



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

Gestalt Language Processing: Advice for Teachers



Introduction

As the term Gestalt Language Processing (GLP) has become more prevalent in educational settings, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recognised the need to provide clear and accessible information on the topic.

The content of this resource has been developed by the NCSE Speech and Language Therapy team all of whom have additional professional training in the area of gestalt language development. It is based on up to date evidenced informed practice combined with the NCSE's professional experience working in schools to support the inclusion, participation and well-being of students who are gestalt language processors.

This resource defines key terminology associated with Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) and GLP. It provides practical strategies for teachers to support all forms of language acquisition, including GLP, within the professional scope of a teacher.

As of 2025, and to the best of our knowledge, this document uses language, and, encourages practice that is reflective of current research and evidence. We recognise that language, phrasing and terminology considered best practice at this time may evolve and future iterations of NCSE Therapy resources will continue to endeavour to include the most current language and practice available.



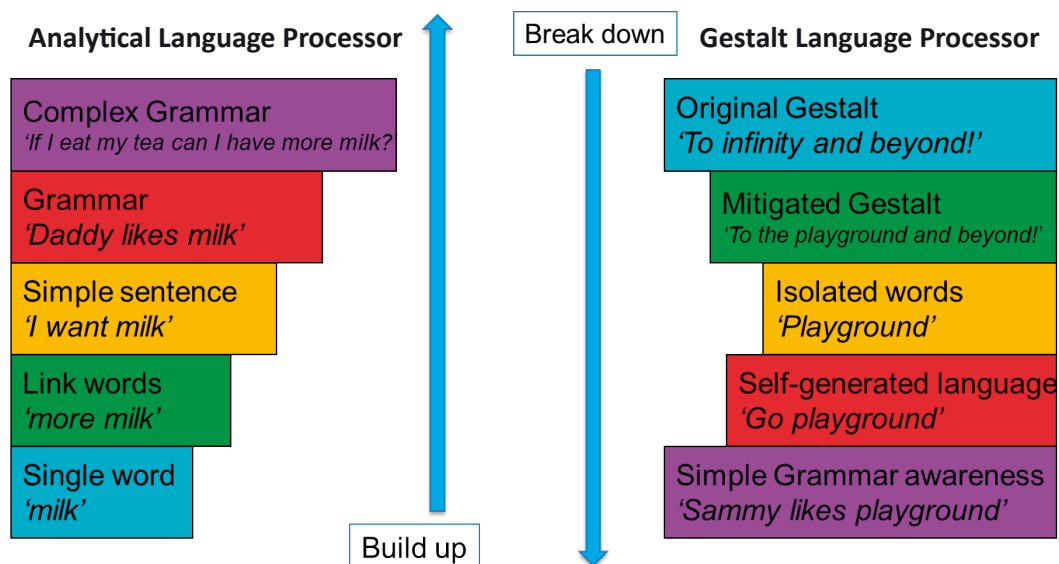
Gestalt Language Processing: Advice for Teachers

It is currently thought that there are different ways to learn and process language. Some children may be Gestalt language processors (GLP) and some may be analytical language processors (ALP). Similar to ALPs, GLPs follow predictable stages in their language development. These stages eventually lead to original, flexible language.

The concept of GLP is not new, Dr. Barry Prizant originally published these stages in his research in 1983. Marge Blanc then wrote a book in 2012 about gestalt language development where she outlined these stages in a framework called Natural Language Acquisition (NLA).

Gestalt language processors begin by learning chunks of language or 'gestalts'.

As represented in the diagram below, a phrase may be the first thing a gestalt language processor says e.g. 'to infinity and beyond'. These chunks of language often link to a situation and are meaningful to the student in some way. This meaning may not be immediately obvious to their teacher or caregiver. An analytical processor on the other hand will often have a first word 'milk'. This word will be meaningful to them and will most often have a shared meaning with their caregivers.



NHS Trust Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership, 2023 -adapted from Barry Prizant (1983)

Over time, gestalt language processors learn to break these chunks of language down into single phrases or units.

Language units or gestalts are most often learned from TV shows, songs or events. They can link to an experience, which may be tied to big emotions (e.g. Hello Mr. Sunshine meaning I want to go outside). Students might use or 'echo' a gestalt at later time, sometimes out of context. This is often referred to as 'delayed echolalia'. Gestalt language processors often tune into rich intonation patterns (the up and down musical tones) of talk. Sometimes the intonation is what they repeat. It may sound like babble or strings of sounds that do not make sense to others. It can also be the whole phrase, song or a word that is repeated (e.g. how much is that doggy in the window). Gestalt language processors differ from analytical language processors who learn words individually and then begin to combine them.

Neurodiversity Paradigm and Gestalt Language Processing

Analytical language processing is the pathway of language development aligned with the neurotypical/neuromajority. Analytical language processing is often the assumption when referring to 'typical' language and communication development.

Gestalt Language Processing is a different way of learning and processing language, it is not a difficulty or problem to fix. The overall communication goal for gestalt language processors should be the same as for analytical language processors – to facilitate competent, confident communicators who can use all forms of language and communication as flexibly as possible to communicate needs, wants, thoughts and opinions.

How to create language learning opportunities in your classroom for all

As a teacher, you have a very significant role in the language and communication development of all your students. Evidence based pedagogy and communication friendly learning environments naturally create opportunity for students to explore language and build communicative competence. You can enhance the language-learning environment for all students by:

- 1. Prioritising a safe environment through the acceptance of difference, building meaningful relationships, establishing routines and providing choice. The following resources can support you with this:**
 - NCSE Physical Environment and Visuals Booklets – coming soon on NCSE website
 - NCSE Visual Supports within an Inclusive learning environment booklet
 - NCSE Relate: A Regulation-First Approach to Reframing Behaviour and Supporting Student Engagement and Participation. (NCSE 2025). <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NCSE-Relate.pdf>
 - LEANS Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) | Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre (ed.ac.uk)
 - NeuroBears - Pandas (pandasonline.org)
 - NCSE TPL Calendar
- 2. Prioritise interaction and communication that is natural, authentic and meaningful.**
- 3. Recognise the significance of teacher talk.**
- 4. Be led by student interests in your engagement, interactions, lessons and play.**

*To learn more about how to create language learning opportunities in your classroom, please see the NCSE Speech and Language Therapy Teacher Professional Learning available to you, as advertised on the NCSE TPL Calendar

As a teacher you may definitively know or have a strong sense of your student's 'type' of language processing. There may also be times when you are not sure. The above opportunities for language learning can be used with all students; those who are analytical language processors, gestalt language processors and those where it may not yet be clear.

It is important to note that it is a Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) role to:

- Identify the type of language processing that is occurring
- Determine what stage of language acquisition a gestalt language processor is at
- Develop student specific strategies to support progression from stage to stage

As a teacher, it may be appropriate to do the following in order to meet your student's educational needs in the classroom or school environment:

- Implement student specific strategies or interventions in the area of GLP that are recommended by a speech and language therapist, with support from a SLT.
- Monitor the progress of these strategies or interventions, with support from a SLT.
- Support the student to move on from these strategies/interventions, with support from a SLT.

Note: Where there is an expectation placed on a teacher to do any of the above, it is recommended that the teacher label these activities outside of their professional skill set. Make clear that you require training, modelling and coaching from an SLT to safely implement student specific support. You can reassure your principal, parent, colleagues that in the absence of this support, you will continue to implement evidence-informed, educationally relevant strategies in your learning environment that will benefit the communication skills and language processing of all students. Key strategies for teachers are outlined below.

Teacher strategies specific to support Gestalt Language Processors

If you think or know a student in your class or school is a gestalt language processor it is recommended, that in the first instance, you prioritise changing or enhancing the language-learning environment, as outlined in Ideas for Universal Supports/Classroom Supports.

If you wish to implement more specific strategies at whole class level or in an individualised way, it is important to be aware that you are always working towards **acknowledging, responding and respecting gestalts and modifying teacher language and communication**.

WHOLE CLASS STRATEGIES

Acknowledge, respond to and respect gestalts

- Recognise and embrace gestalts as a valid form of communication.
- Get to know the common gestalts used by your student(s) by tuning in across the day. Keep a note of these gestalts for SSP, lesson planning and outcome measurement.

Modify teacher talk for Gestalt Language Processors

Strive to modify and reflect on your own language and communication regularly

- Connect to the strengths of a gestalt language processors in your class by:
 - Including more music, song and rhyme in your teaching.
 - Using your tone of voice and prosody to engage students and emphasise key words/phrases.
- Comment more, ask questions less. A practical rule is to make 4 comments for every question you wish to ask.

INDIVIDUALISED STRATEGIES

Acknowledge, respond to and respect gestalts

- Begin to interpret the gestalts:
 - Seek the support of parents, caregivers, siblings, peers and other teachers to interpret gestalts.
 - Take your best guess using what you know about the student and the context as a guide.
 - Keep a record of interpretations. Update as you go.
- Respond to gestalts in their interpreted form. This may look different depending on the gestalt, for example:
 - Child: *Hello Mr. Sunshine meaning I want to go outside.* Teacher: *You want to go outside. Now you are eating lunch, next you can go outside.*
 - Child: *Babbles in a frustrated tone.* Teacher: *I think you are cross. Can I help?*
Teacher tunes in to what may be causing frustration.
- Where a gestalt has no immediate meaning to you, acknowledge as best you can. Some examples of acknowledgement may be mirroring the student's energy, saying 'I'm not sure' or simply repeating the gestalt - for example:
 - Child: *You can count on us.* Teacher: *Yeah, you can count on us.*

Modify teacher talk for Gestalt Language Processors

- Adapt your language modelling for GLP.
- For analytical language processors, modelling single or two word combinations is recommended in the early stages of language acquisition. For GLP, model phrases instead - for example, '*let's go outside*' rather than '*outside*'. If you are teaching at whole class level, you can use switch between both when speaking to the whole class.
- Use similar phrase structures for GLP, for example '*let's go outside*', '*let's eat lunch*', '*let's use the bathroom*'. This helps support the understanding that words can be moved around (in this case '*let's*') to say different things.
- Focus on the communicative intent of student engagement and interaction. If you think a student may be a GLP, do not use responses to recast grammar or speech sound errors. Instead, focus on keeping the communication going in a meaningful way for you both.

Impact and Outcomes

It can be hard to measure the impact of changes to the mind-set around GLP and teacher talk. Try one of these strategies at a time, for at least a 4-6 week period. Be clear when in your day you will use the strategy and ask yourself at the end of each day, what difference did it make when I used it? Keep a record of the differences for you, the class as a whole and specific student(s) where relevant. Then pick a new strategy and begin the process again.

Reference List

- Blanc, M. (2012). Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum. COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT, [S.I.], 2012.
- Kapp, S.K. (2020). Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement.
- Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) | Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre (ed.ac.uk)
- NCSE Relate: A Regulation-First Approach to Reframing Behaviour and Supporting Student Engagement and Participation. (NCSE 2025). <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NCSE-Relate.pdf>
- NHS Trust Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership (2023). What is Gestalt Language Processing? Gestalt-Language-Processing.pdf (coventrychildrens.nhs.uk) Downloaded August 2024.
- Prizant, B. M. (1983). Language acquisition and communicative behavior in autism: Toward an understanding of the "whole" of it. *Journal of Speech & Hearing Disorders*, 48(3), 296–307. <https://doi.org/10.1044/jshd.4803.296>.
- Walker N. (2014) *Neurodiversity: Some basic terms and definitions*. Available at: <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (Retrieved, October 2024).
- Walker N, Raymaker DM. Toward a Neuroqueer Future: An Interview with Nick Walker. *Autism Adulthood*. 2021 Mar 1;3(1):5-10. doi: 10.1089/aut.2020.29014.njw. Epub 2021 Mar 18. PMID: 36601271; PMCID: PMC8992885.