



Jaime Hoerricks

HOLISTIC  
LANGUAGE  
INSTRUCTION

Addressing Literacy in Standard and  
Non-Standard Populations

Education Studies

Collection Editor  
**JANISE HURTIG**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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## **Abstract**

Guided by a lived experience point of view, Holistic Language Instruction reveals a flaw in an assumption that underpins many of the world's educational systems: that there is only one way that humans learn language. The data show that this flaw has left about 40 per cent of the world's English language learners behind in the development of their language skills. Are these students disabled? Or does the system disable them when it does not address the way in which their brains acquire and process language? When these learners begin to fall behind their peers in their educational journey, they may be placed in a special education program, assigned to a speech and language professional, or simply ignored. Given that language processing differences have no connection with intellect, what if these learners could be easily accommodated within the general population of students and progress through school with their peers? This book first informs the reader of the issue, explains why the current paradigm fails so many learners, presents the different language processing models, then charts a path forward for current and future educators, parents, and caregivers to support the growth of English language literacy in all learners.

## **Key words**

English Language Instruction; English Language Learner; Science of Reading; Natural Language Acquisition; Gestalt Language Processing; Non-Verbal Autism; Disability Studies; Special Education & Teaching Studies.





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# 1

## Introduction

### Learning objective

Students will be able to synthesize the elements of the Natural Language Acquisition model and its relation to learning English in standard and non-standard learner populations.

“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” – Kong Fuzi (孔夫子).

### Rationale

The learning goal requires students to synthesize information about the Natural Language Acquisition model from multiple sources and contexts (standard and non-standard learner populations). Students must integrate this information to demonstrate understanding of how the model relates to teaching and learning the English language across different groups.

This aligns well to the Common Core standards (e.g., CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.11-12.7) which require integrating information from multiple formats / media to address a question or problem. Students must pull together information about the model itself as well as examples from different populations to synthesize how the model applies in various contexts. This demonstrates

the ability to integrate and evaluate multiple sources to address the underlying question.

When designing the chapters of this book, I have intentionally incorporated instructional approaches encouraged by the Common Core standards. These include emphasizing nonfiction texts, analytical writing, cross-curricular skills, and utilizing technology / media. In essence, university instruction can be partially shaped by the approaches championed by the Common Core as academics bring aspects of those pedagogical shifts into their own teaching and course design even without formal adoption of the standards in a particular setting. The Common Core has rippled into higher education by influencing the instructional materials, activities, and structural decisions made by instructional designers seeking to build key transferable skills.

## **Meet the author**

Hello and welcome to Holistic Language Instruction. My name is Dr Jaime Hoerricks, the author of this text and your guide through this journey. By way of introductions, many professional cultures ask participants to share a fun fact about themselves. I'll begin. I happen to be autistic, a gestalt language processor (aka, non-verbal), and was functionally illiterate when I graduated from high school in Southern California in 1988. These elements of my identity have a lot to do with the fact that I am the proud owner of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) diagnostic code 6A02.2, "Autism Spectrum Disorder without disorder of tellectual development and with impaired functional language" (WHO, 2021a, 2021b), information that wasn't available to me when I was going through school as a child. Back then, I was just "different", perhaps a bit "odd".

To me, this isn't some random or trivial point. It is an important factor in this text. You see, for many years various communities have asked that future work focus on those areas that improve their members' day-to-day lives. Also, that there needs to be more involvement from members of the targeted communities in research as well as in the creation and publication of materials that are offered to or for them. This work is an attempt to do just that, to feature someone who was failed by the traditional educational system yet found a path to a sustainable and happy life. In doing so, it features the work of a now special education teacher with a diverse range of lived experiences. These experiences reinforce the central premise of this text: that how, when, and where one learns language, particularly the English language, depends entirely upon how one's language acquisition and processing centers function. This implies, of course, that there is more than one way in which humans can learn the English language. I'll get to that shortly. But first, a bit more about me and what brought me to write this book.

## **My educational background**

In my almost six decades on this planet, I've managed to earn both a Bachelor and a Master degree in Organizational Leadership from Woodbury University, a Master of Education – Instructional Design, from Western Governors University, a Master of Education – Special Education, from Loyola Marymount University, and a PhD in Education from Trident University. I've earned a 150-hour certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I've earned a 40-hour certificate from my

school district's training and development division in the Orton-Gillingham method. I've also earned a 90-hour Early Literacy certificate from Atlanta's Rollins Center for Language and Literacy. I did all of this, beginning when I was 36 years old and was supporting my rather large family working as a forensic scientist for the City of Los Angeles.

How I got there, or how I came to be in the employ of the City of Los Angeles as a functionally illiterate adult, and how it is that I am now a special education teacher and literacy specialist is an interesting story. The path, and the lessons learned, will be woven throughout this text. I will use them to illustrate the points of what holistic language instruction can look like at various stages of one's life. I thus offer myself as the exemplar, as well as a few of my willing former students, to provide the "mass" of the item under study. In this way, topics become less abstract and more practical.

## **What does it mean to be illiterate?**

First, let's dive into the difference between illiterate and functionally illiterate. Illiterate generally refers to someone who lacks basic reading and writing skills and is unable to understand written text or write coherently. They may struggle with recognizing letters, forming words, or comprehending written information. Illiteracy, in this sense, is often associated with a lack of formal education or limited access to quality education (Vágvölgyi et al., 2016), though it can find its roots in language deficits in the brain.

Functionally illiterate, on the other hand, usually describes people who have some basic reading and writing skills but still struggle to use these skills effectively. While they may be able to read

simple texts or even write basic sentences, they may have difficulty comprehending complex instructions, filling out forms, or engaging in tasks that require advanced literacy skills often found in adult life. The functionally illiterate often have wide gaps in their reading and writing abilities that hinder their overall literacy proficiency (Semingson and Kerns, 2021).

My having been functionally illiterate is separate from my being a gestalt language processor, also known in the autistic community as being “non-verbal”. Non-verbal is not the same as non-vocal or non-speaking, though many confuse these two concepts. The term non-verbal speaks to the way the human brain acquires, learns, and / or processes language. Gestalt language processing (GLP) is the big technical term for the way the “non-verbal” brain processes language (Prizant, 1982; Blanc, 2012). This language processing style is not unique to autistic people, though many of us use GLP. The other way humans process language is called analytic language processing (ALP). We’ll cover both in more detail later. Here, I just wanted to introduce the terms.

With these ideas in mind, how does one graduate from school functionally illiterate? It’s easier than you might think. Let me explain.

## **Taking a step back – traditional language instruction in elementary schools in the US**

I attended elementary school in the 1970s in the United States. Then and there, schools favored the “traditional” approach to language instruction. The “traditional”, grammar-based approach

featured vocabulary building and the development of the four main skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It was, and still is, a teacher-centered instructional approach that relies heavily upon lectures (also called modeling), memorization, and drills. Assessments are given and scores received. Then, students move on (Lightbown and Spada, 2021). Students moved on, not because they were necessarily ready to move on, but because the schedule dictated the pace. I saw the results of this practice in my own life manifest in gaps in my language skills, one that built gap upon gap (Mason and Sinha, 1992) over the course of my schooling.

We would say today that those teachers taught to the center of the room. Assessment data really didn't inform instruction in any way that I can remember. There was a certain plan and pace that teachers meant to keep, and we kept it (Juel, 1988). A student like me could easily hide in a large classroom, relying upon eager peers to provide cover when a teacher would ask for a student to demonstrate their proficiency to the class (Davidson, 2021).

When I would occasionally get called upon, I would panic. This time was long before the world would come into an awareness of the traits, strengths, and limitations that now place me on the autism spectrum. I didn't have free-flowing conversational skills like my peers. I didn't have the decoding skills needed to decipher what was on the page. I would wait, then the teacher would prompt, and then I would improvise using my mental bank of language scripts (gestalts) – a behavior known as delayed echolalia (Prizant and Rydell, 1984), which is common among autistic people (Fay, 1969).



My improvisation relied upon a mind that processed chunks of language scripts, gestalts. It didn't do so letter by letter, understanding all the rules of the English language. Rather, it absorbed how the chunks of language sounded and felt, as well as the contexts in which they were discovered. My alexithymia assisted, unconsciously, in gathering the emotions of the speaker as they spoke their words (Taylor, 1984), and the feelings within the room as they were spoken (Kinnaird, Stewart, and Tchanturia, 2019). In my panic at a request to read aloud or respond to a question, my brain would assemble a reply that it believed would satisfy the request. Early on, I was comically inept. My replies tended toward the nonsensical, never seeming to correlate with the requests. Later, with practice and as my storehouse of sounds, words, and feelings developed, they became more coherent. In short, as I grew up, I become more adept at using my delayed and immediate echolalia to communicate (Prizant, 1982, 1983; Prizant and Duchan, 1981; Prizant and Rydell, 1984; Stiegler, 2015).

## **Early echolalia**

Much of what was known in the West about autism and communication then was guided by the works of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. A few generations ago, only the most profound cases of communication deficits were referred to specialists. Unknown in the West were the works of the early Soviets; Sukhareva, Vygotsky, and their compatriots (Smagorinsky, 2013; Vasileva and Balyasnikova, 2019; Vygotsky, 2012). Sadly, the western countries would only learn of their work after the fall of the "Iron Curtain". I say sadly because their work seems to my mind more humane, more holistic. While Asperger, for example, studied autism to

determine the functioning levels of autistic children and adults as part of Nazi scientific racism, and thus who would live and who would be “relieved of their suffering” for the good of the family and the Volk (Hoerricks, 2023), the work of the Soviet scientists seemed to look for root causes so appropriate supports could be given (New and Kyuchukov, 2022; Simmonds, 2019).

These early Soviet doctors looked at autism in a systemic fashion. They noted that autistic children often displayed motor disorders, including problems with muscle tone and coordination. They wondered if there was a connection between the severity of motor disorders and the child’s emotional state. They studied how language and speech were also affected in autism, with prosody (pace, rhythm, and voice modulation) often being disrupted. In severe cases, they observed, children may experience either selective or total mutism. However, they observed, when the child’s emotional condition improved, there was often a transition from repeating words and phrases (echolalia) to more meaningful communication (New and Kyuchukov, 2022). The later, and seemingly unconnected, work of Prizant (1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985) and Blanc (2012) would show them to be completely spot-on.

For me, echolalia combined with alexithymia meant that I was pretty good at mimicry. When I ingested language from others, it came with the emotional content, tone, tenor, and intonation. In my multi-ethnic and multilingual melting pot of city and schools, I had built an assortment of phrases in English, Spanish, German, Russian, and Armenian. Some of these languages seemed to go better together, like English and German, with similar sounds and meanings. Others seemed light years away from what I knew of

English, like Russian and Armenian (Bodmer, 1944). I worked hard at sounding correct in each language and dialect that I repeated in response to questions and requests, trying to match what was coming out of my mouth with how the words sounded and felt in the theater of my mind. Sometimes, the languages got confused in delivery, a German response to a Spanish prompt or the wrong word / phrase returned, much to the endless delight of my peers.

## **Middle school years**

In the US, it's assumed that by the time one leaves the primary grades and heads off to middle school that one knows how to read and comprehend the English language. I didn't. I knew some sight words and could string some words together when asked to read aloud, but I had no comprehension skills. When I would be tasked with reading a passage aloud, I would struggle mightily if I had never encountered the words before. Often, the teachers would get impatient and move on to a student who could keep pace with their schedule for the day. At no time did any of my teachers attempt to intervene to find out if I could read or try to teach me the fundamentals of reading.

Middle school, for me, was a rough time. It's embarrassing when you have severe gaps in your skills. I was the butt of jokes and received a ton of teasing and bullying. Puberty was hitting. The last thing that I wanted to do was to stay at school and work on my reading. In fact, I couldn't wait to get out each day.

California had seemingly invested a lot of money in its schools and reading programs. In 1965, its governor signed the Miller-Unruh

Act into law. According to the Act, the intent and purpose of the law was “the prevention of reading disabilities and the correction of reading disabilities at the earliest possible time in the educational career of the pupil”. (Sparks, 1968) The Act was directed toward what it called “reading success” for students in the primary grades. It provided funds for the salaries of reading specialists, as well as for scholarships to develop new specialists and librarians (Sparks, 1968). I saw no evidence that any of the programs funded by the Act were present at my school in suburban Los Angeles County.

Diving into reports from that time frame, 1982–1984, one finds that the situation in public schools mirrors what we see today. There were teacher shortages. There were funding shortages. There was a disconnect between what the state aspired to and the results that it managed to deliver. The data showed that California students were average readers in primary school but slipped below the national average in middle and high school. Not much can be found in the literature about what was meant to be done about this. So many of us slipped through the cracks (Guthrie and Kirst, 1985).

In a general sense, we were presented with a range of literature, including novels, short stories, poems, and plays. Through lecture, we were instructed on how to analyze the literary elements, such as plot, character development, theme, and figurative language. The curriculum aspired to foster a love for reading and develop critical thinking skills in us. It was long on aspiration and short on results.

Thinking back, I can recall a time when we were going to analyze Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in the eighth grade. I panicked at the

thought of having to read that twisted English aloud. A few days and nights of panic gave way to a ray of sunshine. I remembered that there were lots of these classic stories on the local public broadcasting channel. I wondered if the local library had copies of these films. I managed to string together a query to the library staff. Somehow, they arranged to have the 1953 Marlon Brando version of the film made available at the library for me to watch. The film was amazing. The dialogue, thankfully, was very close to the original play. I was able to absorb some of it as I sat and watched, building what I thought might be helpful scripts for later use in the classroom. I tried to focus on those scenes that felt very impactful. If only I could know ahead of time which parts I would have to read.

Alas, it didn't matter. The teacher, perhaps sensing that I wouldn't do well, never called upon me to participate in the table reads. But I learned a valuable lesson. The library staff would be vital to my ability to move through school. That, and in the days before plagiarism checking software, I had my own "William Forester" (Davis-McElligatt and Roth, 2012). There, I had a whole building full of sentence and paragraph starters. As a hint towards my later work with "mentor texts", the writings of the world's best authors were there for me to sample and build any paper that might be required (Chidiac, 2019). All I had to do was ask the staff where to find books on the subject at hand.

## **High school years**

The teachers at my high school were a mix of those nearing retirement, and young, eager, and passionate 20-somethings. Class sizes were quite large. In most of my classes, it was easy to

sit in the back of the room and not participate. There were no “checks for understanding”. There were very few lively discussions on topics of our choosing. There were the texts and the assignments. There were monologues from our teachers and quiet time for work. There was no such thing as “student voice” or “windows and mirrors” in the 1980s in Southern California’s public schools.

When I entered high school, I was 13 years old. I was also 6’2” and quite athletic. I was encouraged to join the freshman basketball team, later becoming its star. Given my size, I frequently practiced with the varsity squad. With this bit of popularity came friends. These friends were a source of academic help. I could ask them questions after practice. I could meet them on weekends to “study together”. I had become quite adept at social engineering.

Of course, I had no idea what social engineering was or that I was engaged in it. My pattern-recognizing autistic mind, paired with the way it processed, stored, sorted, and utilized language scripts, worked out ways in which to ask questions that seemed to get the responses I was after. Contrary to the view that all autistics lack social skills or miss social cues, it turns out that some of us can develop this social engineering skill to a fine art (Scullin-Esser, 1988; Simpson, Ganz, and Mason, 2012).

I had a few “go-to” scripts. Usually, I would ask a friend from class, “Man, [teacher’s name]. What are we going to do?” They might respond, “I know. It’s crazy. Let’s meet at [location] and work on it. Hopefully, we can finish in time.” We’d meet. They’d verbally process their anxiety over the project. I’d gather the information they were sending out verbally and do my best to throw together what they were saying on a page of my own. Perhaps

it was coherent. I doubt that it was. I soon found that few of my teachers read what we submitted. Armed with that information, my course through high school was set.

Over the four years, I made friends with the smart kids. I did my best to organize study sessions where I could mine them for helpful information. During tests, I cheated as best as I was able. When I couldn't, I failed the tests miserably. On balance, I did well enough to graduate towards the top of my class and left with a 3.8 grade point average (GPA). That fact alone is why I place little value on GPAs to this day.

Before you judge my use of "mentor texts", social engineering, and cheating on tests, consider that how one views cheating depends upon one's point of view. Was I not the one being cheated out of a "free and appropriate public education", what we now call FAPE? After all, it's often the case that younglings lack the moral judgment to fully comprehend why cheating on exams might be wrong, even if they feel the system itself is treating them unfairly. Their underdeveloped faculty for ethical reasoning, combined with a penchant for self-interest, and peer pressure in adolescence, can lead them to rationalize unethical actions they would later regret. (Side bar: I don't regret it.) However, rather than condemn, we must seek to educate. Which is my point here. Never mind. Let's move on.

## **Adult, and illiterate in college**

It is expensive to be illiterate as an adult (LaI, 2015). When I speak on the subject now, I ask the audience if they can name the most expensive thing on the planet. The answers range from

cyber-currencies to precious metals. I say simply that it's ignorance. Ignorance is expensive.

Being a successful athlete in high school, my grades and test scores didn't matter. All that was required of me to play my first semester of college football was a 2.0 GPA in high school. Standardized tests like the SAT and ACT weren't considered if one had over a 3.0 GPA. With a 3.8 high school GPA, I was considered ready to play. Yet, something was missing. I had never taken a foreign language in high school. The thought terrified me, so I avoided it. I had trouble enough learning one language, why would I want to torture myself learning another at school (Krashen, 1981)? Besides, it wasn't needed for graduation. However, I found out during my senior year that my lacking this "core requirement" meant that I would not be eligible to receive any of the five Division 1 scholarship offers I had received to play football – and go to college for free. Thus, it was off to community college.

Though it was a community college, my first destination after high school was a "football school". None of the classes I attended were rigorous. All were packed with football players. Nothing much was expected of us, save for showing up. Yet, as an illiterate student, I struggled to succeed even in those classes. After an injury in my first semester and a cross-state transfer, I couldn't handle the rigorous college classes at a "regular school". I was left to fend for myself in regular classes. I didn't do well.

I liked being on campus, however. I wanted to stay. I managed to figure out that I could take short-term courses, withdraw at the last moment without penalty, then register for other short-term



courses, and eventually make it to the end of the school year. But, in doing this, I earned very few credits. Eventually, I found classes that didn't feature much reading or writing. For example, I took wine tasting, twice. I received credit for an internship. Thus, I was able to string together enough credits over four years of trying to earn an associate degree in Political Science.

The thought of transferring to a four-year university course frightened me. I did not see a way to duplicate what I had done in community college at the local state school. Besides, I needed a break. I worked as a construction laborer for a bit. Then I worked as a security guard. Then in a warehouse. Then as a janitor. Another job had me as driver and bodyguard to a women's sport fashion magnate. None of these jobs paid much. None required me to read. I know now that all my past employers took advantage of the fact that I couldn't read to cheat me out of wages, overtime, and some benefits.

It's safe to say that every single employer from the time that I left college in 1992 until I returned to college 13 years later took advantage of the fact that I couldn't comprehend what was put in front of me to read. This caused me problems with the Internal Revenue Service. This caused me problems with my banks. I signed up for an auto loan that I couldn't really afford. I made just about every financial mistake that one could make because I didn't understand the adult world, I didn't have someone looking out for me anymore, and I couldn't read.

## **Seeing the light**

In the late 1990s, I was back in California after wandering and working across the US, then wandering and working across

western Europe; finally living and working in rural southwestern Germany. I was attempting to put an adult life together. After the death of my grandmother, I was trying to connect with my extended family. I was introduced to the head of my Scottish kindred or clan, the Clan MacFarlane, who happened to live in Southern California. He was a few years older than me and lived a rock-star lifestyle. At the time, I was 6'7" and almost 400lb, and was winning championships in the Scottish Highland Games. I was a giant. He offered me a job as his ghillie.

A ghillie, in traditional Scottish culture, handles the Laird's affairs outside of the house. They supervise and act as steward to the lands and all that live on the estate. They can be a hunting or fishing guide. They can also serve as bodyguard and collection agent. It was this latter function that my new employer had in mind for me. With me by his side, he feared no man. With me leading the way into his customers' businesses, he left no debt uncollected. It was decent work. And it didn't require that I read.

As I got to know him and his family, I met his grandmother and his aunt who were in business together. I found out that they were quite famous. They were Dottie and Lilly Walters of Speak and Grow Rich fame, and the Walters' Speaker Service. They knew absolutely everyone. They were excellent businesspeople. And, more importantly, they had the knack of sizing up people in an instant.

Dottie quickly recognized that something wasn't quite right with me. When she would ask me to go get a box of books for shipping, for example, I struggled to find the right one. She asked me about the errors. I trusted her enough to tell her of my struggles.

She cared enough to take some time out of her very busy schedule to get me started on my path to literacy. Again, she knew absolutely everyone in so many professional spaces and connected me with some of her clients whom she believed would be a great fit to mentor and tutor me to a functional literacy.

It was around this time that my employer, and now friend, became a Freemason. At first, the nights that he would attend Lodge were nights off for me. He didn't need help or protection in Lodge. Plus, as a non-member, there wasn't much that I would be able to do there. That all changed about six months later when he invited me to join him at their monthly dinner.

Walking in the door of North Hollywood Lodge for the first time was like the splitting of the atom for me. As I stepped into the foyer and looked around, my eyes feasted upon a visual treasure trove. Much like the stained glass works of the world's finest cathedrals, Masons have instructional artworks called Tracing Boards (Rees, 2019). Adorning the walls of this amazing temple to knowledge were beautiful panels that depicted the symbols, and thus the lessons, of the Degrees of Freemasonry.

I stood for what seemed like forever, soaking it all in. At once, I felt welcome and included. Here, this ancient fraternity seemed to take the time to support their lessons with beautiful visual aids. A dozen questions popped into my mind. Then hundreds. Then ... meltdown. It was very overwhelming to my autistic system to be confronted with all this wisdom and beauty without any warning and preparation. My problems with functional language conspired against me. My panic and anxiety worked together with my fight / flight / freeze response to render me almost catatonic.

Yet, inside, my synapses were exploding joyfully at the possibilities found within this new space. One lone thought managed its way through the chaos, "I'm home."

## **Order from chaos**

Over dinner, I didn't have the headspace or the scripts to engage in meaningful conversations. I could manage my name and the fact that I worked for one of the Lodge's new members. I found out that, contrary to popular belief, membership in an American Masonic Lodge is not all that exclusive. In fact, Lodges do not invite people to membership. All that is necessary is for the person to ask for an application. Now, to be sure, there's a bit of a vetting process. But it's a lot easier to join Freemasonry than people think (Hoerricks, 2010).

Sensing my excitement, and my lack of words, Michael handed me an application. The rest of the evening was a multisensory blur, an overload to my autistic system. 20 years later, I can still feel the joy and relief of finding a place that seemed to get me.

I brought the application home. My wife had a ton of questions. I had few answers. I struggled to describe what happened and how I felt. I think she sensed that it was a positive thing and trusted me enough to let me explore this new avenue. After all, we autistics often lack opportunities to socialize. Here, with Freemasonry, the Lodges were filled with serious men – mature, masculine men. Men who believed that the improvement of oneself was a desirable goal and helped each other selflessly towards its attainment.

I didn't think too much about the downsides of joining such a venerable institution. I was caught up in the joy of the moment.

I turned in my application, paid my fees, and reported to the Lodge for my initiation. It was an amazingly transformational night (Hoerricks, 2010).

The highs of the night's events were countered by the crushing low of the knowledge of a task given to each Mason. To progress through the Degrees of Freemasonry in California, one must memorize a portion of the preceding ritual's dialogue and recite it back to the membership in open Lodge. Indeed, this is how one demonstrates one's "proficiency" in most US-based Lodges.

Panic! Terror! What have I gotten myself into? Me? Memorize a script and recite it back? I was crushed.

My panic and terror were informed by a life unsupported. Yet there, in my new home, I would have all the support that I would need. Brotherly love meant that my new Lodge brothers would find a way to help me accomplish my obligations. Relief meant that they had already encountered this issue and had a solution. In fact, the solution was hundreds of years old, hidden within the phrase "the instructive tongue, and the attentive ear" (Hoerricks, 2010; Rees, 2019). This meant that the instructional staff, my new brothers, would vocalize the lines I was to retain and recite. I would listen and repeat. We would practice on Lodge nights in the comfort of the Lodge's lounge. I could watch the ritual performance as many times as I needed. We could take as long as necessary, the ancient fraternity being in no hurry. This system would help me build the bank of gestalts necessary to succeed and progress.

On the night that I was to deliver my first proficiency, again, panic and terror. Yet, within the membership was a brother who was new, like me. He happened to be a psychiatrist. In getting to

know me over the preceding months, he recognized the signs that I might have functional language difficulties and other mental processing problems, then known as Asperger's Disorder. He made referrals and got me on the path to an eventual diagnosis (Hoerricks, 2023). But more importantly, on that night he sat with me as I gave my recital. He quietly prompted me when I would miss a line or stall in my recollection. In doing so, he helped me get through one of the more terrifying moments of my adult life. He would do it twice more over the next year as I made my progress towards becoming a Master Mason.

## **Lessons learned**

When I was raised a Master Mason in early 2004, I was finally beginning to use originally created basic grammar. I was beginning to piece together appropriate vocabulary and respond to questions coherently when surprised with an unanticipated vocal exchange. Where before I had relied upon echolalia and heavy mental scripting, I could now operate more extemporaneously. I practiced my new skill in those small talk situations at the monthly Lodge dinners and other Masonic social events. Gradually, I branched out into other spaces with my newly developed skill, even exploring the occupational therapy aspects of improv theater at the suggestion of my care team.

Reflecting upon this journey, I can see the stages in my language development as an unsupported non-verbal autistic (Prizant, 1982, 1983). For years, decades almost, I was stuck around level three or level four of my development, relying upon a couple of words or some simple, trusted phrases to communicate. With my new diagnoses, and the emerging internet, I set about