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Timed oral reading tests may not reflect true reading abilities in school-age children who stutter

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Abstract

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) Ad Hoc Committee on Reading Fluency for School-Age Children who Stutter surveyed ASHA members working with children who stutter to determine common practice for assessing oral reading fluency. Qualitative results revealed a non-standardized process of assessment procedures and interpretations that may have negative educational consequences for children who stutter.

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1. Introduction

Reading is the one of the most valuable academic skills a school-age child can acquire. Long-term reading outcomes such as comprehension require early mastery of basic reading skills: phonemic awareness, decoding, and oral reading fluency. The complexities of oral reading fluency involve intricate motor and cognitive coordination within a rapid time frame. In order to achieve the instantaneous and seemingly smooth act of oral reading, the basic components of reading must be executed automatically with minimal conscious awareness (Logan, 1997). When enough reading components are processed rapidly, the reader is freed to focus attention reserves on processes such as comprehension of text. It is not surprising, then, that reading scientists have focused their attention on utilizing speed at which text is read as a key measure of skillful reading. Oral reading fluency scores can be indexed as words read correctly per minute, so that incremental differences can be tracked over time to monitor progress of reading skills (Fuchs et al., 2001).

Students are frequently tested at school to measure their reading progress, as achievement of early reading skills is deemed essential to the development of later reading proficiency. Educators use reading assessment data to determine student needs and to make reading intervention decisions. For example, if the student does not meet the one-minute oral fluency target, he/she is at risk of being recommended for various levels of interventions including further testing and/or receiving instructional support in smaller groups (Diamond, 2005).

For many students who stutter, however, lack of oral reading fluency can be wrongly attributed to poor reading skills. Fluency breakdowns during stuttering moments (e.g., repetitions, substitutions, hesitations) will inevitably impact oral reading rate. There are legitimate concerns that students who stutter may not be receiving necessary accommodations during time-limited reading tests. Children who stutter (CWS) might experience challenges on time-limited tests due to the presence of blocks, repetitions, prolongations, slower-than-normal speech rate and speech breakdowns from reading or speaking under pressure (Scaler Scott, 2010). Many of the standardized oral reading fluency tests are timed measures and most do not allow time adjustments for school-age students with speech fluency problems. Testing procedures and accommodations remain unclear when assessing reading progress in students who stutter, leading to possible misdiagnosis, inaccuracy, and misjudgement of full potential of reading skills. Such errors have the potential to lead to negative communication attitudes and communication avoidance in CWS. Although negative attitudes and communication avoidance has been documented in CWS (see Murphy, Yaruss, & Quesal, 2007 for review), no studies to date have examined the potential negative impact of measures of oral reading fluency on CWS.

1.1. Examining oral reading fluency measures for children who stutter

Given the concerns that students who stutter may not be receiving necessary accommodations during reading tests that have oral reading rate as an integral component of the assessment, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) established the Committee on Reading Fluency for School-Age Children Who Stutter. The committee's first task was to further investigate the current status of oral reading fluency testing and existing accommodations during such testing for CWS. The purpose of this investigation was to determine: 1) the type of tests that are being administered to measure oral reading fluency in the USA and; 2) the type of accommodations that are being implemented across school districts in the United States of America (USA) during the administration of oral reading fluency to students who stutter. The committee developed and fielded a survey for speech-language therapists (SLTs) to investigate the oral reading fluency testing and accommodations process. Quantitative results of this study are published elsewhere (Games, Paul, Reeves, in press). The purpose of the current study is to outline qualitative themes obtained from commentary provided by SLTs completing the surveys.

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