing in a particular instructional program. Or, this type of assessment may be more informal and include special activities, such as group or individual projects, experiments, oral presentations, demonstrations, or performances. Generally, authentic assessments are taken from typical classroom activities, such as assignments, journals, essays, reports, literature discussion groups, or reading logs, to determine if the child demonstrates delays or difficulties during these activities within an authentic environment, the classroom.

A functional-ecological approach to assessment provides an alternative method of assessment, which is strength-based and recommended for determining a student's learning needs, especially for students with severe and multiple disabilities (Cosden, Koegel, Koegel, Greenwell, & Klein, 2006; Snell, 2002). This assessment process determines what is expected and needed by the student to be able to complete specific activities for the setting. Once the assessment process is complete, intervention strategies are identified that will occur in natural contexts at natural times of the day that will help the student acquire the skills needed to be as successful as possible within meaningful activities. This approach to assessment is dynamic and ongoing, requiring revisions as the student's abilities, needs, and desires change (Downing & Demchak, 2008).

For example, our IEP team identified asking questions as an important communication need for Zach across all environments. Zach is in the third grade, and all students in the third grade go weekly to the school library to choose a book to read. The team identified this

as an important activity that will allow Zach to participate and provide an opportunity for him to ask questions in a natural setting. To determine the steps of the task, Zach's classmate was observed. He entered the library, found the appropriate book section, looked at a few books, chose his book, took it to the librarian, and checked it out. The next step was to observe Zach in this situation to see what he could and could not do. When Zach entered the library, he just wandered around the room. He did not ask where the third-grade books were located or for a favorite book.

The team then set goals and objectives for asking questions in the library that included locating the question words on his SGD, identifying the correct question word, adding the name of the book, and then speaking the message to the librarian. The instruction would subsequently be implemented using natural cues (e.g., walking with a peer partner to the appropriate area in the library), appropriate adaptations (e.g., using his SGD to ask for the specific book), and effective teaching strategies (e.g., peer modeling of the behavior; teacher/librarian/aide providing visual/verbal cues). In this approach, reassessment could occur in one of two situations: either when Zach was successfully asking appropriate questions in this setting, or if the current strategies did not result in successfully asking questions and new strategies needed to be developed.

Impact of Communication on Literacy Development

Understanding language and language learning plays an important role in the acquisition of literacy development. Spoken language, also referred to as expressive language, is, as previously discussed, the foundation of reading and writing, and the development of speaking, reading, and writing occurs concurrently. Individuals with difficulties with spoken language tend to have deficits in written language or literacy acquisition, and vice versa. Therefore, it is essential that professionals working with individuals with language and literacy learning deficits, including children with ASD, understand language development and its impact on literacy acquisition.

The following subsections discuss the specific areas of language and their impact on literacy. As described with speech and language development, it is important to note that none of the following areas exists in a vacuum: **Proficient skills within each are required to gain meaning from the text. Mastery of a single skill does not automatically mean that a child can read well.**