The Variable Professional Perception in Assessment of Pragmatic Language Level in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Related Developmental Difficulties

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Abstract

Problem statement: The pragmatic language level (PLL) is probably one of the most important components of not only communication, but also the emotional and social performance within the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Nevertheless, the symptoms of possible PLL variances or even abnormalities may be perceived very differently by variable professionals involved in the process of an assessment of ASD and related developmental difficulties. The purpose of study: We created a specific evaluation tool for an assessment of PLL in ASD from the speech and language therapy (SLT) view. We also discuss PLL performance determination and consequences. Methods: Based on the previous quantitative research and analysis of variable diagnostic tools we have created and used an evaluation material for assessment of specific components of PLL in children with ASD, in the purpose of the comparison of the measured values with the children of developmental specific language impairment (SLI) and intellectual/cognitive disabilities. Findings: There is a difference in perceiving of specific components of PLL from the professional point of view (eg. SLTs, psychologists, occupational therapists). The results differ within the groups. Conclusion: During our preliminary research we found specific differences in perceived performance in children when evaluating PLL with our adapted assessment material. We discuss the possible use the new material and the importance of careful analysis of the findings with respect to different professional views.

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1. Introduction

Modern speech and language therapy (SLT) emphasize the importance of communication in a social context. It is taking into consideration the significance of nonverbal components of communication ability. Regarding a holistic approach, the pragmatic view on speech and language therapy is related to the theory of speech activity taking into account all elements affecting the communication act, including biological, physical, psychological, social, and other factors.

The act of communication is carried out by an interaction between language, cognitive and sensorimotor processes, which are ongoing, in all individuals (Perkins 2005; Hwa-Froelich 2015). All of these processes can be seen differently by various specialists involved into the assessment and therapy of individuals with communication disorders, especially if the difficulties are connected to some primary impairment or disorders, e.g. in language disorders related to autism spectrum disorder (ASD). What one perceive as a result of inner emotional status, other may consider to be the unavoidable neuromuscular activity. For example, when an individual frowns, a specialist, e.g. psychologist, may take this behavior as a logical consequence of the emotion expressing disagreement or dislike, anger. But from the speech and language therapist’s (SLT) point of view, the same motor activity can be perceived as a try to move a particular part of the face, even imprecisely. The same act of communication behavior, but absent or inhibit, could be incorrectly viewed as a result of a neglect, negativism, etc.

Such differences in diagnostic explanation of communication expressions may lead to misunderstandings in assessment of pragmatic language skills and functional language, with the influence on judging on emotional status or social proximity and other components of the individual personality, especially in individuals with such severe difficulties in language development like those with ASD.

We believe that speech and language therapists are those who should actively participate on assessing the pragmatic language level, and thoroughly, using specific professional SLT view and particular tests, differentiate between various orofacial movements and oral imitation activities, as well as sensory perception influence on communication behavior and their origin. Nevertheless, despite the fact that we repeatedly found out that speech and language therapists agree with the prior importance of pragmatic language level assessment and therapy in children with autism spectrum disorders, we also found out that they often neglect or ignore the real assessment of this language level because of the lack of relevant evaluation tools acceptable specifically for speech and language therapists (see e.g. Norbury & Sparks, 2013; Vitásková & Říhová, 2015). Therefore we have decided to concentrate on the evaluation of pragmatic language level in children with ASD and create a new assessment tool for speech and language therapists in order to use it in a comparing pragmatic language level in children with different developmental language disorder and children without any specific language delay or disorder.

2. The variable professional perception in the perception of pragmatics – speech and language therapist view

Deficits in the pragmatic language level are one of the most important characteristic of the diagnostic category of the ASD in all types (Ramberg et al. 1996). Specifics are evident at a child’s early age and manifest themselves in the use of gestures and in the full range of nonverbal communication. These determine the verbal component and have an influence on the application of AAC options (Bondy & Frost, 2007; Boyd, 2011).

SLT insights can differ from this generalized interpretation presuming that general determinants, which should necessarily be taken into consideration in a contemporary diagnosis of ASD, are primarily connected to social relations and social communication with respect to anatomical and kinesiological factors. Facial expressions and gesture, e.g., are traditionally perceived as being mostly emotionally based. E.g. facial expressions can be viewed as an external behavioral manifestation of orofacial movements, which are connected to neuromuscular activity, orofacial praxis, gnosis, or imitation of motorics. Gesticulation, as the example of other pragmatic skills area, involves praxis, gnosis, and imitation of motorics. All the abilities and activities are closely related to alternative and augmentative communication. Continuously studied area of the pragmatic level of communication is communication by eye contact. As speech and language therapists, we can evaluate eye movements, measure focused/direct attention to articulators and pictures (e.g. when using PECS - or VOKS systems in Czech), gestures (that means movement), or detect apparent “inattention” or other connections to nonverbal learning disorders. (E.g. Miller et al., 2014; Vitásková & Říhová 2013;
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