Gestalt Imagery: A Critical Factor in Language Comprehension

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Gestalt imagery—the ability to create imaged wholes—is a critical factor in oral and written language comprehension. Despite good decoding, good vocabulary, and adequate background experiences, many individuals experience weak gestalt imagery, thus processing "parts" rather than "wholes," from verbal stimuli, spoken or written. This contributes to a Language Comprehension Disorder that may be accompanied by a commonality of symptoms: weak reading comprehension, weak oral language comprehension, weak oral language expression, weak written language expression, difficulty following directions, and a weak sense of humor. Sequential stimulation using an inquiry technique develops gestalt imagery and results in significant improvement in reading comprehension.

For years educators have studied reading and discussed and disputed reading efficiency in terms of primary strategies, such as the "context effect" and vocabulary, phonological segmentation and word attack, and word recognition. Yet, none of these strategies guarantees the critical skill of language comprehension.

Language comprehension is the ability to connect to and interpret both oral and written language. It is the ability to recall facts, get the main idea, make an inference, draw a conclusion, predict/extend, and evaluate. It is the ability to reason from language that is heard and language that is read. It is cognition.

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Unfortunately, my clinical research suggests the existence of a specific Language Comprehension Disorder. This comprehension disorder underlies the reading process and goes beyond use of context, phonological processing, word recognition, vocabulary, prior knowledge, and background experience. It is a disorder in the comprehension of both oral and written language. It may be separate from a decoding disorder. It may be separate from a phonological processing disorder. It may be separate from a vocabulary disorder. However, it can be diagnosed and it has a cause and symptoms. It is a serious cause for concern in the field of reading.

The Imaged Gestalt

A Language Comprehension Disorder is based in the sensory system and is a weakness in creating a gestalt. Gestalt is defined as a complex organized unit or whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The whole may have attributes that require a certain function for each part in the whole; these attributes are not deducible from analysis of the parts in isolation. In the case of a language comprehension disorder, the weakness in creating a gestalt interferes with the connection to and interpretation of incoming language.

For many individuals gestalts are not easily or successfully processed. Instead, "parts," bits and pieces, facts and details, dates and names are processed but not the entirety of the concept. Individuals describe the phenomena as, "the words go in one ear and out the other." A high school student commented on his reading, "It is words man... just words." A university graduate described listening to a lecture, "It is like the language was written on a blackboard and someone was going behind and erasing it, and I only got parts"—not the gestalt.

And the gestalt is the issue. The only reason to read or listen to language—take in verbal stimuli—is to get meaning, to comprehend, to interpret, to reason. The gestalt is a prerequisite to interpretation and reasoning. For example, the main idea cannot be discerned if only a few "parts" have been grasped. An adequate inference cannot be determined or an accurate conclusion drawn from "parts." The gestalt is the entity from which the interpretive skills of identifying the main idea, inferring, concluding, predicting, extending, and evaluating can be processed. It enables the reader or listener to bring meaning—deep structure—to what is read or heard. It is an integral part of cognition.

The critical nature of the gestalt then requires us to answer the question: How does one create the gestalt? An answer: The gestalt is created by the visualization of a whole. Gestalt imagery is the ability to