

Our Children Lead Us Forward: The Real Importance of NLA

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Part 1: How language development is much more than communicating needs

Hello, colleagues.

And thanks to Anna Dvortcsak for continuing the conversation to include issues that surfaced in the earlier Hutchins et al., 2024 article, and then those in the Bryant et al. 2024 article.

I welcome this opportunity to reply, first to Anna's thoughts, specifically, "As speech-language pathologists, our role is to support individuals in communicating their needs in ways that promote independence and autonomy. Some of the concerns raised about specific interventions relate to the limited empirical evidence supporting certain strategies, as well as potential inconsistencies with existing research and clinical experience. This does not suggest that these approaches are ineffective for all individuals, nor does it negate individual successes. Rather, it highlights the need for further systematic research beyond individual case studies...I believe that many of the concerns center on treatment techniques and the current lack of robust empirical evidence supporting some interventions. While it is essential that we remain open to learning and evolving our practices, it is equally important that we do so thoughtfully, avoiding broad generalizations based on limited case studies without further investigation."

While this frame sounds both reasonable and familiar, it is not the one that began our research, that NLA embodies, or that proponents of NLA have since voiced. NLA research began with the premise, the theory if you will that Hutchins et al. questioned, that gestalt language development is natural. NLA describes the natural gestalt language development process. Period. It is not about "communicating...needs in ways that promote independence and autonomy." In the right hands, PECS can do that. Natural Language Acquisition documents language development that begins with echolalia, recognizing echolalia as the use of gestalt language; follows it through mitigated/changed echolalia, to natural isolation of single words at the 'brain shift' (which our field has always wanted to find/promote/prompt/teach but could not), and then through grammar development: full grammar development. Hutchins et al. 2024 found this incredulous; we find it the 'missing link.' Barry Prizant first labeled it Stage 3; we explain more here and elsewhere. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/nla-stage-3/>

That is all NLA is. It is huge, but that is all. It is not about "certain strategies," or "some interventions." It is not about all the things "naturalistic" therapies" have strived to promote: joint attention, for instance, that was assumed to be requisite to language development. NLA is not

about anything short of natural, complete grammatical language acquisition - not with strategies our field recognizes as requisite and required for an individual to "communicate their needs" - but with strategies that are those our 15-years of client-research lead us to. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/q-and-a/elementor-7024/>

Part 2: How our broadened lens of language development redefines our future

Hello again, colleagues, and another thanks to Anna Dvortcsak for inviting this continued conversation.

To refresh our memories, this conversation includes: "Marge Blanc's Reply to the Lorang et al., 2025: A Response to Blanc and Colleagues' Viewpoint on Gestalt Language Processing and the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol: Concerns and Common Ground" https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Blanc-M._-Gestalt-Language-Development-Gestalt-Language-Processing-2025.pdf

And also, Lorang et al., 2025 was a response to Blanc et al, 2023: "Using the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol to Support Gestalt Language Development" <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/blanc-et-al-2023-using-the-natural-language-acquisition-protocol-to-suppor.nt-1.pdf>

While this might sound rather confusing, even cursory reading shows the confusion is outside of NLA research and application of the resulting supports. NLA offers a way forward for clinicians, educators, and parents who support many children who are not developing language in the usual, expected way. Historically, we have thought of all such children as language disordered, but that was when we looked at them through the singular lens of the more typical analytic language development. While language-development challenges still exist, of course, one far-reaching advantage of Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) as a description of gestalt language development is broadening our lens of what is natural in terms of language development. As innumerable clinicians and parents all over the world now recognize the natural gestalt process in their own children (see for example, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/288902877598817>), we can now focus on true challenges such as self-regulation, motor development and access, processing differences, and applications in bilingual language development, AAC use, older individuals, literacy, and academic learning.

Such was the hope when our groundbreaking book, *Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: the Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language* was published in 2012. Addressing parents first, and clinicians second, our book was peer-reviewed by clinicians who understood, and illustrated with stories that represented natural variation during our 15 years of research with children who develop language the way Barry Prizant had predicted in 1983. We had hoped that focusing on gestalt language development in 85 children would allow us all to language development in every child, and then focus on the other true challenges children face.

A recounting of the success in recognizing our endeavors would not be complete without reiterating the roots that critics have failed to cite. This goes back to 1994 when I applied the then-understanding of the stages of gestalt language development developed by Barry Prizant. I was a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the time, mentoring graduate and undergraduate students, and applying the wisdom of Ann Peters, Amy Wetherby, and Barry Prizant, which were popular at the time.

In retrospect, had I not read Prizant's research I would have been very concerned when my client went from using full sentences to single words. How I first used the stages already described by Barry Prizant was to understand why my client went from saying, "I gotta get toys" in his sing-songy way to his very deliberate "I ... toys!" that sounded almost like stuttering. Without understanding the stages described by Prizant, I would have thought that he was regressing. But by recognizing these natural stages of gestalt language development, I was able to reassure his parents (and my students) and recognize that grammar would soon follow. Anyone like Bryant et al. who has not read this case history — the roots of our research — is invited to read this four part series. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/articles/finding-the-words-to-tell-the-whole-story/>

Part 3: The words of an Autistic educator, and self-described Gestalt Language Processor

Reviewed by the Autistic educator, Jaime Hoerricks, Ph. D. and self-described GLP, the series introduced NLA to new readers as a description of gestalt language development. Hoerricks wrote at length about its strengths, and described them as the essence of science. Formatted slightly differently for size, here are some relevant parts of Hoerricks' substack article, "**On Workflow as Evidence: How Blanc Published a Science the World Could Learn,**" November 21, 2025. The following is a direct, contiguous quotation, through the line "**Blanc's method taught itself through children.**"

Repeatability — The Pattern That Holds When Others Walk the Path

Repeatability is reliability's twin: the ability of others, working independently, to apply the same method and arrive at comparable results. It is the heart of scientific integrity. If a method works only for its creator, it is art. If it works for the world, it is science.

The NLA stages have been repeated across: early intervention programs, school-based speech therapy, multilingual homes, autistic adult language reclamation, trauma-informed clinics, community speech-language practices spanning multiple countries.

Everywhere the workflow is applied with fidelity, the arc appears: gestalts → mitigations → single words → analytic combinations. Even researchers who do not cite Blanc replicate her findings inadvertently, because the children themselves keep producing the data.

A method that can be repeated is a method that is real.

Systematic Organisation — The Method Made Legible

A workflow is not intuition. It is the organisation of resources, principles, and practices into a coherent method that others can follow without guesswork. Blanc understood this long before her critics accused her of informality.

Her clinic operated with a systematic structure: Transcription protocols that captured utterances faithfully, without forcing them into analytic categories, Relational methods that foregrounded safety, attunement, and authenticity as prerequisites for linguistic unfolding, Stage-based interpretive frames that gave meaning to the progression, allowing practitioners to recognise where a child was developmentally and how to respond. This organisation was not accidental. It was intentional, transparent, and replicable. It provided the scaffolding needed for reliability and repeatability to emerge—not through constraint, but through clarity.

Systematic organisation is the difference between a set of anecdotes and a body of evidence. Blanc built the structure; the field walked through it.

Documentation — The Record That Withstands Forgetting

In science, if it is not documented, it does not exist. Blanc documented everything. She published: the four-part *Autism–Asperger’s Digest* series (2005), capturing the first longitudinal case study; *Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum* (2012), known now as the Big Brown Book, laying out the full workflow with precision and clarity; decades of client records, transcriptions, and developmental mappings that trace the arc from gestalt to analytic language with meticulous care.

This documentation meets every evidentiary standard: transparent, traceable, reviewable, and rooted in lived practice. It forms a long, patient record that anyone can follow. And because she made it accessible—to parents, clinicians, educators—the data did not remain trapped in an ivory tower. It lived. It circulated. It informed practice.

Documentation is the spine of science.

Blanc gave the world a spine strong enough to bear decades of scrutiny.

Learnability — The Method the World Carried Forward

A workflow becomes scientific when it is not only documented but teachable—when others can learn it, adopt it, and integrate it into their own practice with fidelity. This is where Blanc’s contribution becomes unmistakable. The NLA framework spread the way effective methods

always spread: through resonance, clarity, and the visible success of those who use it. Its learnability is evident in the global community that now practices it: hundreds of clinicians whose training pathways trace back to Blanc's original publications; parents who recognise their child's developmental arc in real time; autistic adults who use the framework to make sense of their own communication history; educators who finally understand that gestalt language processors were never "delayed"—they were simply unfolding differently.

The method is visible.

The method is teachable.

The method is reproducible.

A workflow that can be learned is a workflow that survives.

A workflow that survives becomes a scientific lineage.

Blanc's work does not merely satisfy these pillars—it exemplifies them. Each one reinforces the next, until the structure becomes undeniable: a scientific method lived out in real time, in real rooms, with real children. A method documented, replicated, and carried forward by the very people the academy overlooked.

This is what science looks like when it is freed from its gatekeepers. This is what evidence becomes when it is allowed to breathe.

Blanc's Workflow as Published Science

If the pillars establish what a scientific workflow is, this section turns to what Blanc actually did. And when we place her work against the criteria—not aspirationally but functionally—the result is unmistakable. She did not operate in pre-scientific intuition. She operated in method. She published a workflow so clearly, so transparently, and so accessibly that the field absorbed it almost by osmosis.

This is what published science looks like when it is written for the people who need it, not for the people who police it.

She Shared the Method — Public, Plainspoken, Precise

Blanc did something the academy rarely respects but practitioners immediately understand: she wrote plainly. She wrote for parents. For clinicians. For the people who needed the knowledge in order to act on it, not for reviewers who needed it siphoned into jargon to avoid contamination by care.

In those early *Autism–Asperger’s Digest* articles, she: defined the stages of gestalt language development with clarity and humility; traced their emergence through real examples, not abstracted curves; offered clinicians tools for identifying where a child was situated in the developmental arc; explained how meaning lived inside gestalts long before analytic syntax emerged. In doing so, she bypassed the academic gate entirely. She placed the method in the hands of the community—openly, intentionally, and without pretense.

She did what scientists used to do before science became a performance: she shared the method so others could follow it.

The World Learned It — Not as Theory, but as Practice

What happened next is telling. The method did not spread the way ideological fads spread—with slogans, brand identities, or institutional marketing. It spread because it worked.

SLPs and SLTs learned it in: conference sessions; hands-on workshops; webinars that circled the globe in real time; parent communities desperate for meaning; clinical trainings where new practitioners recognised the children in front of them in the pages of her book.

The learning was not aspirational; it was applied. Clinicians didn’t have to ‘believe in’ NLA. They only had to try it, and watch the pattern unfold. **And once they saw it, they couldn’t unsee it. Real science teaches itself through effect. Blanc’s method taught itself through children.”**

Here is the link to the original sub stack article by Jaime Hoerricks: https://open.substack.com/pub/outside/p/the-workflow-as-evidence-how-blanc?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Hoerricks’ take on the original Blanc, 2005 article highlights the value of the stages, which are now validated via NLA research — and how they explain what children are doing naturally. You can find that original article here <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/articles/finding-the-words-to-tell-the-whole-story/>

It's interesting to note that, even in 1983, gestalt language development was seen as fluid and natural, and that, in 1994, the original four stages described the process I saw with my first GLP client. As Hoerricks notes, if it’s real, it’s recognizable. But even so, realizing the need for more longitudinal research, Barry Prizant inspired me to continue my research for fifteen years.

The irony today is **that first case study was the birth of NLA**; a pivotal article describes it; an Autistic GLP describes it in detail. And yet, that article fails to make the mark when Bryant et al.

were looking for articles that showed how NLA was used to support language development! "Eighteen scientific databases and three clinical trial registries were searched. Records were also collected located through open calls, hand search of reference lists, a general web search, and topic domain websites. Only commentary papers, editorials, and book chapters or books describing GLP/NLA were located. The systematic search and review of records identified no empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of approaches related to GLP/NLA...There is an apparent lack of empirical evidence in the form of treatment studies to examine, evaluate, or support NLA for children identified as 'gestalt language processors' or 'GLPs'. Clinicians working with children with neurodevelopmental communication disability have an ethical responsibility to ensure parents are informed of the apparent lack of research into these practices."

Somehow, **in spite of our 2005 article - and our 2012 book - Bryant et al. concluded**, "In the absence of any empirical evidence to support the use of interventions for individuals labeled as Gestalt Language Processors, or using a natural language acquisition framework, clinicians, parents, and other professionals must exercise caution when considering any use of this **contested and controversial approach** to intervention. While anecdotal reports draw heavily on an emotional response, serious questions around the validity of any underlying theory, and a lack of rigorous, replicable and transparent evidence should be at the forefront of critical reasoning prior to implementation of any GLP/NLA-type intervention."

Before we conclude this part of our response, might we query whether there was any 'controversy' before 2024. ASHA reported that our peer-reviewed article, Blanc et al. 2023 was the most-read article of 2023. When did the 'controversy' begin? March 2024. It is now December 2025. Might we call an end to this 'contest'?

We would submit that it's a disservice to Autistic people, to GLPs everywhere — and their parents, clinicians, and educators to try to pull back the curtains of time. NLA resonates. The research is clear — and 2005, and 2012 were a long time ago. We are a world-wide movement now. Why? Because the truth of Gestalt Language Development has been witnessed thousands of times by now. Children go through the NLA Stages in a year, two years, three years, or more years depending on their age. We have ways of sharing information from clinician to clinician now - and from clinician to parent and back again - that bypass the Bryant et al. style of gatekeeping. We continue to amass data; our sharing is now about older individuals who begin their language development journey at age 10, 12, 15, 19, 21. These are the individuals we are researching now. And the dual processors...and the bilingual children...and the variety of AAC users.

May we continue on as we have been since 2005. Please join us. One way to catch up is to read the free NLA Guide <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/articles/the-natural-language-acquisition-guide-echolalia-is-all-about-gestalt-language-development/> and to watch our free webinars. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/nla-overview/> Testimonials from

parents and clinicians who are witnessing Natural Language Acquisition from echolalia/gestalt language through Stage 3 single word isolation, to grammar, to a full grammar at Stage 6 increase exponentially every day. Please ask us about an NLA Study Group you can join.

We all have a lot yet to do. We have a solid past; but a lot to do into the future. Please join us!
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Thank you!

Marge