

Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Special Education, Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, June 9-11, 1994.

Task Analysis in Teaching Living Skills to Visually Impaired Pupils with Additional Handicaps

A programme of practical life skills, including food studies, household, laundry, self care and consumer studies is implemented using task analysis techniques which provide an on-going method of assessing both the progress of the pupils and the suitability of the course.

JILL FLATT is Head of the Living Skills department at Henshaws College, a college for students with visual impairment, at Harrogate, England.

INTRODUCTION

The Living Skills department at Henshaws College, Harrogate, responds to the needs of a constantly changing client group who have increasingly complex combinations of difficulties. At one stage visual impairment would be the only criterion for a student attending Henshaws, but we now welcome students for whom visual impairment is just one of their problems. Our challenge is to prioritise need and to develop schemes that will educate these "crack and crevice syndrome" students (Bantu E.1971), balancing provision to accommodate each of their handicaps. Task analysis has been used both in determining content and in presenting a programme to the students which "provides systematic and consistent instruction" (Swallow and Huebner, 1987).

BACKGROUND

Interpretation of the term "Living Skills" is perhaps broader than for any other area of the curriculum. This is reflected by the diversity of titles and course contents in this field of education. Equally, there are extremely flexible parameters as to what is and is not included in this area of learning. While this flexibility represents challenge and excitement for teachers in the area, they are conscious also of possible difficulties. These can arise from either a focus which

is too narrow in terms of content and method or, conversely, is one which is so diverse that little control can be kept over what is taught, how it is taught and by whom it is taught. Programmes should also have the capacity to respond to the individual student's needs both in terms of content and methodology. Other factors to be considered are the nature (and combination) of handicap(s), circumstances and age of onset, the intelligence and personality of the student as well as his/her cultural, educational and social background.

STRUCTURE OF OUR PROGRAMME

The programme used at Henshaws is divided into five main skill areas namely: Food, Household, Laundry, Self Care and, most recently, Consumer Studies. This programme has been developed over the last six years gradually being "fine tuned" in response to student needs, (although we would never be so complacent as to consider it perfect!) All skills are taught practically, supporting the premise that "children with visual impairment need access to first hand experiences wherever possible" (Best, 1992). The most recent influence on our programme has been the U.K. National Curriculum which although not connected in any way regarding content and skills, has lent its format and terminology. As well as "tightening" the structure of our programme and facilitating continuity across subject areas, the National Curriculum has been an influence in encouraging greater specificity in report writing.

The levels worked on in our curriculum are not linked with the year that the student is in. Students work at their own pace taking as long as they need to achieve skills and having the opportunity to review work as necessary. One area for caution is when showing the programme to parents as they can become very discouraged when they realise that their child is "only" achieving at one of the lower levels and perhaps has been on these same levels for a while. For this reason we discuss each student's present level of attainment in the programme in relation to the projected level of attainment for that student. This helps to put their actual attainment into perspective.

WHAT ARE WE AIMING FOR?

Our target is not that students master/acquire every skill in the programme but those which will enhance his/her personal independence or contribute to his/her status as a participant in a future domestic setting in whatever form that might be. Occasionally we question the relevance of some of the skills to individual students but we take the view expressed by Swallow and Huebner that "often

children do not fully appreciate skills until they understand the need for them. This is only possible if the children are permitted to do things for themselves”(Swallow and Huebner, 1987). Sometimes we adapt the programme to include tasks suggested by ex students who tell us what they felt was lacking from the programme they received.

THE STUDENT’S PROGRESSION THROUGH THE PROGRAMME

On arrival at Henshaws students are given an initial assessment to determine at which level they are functioning. We find that information sent from feeder schools and colleges varies greatly in content and quality. Making our own assessment also allows for the inevitable de-skilling that occurs as a result of changing environment and having had a holiday break. In this setting too, the student can show off his/her skills, and however minimal these are, receive plenty of praise so setting a firm foundation of confidence and trust. This permits an early opportunity to form a working relationship with the student.

Our initial assessment, which is very detailed, gives a reliable indication as to the level at which the student should be introduced to the programme. The programme is tiered into three levels within the five main skill areas mentioned previously. The task sheets bearing the skills at each level are colour graded: red/pink (levels 1-3), amber (levels 4-7) and green (levels 8-10). The student, who may not understand levels, knows that amber is “harder to do” than pink etc. Each task sheet lists about thirty jobs. In order to make this more palatable for the student (and staff), the tasks are worked on in clusters of four, each cluster representing about an hour’s work. These skills form the basis of the student’s work for four sessions. After each session the staff member records briefly, but in long hand on the student’s sheet any progress made and techniques used. While recording, the staff member is assisted by guidelines from the departmental skill content handbook in determining the student’s success or failure in mastering the skill. After four sessions a clear picture emerges regarding the progress being made by the student in the prescribed skills. If the staff member is satisfied that the student can achieve the skill independently this is recorded on the coloured task sheet in ink. If the staff member or the student feels that the skill needs further practice, this is recorded in pencil denoting that it will be tried again, either immediately in the next skill cluster, or later as the student wishes (if the skill bores or frustrates him/her). As time progresses it is possible to see at a glance from the pencil and pen ticks what has been achieved and what still needs to be attempted. Thus task analysis is used as a method of overview.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE PROGRAMME

The advantages of a programme whose content is broadly prescribed, but also open to negotiation, are that the staff has a feeling of structure whilst allowing for some use of initiative. Most importantly however, the student knows what is being asked of him/her yet feels involved in the process of selecting what work he/she is going to do. The disadvantages of such an achievement oriented programme are that students with degenerative conditions may become aware of their diminishing ability to do tasks. In this case sensitivity is required of the staff member in minimising feelings of failure for the student.

What of the student whose skill base is insufficient even to cope with the simplest levels of the programme? This is where task analysis comes into action once again. If a student is not able to achieve all stages of a skill e.g. putting on an apron, the staff member would support the student through the process using his/her powers of observation to identify which elements of the task were eluding the student. This student's task would then simply be the element that he/she had struggled with, perhaps locating the head-hole or being able to lift the apron off the hook on the wall. Often by identifying and specifically working on the elusive element, the student can be helped to achieve the whole of the larger task. Hence our programme offers the flexibility (and the luxury of time) to provide what the student needs.

ANALYSIS OF NEEDS IN PROVISION OF RESOURCES

As in the consideration of the content of each student's programme, care has to be taken in the selection of the resources the student will use in the acquisition of those skills. There is a large amount of equipment specifically designed for people who are disabled and/or visually impaired. In general, we tend to err on the side of low technology, low cost adaptations of standard equipment and careful selection of gadgets from catalogues. We have experimented with so called "specialist" equipment but as well as finding such equipment expensive we feel they are no more useful than the items we have adapted. Students' families also find non specialist equipment more acceptable as it carries no stigma of being "for the handicapped".

In terms of human resources we are very fortunate to have a team of five teacher's assistants who make possible the teaching of individual programmes. We emphasise the development of positive relationships with the students as a basis for effective learning. Our teaching base was newly refurbished two years

ago. We have a total of eleven work units, all identically equipped. Each student is allocated his/her own work station (taking into account additional needs such as adjustable height for wheelchairs) which he/she uses every session, in this way developing confidence of orientation within their own space. Household, Laundry and Self Care skills are taught in the student's own home base as "most often the natural environment is the best place to teach a specific skill" (Swallow and Huebner, 1987).

DEVELOPMENT OF RECIPE MEDIA

In response to student needs we have developed a range of recipe media as a basis for our work in Food Skills. As well as the usual braille and large print, we also use so-called "symbol" recipes which use a range of line drawn symbols to replace the majority of words in a recipe. These have proved to be very popular, especially with partially sighted students who have always struggled to read. At last, with the support of the symbols and a minimal number of words (practised in literacy sessions), students are able to "read" a recipe. For students with no sight for whom tactile reading methods prove impossible, we have developed taped recipes. These "talk" the students through every stage of the recipe from getting out equipment through to wishing them a pleasant meal! The student controls the progress of the tape by responding to the verbal instruction of "stop" which denotes use of the pause button to put into action the instruction just given. Students' confidence and independence develops quickly when using these tapes, and they also provide company for those clients living alone, rather like having the radio on but with a delicious result! Students are allocated their own set of recipes in the medium that suits them best. These are given to students to keep, even after they have left the college. So, we remain confident that they will continue to be able to prepare a selection of meals in the future.

CONCLUSION

In the first instance then, we use task analysis in a general sense to identify the student's needs (from skills teaching through to selection of equipment and working environment). Once students have been established in the programme, task analysis is used in the more traditional sense of splitting tasks into their component parts. This strategy supports students as they learn and in this way promotes our wish to provide "a curriculum" that "represents the translation of a specific hypothesis regarding how the child learns into a set of activities which attempt to achieve pre-determined goals"(Appell, 1977).

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