

Language Skills in the Emergent Literacy of Spanish-Speaking Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract : Learning to read and write is a complex process involving several cognitive skills, contextual, and cultural environments. The basis of this development is linguistic skills, such as the ability to name and understand vocabulary, retell a story, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, among others. In children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), one of the main concerns is related to language disorders. Nevertheless, most of the children with ASD are able to decode written information but have difficulties in reading comprehension. The research of these processes in the Spanish-speaking population is limited. However, the increasing prevalence of this diagnosis (1 in 115 children) in Mexico has implications at different levels. Educational research is an important area of interest in ASD children, such as emergent literacy. Reading and writing expand the possibilities of academic, cultural, and social information access. Taking this information into account, the objective of this research was to identify the relationship between language skills, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and early reading and writing in ASD Spanish-speaking children. The method used for this research was based on tasks that were selected, adapted and in some cases designed to measure initial reading and writing, as well as language skills (naming, receptive vocabulary, and narrative skills), phonological awareness (similar phonological word pairs, beginning sound awareness and spelling) and letter knowledge, in a sample of 45 children (38 boys and 7 girls) with prior diagnosis of ASD. Descriptive analyses, as well as bivariate correlations, cluster analysis, and canonical correspondence, were obtained for the data results. Results showed that variability was large; however, it was possible to characterize the sample in low, medium, and high score groups regarding children performance. The low score group (46.7% of the sample), had a null or deficient performance in language skills and phonological awareness, some could identify up to five letters of the alphabet, showed no early reading skills but they could scribble. The middle score group was characterized by a highly variable performance in different tasks, with better language skills in receptive and naming vocabulary, some narrative, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness (beginning sound awareness) skills. The high score group, (24.4% of the sample) had the best performance in language skills in relation to the sample data, as well as in the rest of the measured skills. Finally, scores were canonically correlated between naming, receptive vocabulary, narrative, phonological awareness, letter knowledge and initial learning of reading and writing skills for the high score group and letter knowledge, naming and receptive vocabulary for the lower score group, which is consistent with previous research in typical and ASD children. In conclusion, the obtained data is consistent with previous studies. Despite large variability, it was possible to identify performance profiles and relations based on linguistic, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge skills. These skills were predictor variables of the initial development of reading and writing. The above has implications for a future program and strategies development that may benefit the acquisition of reading and writing in ASD children.

Keywords : autism, autism spectrum disorders, early literacy, emergent literacy

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