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Comprehension of idioms in adolescents with language-based learning disabilities compared to their typically developing peers

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Abstract

Adolescents with language-based learning disabilities (LBLD) often interpret idioms literally. When idioms are provided in an enriched context, comprehension is compromised further because of the LBLD student's inability to assign multiple meanings to words, assemble and integrate information, and go beyond a local referent to derive a global, coherent meaning. This study tested the effects of context and familiarity on comprehension of 24 idioms in 22 adolescents with LBLD. The students completed the Idiom Comprehension Test (ICT) [Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools 30 (1999) 141; LSHSS 34 (2003) 69] in one of two conditions: in a story or during a verification task. Within each condition were three familiarity levels: high, moderate, and low. The LBLD adolescents' data were then compared to previously collected data from 21 age-, gender-, and reading ability-matched typically developing (TD) peers. The relations between reading and language literacy and idiom comprehension were also examined in the LBLD adolescents. Results showed that: (a) the LBLD adolescents generally performed poorly relative to their TD counterparts; however, the groups performed comparably on the high and moderate familiarity idioms in the verification condition; (b) the LBLD adolescents performed significantly better in the verification condition than in the story condition; and (c) reading ability was associated with comprehension of the low familiarity idioms in the story condition only. Findings are discussed relative to implications for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and educators working with adolescents with LBLD.

Learning outcomes: As a result of this activity, the participant will be able to (1) describe the importance of metalinguistic maturity for comprehension of idioms and other figures of speech; (2) understand the roles of context and familiarity when assessing idiom comprehension in

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adolescents with LBLD; and (3) critically evaluate assessments of idiom comprehension and determine their appropriateness for use with adolescents with LBLD.

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Idioms (e.g., *raining cats and dogs* and *head over heels*) have been studied in typically developing (TD) adolescents (Nippold, Maron, & Schwartz, 2001; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Nippold, Taylor, & Baker, 1996; Qualls, O'Brien, Blood, & Hammer, 2003), with few studies focusing on idiom comprehension in adolescents with language-based learning disabilities (LBLD) (Ezell & Goldstein, 1991, 1992). Some researchers have examined other types of figurative language (e.g., similes, metaphors, proverbs) in adolescents with LBLD (Crais & Chapman, 1987; Jones & Stone, 1989; Seidenberg & Bernstein, 1986); others have recognized the importance of researching the general language skills of this population (Fisher, White, & Fisher, 1984; McCormick & Becker, 1996; Minskoff, 1982; Nippold, 1991; Nye, Foster, & Seaman, 1987; Wright & Newhoff, 2001). Consequently, little information exists regarding how adolescents with LBLD comprehend idioms and how idiom development will impact on academic success for these children.

Learning disabilities represent “a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant disabilities in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities” (Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, & Larsen, 1981, p. 336). The majority of all students with learning disabilities (as many as 80%) have language impairments that characterize substantially their disorder (Wiig & Secord, 1998). It is believed that central nervous system dysfunction contributes to the presence of learning disabilities (Bigler, Lajiness-O'Neill, & Howes, 1998; Gilger & Kaplan, 2001; Hammill et al., 1981) and reflects the inability to associate information from various parts of the brain (Christie, 2000). Thus, the processing resources and activities necessary for comprehension, including memory, integration, and inferencing, are compromised in adolescents with LBLD. For these individuals, language and reading problems result largely from impairments in vocabulary and comprehension (McCormick & Becker, 1996; Minskoff, 1982; Wright & Newhoff, 2001). Adolescents with LBLD not only have difficulty with literal language processing, but they also have great difficulty with comprehending and using nonliteral language (Jones & Stone, 1989; Minskoff, 1982; Nippold, 1991), such as idioms (Ezell & Goldstein, 1991, 1992).

A greater understanding of how adolescents with LBLD comprehend idioms has both academic and social implications. Importantly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [NICCYD], 1998) mandate that students with LBLD have the right to be placed in a least restrictive environment (LRE) such as a regular classroom with their typically developing peers. It is, therefore, expected that LBLD adolescents will be able to effectively engage in regular classroom activities. Idioms are commonly found in classroom teachers' verbal instructions (Kerbel & Grunwell, 1997; Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, & Johnson, 1989), in academic reading materials (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993;

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