

Intervention Strategies for Speech and Language Disordered Children in the Special School

To maximise the effect of a speech therapy programme in a school for mildly mentally handicapped children, both teacher and speech therapist combined professional skills to develop an integrated approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Holy Family School in Renmore, Galway, is a school for children with a mild degree of learning difficulty under the management of the Brothers of Charity Services. The school has approximately 120 pupils in nine classes.

In Holy Family School there are approximately 40 to 50 children with significant problems in communication. The amount of speech therapy time available though relatively good in the context of the scarcity of speech therapists in the special education system is not adequate to cater for the needs of these children.

Although there are sixteen hours available to the school per week, realistically only eleven of those can be used in direct client contact given school schedules. It goes without saying that 40 to 50 children with communication disorders cannot be treated adequately in eleven hours per week.

At the beginning of this year it was agreed by the school management, the principal, the teaching staff and the speech therapist that it was better to see a small number of people and actually do something for them than to try to see a large number and consequently dilute the service to the point where it was totally ineffective, so it was decided that efforts would be concentrated in the lower end of the school. In reality this year that turned out to be the Reception class.

There were 10 pupils involved, all boys, ranging in age from 7 years 1 month to 9 years 3 months.

The communication problems in the Reception class are as follows:

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN RECEPTION CLASS			
	Mild	Moderate	Severe
Phonology	3	2	-
Language	3	4	3
Dyspraxia	-	-	3
Fluency	1	-	-

HOW THE REMEDIAL PROGRAMME WAS APPROACHED

We are aware that people with mental handicap have difficulty generalising what they learn. If something is taught in a specific situation it often happens that the child can only use that skill in that situation. To maximise the effect of the speech therapy programme it was decided to base as much of it in the classroom as possible and to try to gear the language part of the curriculum to the specific needs of the children. By that I mean, all the children were assessed, the individual responses were analysed in detail and an attempt was made to find some common denominators on which to base the general classroom programme. In addition to that the children were organised into small groups according to specific needs and were seen by the speech therapist outside the classroom situation. Some children were also seen individually.

Two specific approaches were used, one to cater for their speech problems and the other to cater for their comprehension and expressive language problems. The first was Cued Articulation and the second was the Derbyshire Language Scheme.

CUED ARTICULATION

In this method simple hand signs are used to cue the production of sounds. It should not be confused with cued speech which is often used by the deaf. In cued articulation each hand sign represents one phoneme/sound and the system is very logically worked out. With cued articulation we used the stimulus pictures from the Nuffield Dyspraxia Programme. Each picture represents a phoneme/sound. These are totally separate from the alphabet and as we do not use or talk about letters the approach does not interfere with existing reading programmes or lead to confusion. The children were taught that each picture was associated with a particular sound and each sound had a specific hand movement to go with it. So when shown the picture the child would be expected to say the sound and to make the hand movement. We found that the use of the hand sign seemed to help the child discriminate phonemes and he seemed to find it easier to produce the sound when he used the hand sign himself. The signs also seemed to help him to combine and sequence the phonemes into words.

This phonology programme is carried out in the classroom. Once a week the teacher and speech therapist take the class together and then during the week the teacher refers to the programme as appropriate. The programme includes the following activities:

PHONOLOGY PROGRAMME

Articulation of phonemes in isolation

Phoneme discrimination

Recognition of phoneme omissions made

Phoneme blending with vowels

None of these activities have been related in any way to words. They have, if you like, all been nonsense words but the activities have been the ground work for words. We have been developing listening and attention skills, auditory discrimination, and their ability to produce the phonemes both in isolation and in blends or sequences.

We are now at the point when the children themselves have spontaneously begun to relate what we have been doing to words. For example, when we do our blending work with vowels they are now competing with each other to find a word that begins or ends with a particular phoneme. For example, we might be blending /s/ + /ah/ = sah and we would hear shouts of 'like sand' or 'like Santa'.

Another spinoff of this approach is that the children are now very aware of each other's difficulties and we often hear things like 'That's Richard's sound', or 'That's Ciaran's word'. Now in the general work or conversation of the class they will remind each other of how they are supposed to say things.

Doing this work in the classroom instead of the speech therapy room has been beneficial in other ways. Because the teacher is there while the programme is being carried out, she sees what the speech therapist is doing and she has been ingenious in the ways she has managed to incorporate the programme into the daily routine and to tie it up with our approach to improving comprehension and expressive language skills.

THE DERBYSHIRE LANGUAGE SCHEME

This is the system we are using as our means of developing the children's comprehension and expressive skills.

The Derbyshire Language Scheme is an approach to teaching language. It was originally devised as part of the curriculum of an ESN (S) school and now with its adaptations it is used extensively in special education centres and schools throughout Britain.

The aim of the scheme is to improve the child's functional use of language. The approach is very structured and very very detailed and the assessment allows one to accurately pinpoint the child's current ability both from a comprehension and an expressive point of view. The scheme comes with a progress record sheet and if this is accurately and regularly updated reference to it will allow one to see at any time a child's current communicative status.

The progress record sheet is also graded in minutely detailed steps which allows one to plan accurate and appropriate remedial programmes. The scheme also comes with a very detailed teaching manual which gives lots of ideas for teaching and developing all the structures. It is quite a complex system but once mastered, it is invaluable.

One concept that is very important in the Derbyshire Language Scheme is the concept of 'information carrying words'. By that is meant, not the total number of words in the sentence, but the number of words in the sentence which carry information which is vital to comprehension.

The scheme talks in terms of single-word level, two-word level, three-word level, etc.

To illustrate this concept, let us look at one structure. Say, for example, prepositions. In this case, we will talk about the preposition 'on'.

THE SINGLE-WORD LEVEL

Instruction - 'Put the block **on** the chair'

The child is standing in front of the chair. The block is handed to him. The only object is the block and the only place the child can put the block is in relation to the chair. To comprehend the instruction, the child only has to understand one word '**on**'.

So, in this case, the comprehension choice is:

The preposition-
i.e. the single-word level

THE TWO-WORD LEVEL

Instruction - 'Put the block **on** the **chair**'

In this case the child is standing in front of a chair and a table. The block is handed to him. To carry out this instruction the child now has to understand two words. He has to understand '**on**' and '**chair**'.

The choice is:

The preposition
The place
i.e. comprehension at the two-word level

THE THREE-WORD LEVEL

Instruction - 'Put the **block on the chair**'

The child is standing in front of a chair and a table and there are a number of objects presented to him, for example, a block, a cup, a car. To carry out this instruction, the child must choose the **block** from a number of objects presented. He must understand '**on**' and he must choose between **chair** and table.

The choice is:

The object

The preposition

The place

i.e. comprehension at the three-word level

THE FOUR-WORD LEVEL

Instruction - 'Put the **block on the small chair**'

The child is standing in front of a big chair and a small chair, a big table and a small table and there are a number of objects available to him. To follow the instruction, the child must be able to choose from the presented objects, understand the preposition '**on**', understand the concept '**big**' or '**small**' and choose the **chair** or table.

The choice is:

The object

The preposition

The modifier/adjective

The place (and so on)

Some of us have been in the position, for example, after an assessment, of disagreeing with a parent or another professional about a child's ability to understand or use structures. One would say the child could understand and the other would say the child could not. And perhaps both would wonder about the other's credibility. In fact, both were probably right but most likely were assessing or teaching at different word levels.

The Derbyshire Language Scheme has allowed us to pinpoint exactly what level each child is currently functioning at and subsequently draw up a specific programme for each child. We can then look at all the programmes and find the common denominators which then form the basis for the classroom language programme.

By working so closely together and by basing so much of the speech therapy programme in the classroom we, as teacher and therapist, can marry our individual professional skills and integrate our observations and approaches for a more

effective communication programme and a more efficient use of the scarce resource of speech therapy.

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