

CONVERSATION CONVERSATION CONVERSATION



deaf education through
listening and talking

Communication and language

The child's journey towards being an effective communicator is about becoming more effective in sharing meaning not about counting words and sounds

In most cultures supporting the child towards this is achieved in proto conversational contexts and conversation, 121 and small group


The child has many opportunities to observe conversations between adults and children; children are treated as conversational partners even when at the prelinguistic stage and meaning is attributed to their early vocalisations

Parents frequently acknowledge what the child has said or extend what they have said often recasting in a revised syntactic form

Research from the 1980s

Tizard and Hughes identified nursery age children to have more language directed to them in their homes than in nursery

Joan Tough again in 1980s (Schools Council research project) similarly identified importance of the quality of the interactional context that young children with delayed language met in school



Wood, Wood, Howarth and Griffiths (1982, 1986, 1984) highlighted the differences in teacher and parental style, including how, when teachers adapted their conversational style children and young people, whether deaf or hearing, became more active in conversation and were more likely to make on topic contributions

Helpful features in facilitating language?

Use of questions by parents reflected in later auxiliary verb use by children

Recasts of children's meanings into more syntactically correct form

Expansion of utterances

Adults ask question and then answer themselves

Use of semantically contingent speech and semantic extensions

Some indications that quantity is important but not neat correlation

So how we might this impact on our work in home and schools

Everyone is agreed that the nature of language addressed to children is an important component of both how they acquire language and how they think and learn?

How are we exploring this with families and teachers/ teaching assistants

How does it influence our own input

Evidence is that the cognitive load of input increases over time as well as linguistic complexity

THE PROCESS OF LANGUAGE
ACQUISITION IS NOT
SOMETHING THAT ENDS AT
SCHOOL ENTRY FOR ANY
CHILDREN

WOOD ET AL (1986) OFFER
TWO CONCEPTS FOR US TO
CONSIDER IN OUR
CONVERSATIONAL INPUT.

It is clear that despite the technological advances deaf children

- Are still falling behind at school,
- Have challenges in their social and emotional growth
- Too few are achieving at age appropriate levels and are leaving school with real choices about their adult life
- Because insufficient attention is being paid to their continued linguistic and communicative growth during the school years. Instead for many support is diverted into supporting access to curriculum content rather than addressing fundamental needs

As the technology has improved, to validate its worth or refine its impact, we have:

- Sometimes become diverted into thinking that what validates the technology as working – words sounds etc rather than whether the child is moving towards being an effective communicator swiftly and comprehensively enough
- For example there has often been an early focus on grammar, words and sounds and counting these, examining them as evidence of what the child sees and hears rather than on the use to which they are put
- Halliday 1975, 1980, when a child is learning how to mean and acquiring language, to simply focus on words and grammar is like ‘giving a starving man a knife and fork’.
- The task in language acquisition is to ‘learn how to mean’, and in particular to learn how those meanings are conventionally expressed in your home and community – your first language.
- But first of all comes the need and desire to express meanings and to understand those of others and to use it to mediate your thinking

Every day meanings in everyday situations

- What meanings do I express?
- How do others respond to them?
- What do others say to me?
- What do their noises mean?
- Why do people noises matter more than other noises?
- What's in it for me?
- When mummy and daddy make those noises they mean something and I can use noises to mean something too

Journey towards language has its foundations in the earliest meanings children express and the meanings adults share with them

- Dependence on interaction with significant others and taking part in 'conversations/observing others expressing meanings
- Adults instinctively look for meanings in the things babies and young children do, interpreting any small gestures, noises etc as 'intent'
- Children learn to give more clues about what they mean or want – gesture and vocalisation
- Children learn that certain behaviours elicit predictable response from adults
- Babies and children's behaviour moves from purposeful to intentional

Language assessment and identification of next steps

- We quite rightly put a lot of energy into monitoring progress and identifying next steps
- In my experience far less monitoring goes on as to whether the environment can deliver next steps
- In particular is the support available being used to best effect
- We know the characteristics of language input vary according to the linguistic level of the child i.e. the type of input, balance of input, use of facilitative techniques varies.

Example

- As children are discovering the tense system - adults use more tag questions and expansions that include auxiliary verbs
- They do not put tense markers at the front of sentences as often
- Children often use the wrong adverbs of time/ tense markers
- Adults expand and extend these but use appropriate auxiliary verbs
- All this is done smoothly within the conversation not an instructional context

Example

- When adults are using more complex language structures the cognitive load of what they are saying tends to be less
- More complex high demand ideas tend to be coded in simpler language
- Same for new vocabulary which is used but often explained in known language structures

So how can we reflect on conversation and how facilitative our input is

- We can look at levels of control - is it truly a conversation that enables the child to try out new structures, reveal what they know and are thinking about.
- We can look at cognitive load – does the child have to think sufficiently for themselves; are they learning about putting their thoughts into words for others; are they looking beyond the words of others?
- We can look at opportunity – is there enough? Its not simply about how many words a child hears or sees but there has to be a minimum

Levels of control

1. Enforced repetition
2. 2-choice questions
3. Wh-type questions



4. Statements and personal contributions

4.2 Tag statements

5. Phatics or Conversational Oil

5.2 tag questions, confirmation



NB: there is also the need to take into account the intention of the input egg to manage action, correct, direct attention; focus is on the degree of control exercised in the conversation rather than the content

Noion of cognitive demand of the conversation

- Low demand – yes/ no questions, repetitions,
- Medium demand – comments, some open questions; questions where all the information is visible
- High demand – expect child to add own information, or work out where the answer when all information not present; some open questions

Teacher 'conversations'

- Highly controlling
- Children tend to simply answer the question and not give additional information to questions
- More likely to give spontaneous contributions following teacher comments or phatics
- Teachers who ask most questions least likely to receive elaborated answers
- Effect of 'tone of conversation' is more passive children/ students etc

So if language acquisition is nurtured and sustained through conversation

- How much conversation do the deaf children on your caseloads, in your class have access to
- How much training have support staff had so that their input facilitates language acquisition, not simply supporting curriculum content
- How do you know what the quality of this input is?
- How will you change it if it is not good enough (teaching styles research)

If the aim is to support language acquisition as a basis for more effective learning, support staff and teachers must

- Inform, react, listen, acknowledge, make contributions contingent on what children contribute and be more accepting of what they say
- This means getting the balance of questions and comments and cognitive load right

Other things to look at

- The range of communicative intentions a child expresses (Halliday 1986, Monitoring Protocol Level 2 materials 2005), including how the child moves towards making their own language contingent on others' conversation

At the single word stage children

- Begin to develop a symbolic language
- Add new communicative intentions
- Start to communicate about absent people, events and objects
- Increasingly through words but accompanied by context, intonation, gesture, eye contact, pointing and so on
- They do so because the adults too 'up their game'

What do adults do?

- They adjust their input instinctively but it is always ahead of the child's – teaching to the child's tomorrow?
- Yes it is a simpler more accessible less hesitant input than that delivered for adults but it does have complex ideas and language in it
- It is not composed of 'neat little one liners', sometimes we say a lot
- The child learns to extract meaning across utterances, to hold onto partial meanings and add to them
- Adults create narratives around everything in daily lives. They help children to see links through this and to 'join the dots'
- The words of others and the 'story telling of others help children to build 'pictures in their mind'
- They prepare children for the longer inputs they receive in listening to more adult conversations, to teachers, to cultural experiences etc etc

So what does this mean ?

- Its not enough for a child to simply 'have support'
- If the intent is that the support will enable the child's language to progress/ accelerate then we must look at contexts and approaches known to facilitate this
- There is renewed interest in mainstream in such writers as Joan Tough, Gordon Wells etc
- We need to revisit the research of the Deafness research group – they presented evidence about cognition, learning and language and what made a difference, but also that it was possible to influence and change teaching styles and make a difference.