



### Abstract

Through an online survey conducted with certified speech-language pathologists (SLPs) from 23 U.S. states, this study sheds light on the complex process of assessing language skills in school-aged children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The responses gathered reveal the significant challenges SLPs face, stemming from the vast diversity within the ASD spectrum. These insights strongly suggest a need for adopting assessment strategies that are not only more adaptable and thorough, but also deeply mindful of neurodiversity and the distinct communication skills present in children with ASD.

### Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by impaired repetitive or stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests, social interaction challenges, and communication difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Conventional assessments often fail to fully capture the distinctive profiles exhibited by children with ASD, frequently neglecting their individual strengths and requirements (Braconnier & Siper, 2021). Consequently, there is an increasing consensus regarding the necessity for more dynamic and inclusive assessment methodologies that adhere to principles of neurodiversity (Dwyer, 2022).

### Purpose

1. Identify professional challenges and needs.
2. Catalog diverse assessment strategies for children with ASD.
3. Explore adaptations and innovations in language assessment. Contribute to the evolution of assessment methodologies.

### Research Questions

1. What are the primary assessment tools currently employed by professionals to evaluate language skills in school-age children with ASD, and how do these tools align with the neurodiversity paradigm?
2. What challenges and limitations are encountered in the use of current assessments, and how do these impact the evaluation of language skills in this population?
3. How do professionals adapt existing language assessments or employ alternative methods to better suit the diverse needs of children with ASD?

### Methodology

- Online survey distribution to approximately 800 certified SLP's across 46 states
- Data collected from 64 certified SLPs across 23 states
- Descriptive analysis of responses to close-ended questions
- Thematic analysis for responses to open-ended questions

### Results

#### Challenges in assessing language skills

Themes	Codes
<b>Resource Constraints</b>	Budget limitations, availability of appropriate tests, time-consuming process
<b>Assessment Adaptation</b>	High distractibility, poor sitting/attending ability, communication difficulties, maladaptive behaviors, varied functioning levels
<b>Standardized Testing Limitations</b>	Rigid frameworks, lengthy/complex prompts, deficit-focused, lack of neurodiversity affirming practices, non-applicable norms
<b>Rapport and Engagement Challenges</b>	Building rapport, engaging students, understanding interests, overstimulation risks
<b>Assessment Efficacy and Relevance</b>	Inaccurate strength reflection, lack of nonverbal assessments, finding strengths-based assessments, outdated tests
<b>Assessment Environment</b>	Behavioral barriers, attention and motivation issues, inappropriate reinforcement strategies

#### Adapt assessment techniques to accommodate diverse communication needs

Themes	Codes
<b>Individualization of Assessment</b>	Student-driven assessments, adapting to student responses in real-time
<b>Engagement Strategies</b>	Reinforcement with interests, frequent breaks, sensory accommodations
<b>Flexibility in Assessment Methods</b>	Using more rating scales and strengths-based checklists, Switching from standardized to observation/play-based activities
<b>Communication Adaptations</b>	Simplifying instructions, bilingual evaluations, use of AAC extended wait times
<b>Environmental and Sensory Considerations</b>	Understanding sensory needs, assessments in familiar settings or through familiar routines
<b>Parent and Environment Involvement</b>	Incorporating parent input, utilizing checklists for observations
<b>Use of Non-Standardized Assessments</b>	Dynamic assessments, utilizing a variety of tools, allowing multiple forms of communication
<b>Professional Development and Adaptation</b>	Continuous research, following neurodiverse-affirming movements, modifying techniques based on latest findings

Obtain assessment data using (select all that apply)

Q23 - Obtain assessment data using (select all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage
Standardized assessment	89%
Language sampling	97%
Dynamic assessment	86%
Parent and teacher questionnaire or interviews	100%
Observation	100%
Review portfolios of classroom work	56%
Other (please specify)	14%

### Discussion

1. The study reveals a diversity of assessment practices, indicating a shift towards individualized evaluation strategies tailored to the unique needs of children with ASD.
2. Significant barriers to effective assessment are identified, including the absence of tools specifically normed for the ASD population and the difficulty in adapting traditional assessments for this group.
3. These challenges complicate the assessment process and may obscure a comprehensive understanding of the child's linguistic capabilities and needs.
4. There is a clear call for innovative and flexible assessment tools that align with broader movements towards neurodiversity-affirming practices in education and therapy.

### Clinical Implications

1. Urge a shift towards flexible, inclusive assessment methods for ASD language skills.
2. Stress the value of input from multidisciplinary teams and individuals with ASD in developing new assessment tools.
3. Highlight the need for speech-language pathologists to undergo professional training in neurodiversity-affirming practices.
4. Call for collaborative design of assessment tools to better address the diverse needs of children with ASD.

### Key References

1. Braconnier, M. L., & Siper, P. M. (2021). Neuropsychological Assessment in Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 23(10), 63.
2. Vogindroukas, et al. (2022). Language and Speech Characteristics in Autism. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 18, 2367–2377.