Issues in the Development of School and Interpersonal Discourse for Children Who Have Hearing Loss
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ABSTRACT: English instruction for children with hearing loss has traditionally focused on teaching about language conventions, with much less attention to learning language, or to learning through language—especially its discourse features. The author argues that language intervention, through the collaborative efforts of speech-language pathologists and teachers, should promote communication interactions that emphasize English discourse that facilitates interpersonal and school language learning. Particular focus in this article is on issues of teacher talk, talk around print, self-talk in problem solving, and the uses of narrative and descriptive discourse in interpersonal and school contexts. KEY WORDS: hearing loss, language development, discourse, language instruction, school discourse

The effects of significant early onset of hearing loss on English language acquisition and academic achievement have been well documented (Luterman, 1986; Moores, 1987). Even mild to moderate hearing losses, unilateral hearing loss, and recurrent otitis media have been shown to relate to problems in speech and/or language acquisition and in academic achievement (Davis, Elfenbein, Schum. & Bentier. 1986; Friel-Patti. 1990; Gravel & Wallace. 1992; Oyler. Oyler, & Matkin, 1988; Roberts, Burchinal. Davis. Collier. & Henderson. 1991; Roberts & Schuele. 1990; Wallace. Gravel, McCarton, & Ruben, 1988). As children with hearing loss become the most numerous special needs students in public schools, the already overburdened speech-language pathologist will have to find ways to work more efficiently with this population. In the past, if a child had a hearing loss, the focus of therapeutic intervention, by speech-language pathologists as well as teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, was on the mastery of specific language, speech, and/or academic skills in pullout therapy sessions. These sessions often focused on skill acquisition such as vocabulary development, sound perception. or phoneme acquisition (Perkins. 1984). Specific language exercises were used that stressed the teaching of syntactic conventions such as past tense, coordination, or plurality (Lee, Koenigsknecht. & Mulhern. 1975; Simmons-Martin & Rossi. 1990). Language form drills or elicited imitation exercises were often carried out without regard to a particular child's language use, conversational strengths, or communication limitations (Wood, Wood, Griffiths, & Howarth. 1986). Such approaches stemmed from the assumption that drilling on the parts would lead to their generalization into spontaneous communication wholes. However, research and experience have shown that such efforts usually do not result in the generalization of learning that was desired (Masterson & Kamhi. 1992; Poplin. 1988; Schneiderman. 1990).

Even though the acquisition of specific language forms and the mastery of academic facts is important for students with hearing loss, I would like to suggest that these needs are best met when the child is engaged in meaningful communication with others, not in isolated drill and practice. The development of interpersonal discourse abilities and academic independence is best accomplished in authentic communication interactions. As a way of explaining this perspective, this article will be organized into five sections, namely: (1) the premises that underlie language use in communication and how this knowledge is best acquired: (2) differences in the use of discourse in and out of school: (3) aspects of discourse that are important to learning: (4) strategies for developing discourse—both in and out of the classroom—through adult-guided conversation, and (5) discussion of the unique problems presented by interactions with peers.
PREMISES UNDERLYING A PROGRAM OF LANGUAGE INTERVENTION

It is accepted that language consists of a system of symbols and the rules for combining those symbols into meaningful patterns that allow for the expression of thoughts and feelings in interactive contexts. From this definition, it should be clear that children learn the forms of language and the meanings of language, as well as how these forms and meanings are used best through communicative interactions. The rules for organizing symbols into syntactic forms are interwoven with the meanings to be conveyed by those forms and with the principles for social interaction. That is, language forms and meanings are learned by being used in the context of communication with one’s self and with others, whether language is expressed in speech, sign, print, or any combination of these modes.

The prerequisites for the satisfactory development of communication include the following points:

• Communication interaction among any and all partners must occur.
• Each communication partner must have a reasonable opportunity to contribute to the interaction.
• Each partner’s communication efforts must be valued and treated as a genuine contribution to the interaction.
• Contributions by each communication partner should build on and be responsive to the contributions that were previously made in the conversation (Grice, 1975; Wardhaugh, 1985).

Unless these conditions are met, mature, interactive communication is very difficult to achieve. Indeed, the use of dance as a metaphor for communication interaction seems to be especially apt to express the idea that communication is not simply message passing, but rather involves both leading and responding by all partners in order to construct joint meaning (Duchan & Sonnenmeier, 1994; Newhoff & Launer, 1984). It is generally accepted that children and their caretakers in many societies engage in social communication interactions that meet the prerequisites noted above (Baron, 1992; Berko Gleason, 1993; Foster, 1990; Owens, 1992). As a function of these interactions, children are exposed to the language of their culture but, most importantly, are engaged in meaningful communication as part of these social interactions. Typically, children learn language as they learn to communicate in that language. Understanding and mastery of the details and refinements of language grow out of communication experience regardless of the mode of language expression, rather than the other way around.

DISCOURSE IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Most children come to American schools knowing how to converse in English. Based on this expectation, regular education classrooms focus from the earliest years on the “teaching” of academic information and skills. The role of the teacher is that of instructing children in specific subject matter areas or of introducing and practicing specific skills, through formal lessons that routinely include print. Inherent in this situation is the premise that teachers are responsible for verifying what children have “learned.” For this reason, discourse in American classrooms does not parallel the interpersonal communication that occurs elsewhere in school or outside of the school setting. Several researchers including Mehan (1979), Cazden (1988), and Wells (1994) pointed out that one of the most prevalent discourse patterns in classroom interaction is the initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) cycle. That is, the teacher (most frequently) poses a question such as, “We’ve been studying Australia. Who can tell me the capital of Australia?” A student, once designated, responds “Canberra.” The teacher follows with the evaluation, “Correct! Canberra is the capital city of the country of Australia,” and then begins another sequence with an initiation such as, “Now can anyone tell me the state where Canberra is located?”
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If a student responds incorrectly, the teacher may repeat the cycle with another student, or reduce the complexity of the initial question until the desired response is obtained. For example, if the designated student responded “Sydney” to the initial question, the teacher might say, “No. Sydney’s Australia’s largest city. Can you tell me the capital of Australia?” If the student tries “Melbourne.” the teacher might reduce the complexity of the question by saying, “No, it’s a city that begins with the letter C. What Australia city begins with C?” The teacher would continue to reduce the complexity of the question until the expected answer was achieved. Such cycles do not generally occur in conversational interactions outside of the classroom, except when the adult partner adopts a teaching role (Plapinger & Kretschmer, 1991).

Classroom-based discourse differs significantly from interpersonal discourse in other ways as well.

• All partners in the interaction do not have equal opportunity to contribute. Children’s responses are confined to topics and tasks that are introduced by the teacher (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981).
• Conversational cycles do not naturally build, but skip from topic to topic, depending on the teaching goals or the classroom time line (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979).
• Classroom interactions typically are dominated by teacher talk, especially in classes for students who have a hearing loss (see Wood and Wood in this clinical forum).

Consideration of typical classroom discourse patterns clearly shows why this is so. Although the IRE sequence need not be a negative event, it often is. Exclusive use of this discourse model is being challenged both in regular and special education classrooms by a whole range of strategies, including instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1991, 1993), whole-language focus (Calkins, 1990; Newman, 1985: Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1988), writer’s workshops (Atwell, 1991; Graves, 1983), cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1987), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Because most children who have a hearing loss come to school without a fully functional language system, the need to learn language and subject matter simultaneously is a common one. It is possible to learn language and content simultaneously, but altering classroom discourse toward naturalistic, interactive, group-supported learning rather than typical IRE sequences provides a better climate (or progress. School language learning, especially with children who have a hearing loss, can be further complicated by the perspective one takes with regard to what is “taught” about the code. One perspective argues that language learning—whether for interpersonal, school, or print use—occurs best when the focus is on mastery of the code itself. That is, children with (or without) hearing loss should be systematically taught the various elements that make up the English code through controlled practice of these elements. such as sound/letter blending, word decoding skills, or basic sentence patterns (see Bullard & Schirmer, 1991: Johnson & Griffith, 1986; Limbrick, McNaughton, & Clay, 1992: Wood. Wood. Griffiths. & Howarth, 1986 for critiques of such approaches).

This perspective is in line with the general reductionist approach that is taken in many areas of regular education and particularly in special education (Poplin, 1988). Surveys of educational practice show that code-focused approaches to instruction also predominate in the education of children with hearing loss (Hasenstab & McKenzie, 1981: King, 1984: LaSasso. 1987; Wathum-Ocama, 1992). Although surveys of approaches favored by speech-language pathologists for students with a hearing loss have not been reported. it seems likely that a comparable picture would emerge. An alternative perspective focuses on interactive, socially motivated communication experiences as the critical element in the mastery of interpersonal, classroom, and print discourse, including English. The assumption already noted is that children (especially those with hearing loss) learn language best when they are attempting to communicate in that language (Clark, 1989: Ewoldt, 1990: Luetke-Stahlman & Luckner, 1991; Miller & Luckner, 1992: Truax, 1987; Whitesell. 1992; Wood.
As children encounter others in communication situations, they have an opportunity to learn from adult or peer models; to try out their own abilities; and to draw on their own cognitive, linguistic, and world experience to solve communication problems. Children, whether with or without hearing loss, come to learn very quickly that language forms have communication uses. Programs that employ an interactional perspective for the development of communication as a vehicle for learning do not begin with specific linguistic forms and vocabulary items, but rather with authentic communication interactions, whether in regard to intra- or interpersonal school or print discourse.

The perspective a professional adopts will dramatically influence both his or her therapeutic and assessment procedures. If the entry point to language learning is the code itself, then professionals are likely to assess the mastery of specific linguistic forms, vocabulary items, and sub-skills (decoding or word blending) using decontextualized “formal” tests. Teaching in this perspective focuses on exposing children to specific language items, rehearsing their classroom uses, and testing for their retention. “Lessons” focus on the mastery of prescribed language structures, on specific skill development such as matching the letter /p/ to the sound /p/, or on the development of vocabulary around a particular content area. Many of these lessons may even be engineered to approximate dialogue, but their point is to develop and/or perfect a fragment of language. To execute this perspective, the clinician must constantly check on the child’s “learning” through adult-dominated classroom discourse that leads to learning but generally not the “learning” that the clinician had in mind. Adopting a more communication-based perspective changes the focus of language intervention and assessment dramatically. Instead of focusing on the linguistic code, the clinician focuses on communication interaction. Emphasis is placed on the mastery of those “skills” that lead to the processing and production of extended dialogue rather than to the mastery of specific information or single linguistic forms. Conversation is seen as a medium for constructing meaning together and for exchanging important reactions, feelings, and ideas among communication partners.

One example of communication in an interactive classroom is offered to make the point. Whitesell (1991) investigated the interactions of one kindergarten teacher of the deaf who was herself deaf. Whitesell’s observations focused on literacy instruction—specifically, the daily “read aloud” sessions that occurred in the classroom. Unlike most teachers, Mrs. A did not prepare her students for read aloud sessions by checking their understanding of the content to be covered, nor the language to be used. Instead, she embarked on storytelling by reading aloud. The print or text of the story was relayed in English through talking and signing, or signing alone. As she read, she would depart from the text to engage the students in conversation concerning the story. These departures were prompted by initiations from the students, or were decisions she made to “explain” what was contained in the text. These departures were produced in Signed English, American Sign Language (ASL), or whatever communication mode fit the needs of a particular child. After talking about the text, she returned to reading as part of the conversation. These teacher–child dialogues included IRE sequences as well as alternative patterns, such as student or teacher initiations and responses (answers) without evaluation. The interactions around the text had several important features. First, Mrs. A rarely failed to respond to an initiation by a student, even those that seemed off topic. She would acknowledge the student’s communication effort and work to bring the conversation back to the text at hand. Second, in her talk concerning the text, she focused on information such as: (a) showing links between the text and a particular child’s world knowledge, (b) defining or explaining unknown vocabulary and figures of speech, using cues from the text to aid in this process; (c) making inferences in the story explicit to the children; (d) predicting the course of the story; (e) deducing clues from sources of information other than the print itself, such as pictures; and finally, (f)
rephrasing the text in a form that might be more accessible to the student, such as marking discourse forms with she said or they said. Whitesell demonstrated that the talk around the text was providing valuable information regarding communication, both interpersonally and in print, as well as a range of information concerning the processes involved in reading. There was little concern regarding specific skill mastery in these conversations, but important teaching and learning was occurring with regard to both communication and English conventions. It is clear that this teacher believed that children should be exposed to information that is beyond their current level of understanding through a process of natural interactions. Her instruction was through discourse that just happened to occur in school. All members of the conversation were helped to feel that they could contribute to the conversation, and that their contribution would be treated as valuable to the interaction. Instructional goals were achieved by conversing without that sentence-by-sentence comprehension check that is so familiar to anyone who has visited school programs for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. (See Hartman & Kretschmer [1992] for application of talking about text with adolescent-age students who have hearing losses).

This type of rich interaction should be familiar to those who engage in or research book reading with children who have normal hearing (Baghban, 1984; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1984) or with children who have a hearing loss but whose parents have been encouraged to use natural communication patterns with their children (Uzuner, 1993). Further, it should be noted that the success of this teacher’s interactions occurred only in part because of her fluency and flexibility in communication or her hearing status. If she had not been a skilled and sensitive teacher, her mastery of various sign systems would not have been sufficient to make these sessions work. It could be argued that such conversationally based approaches are possible with young children but work less well when the child is an older language learner. There are positive data on this issue with children with hearing loss (Messenheimer-Young & Whitesell, in press; Whitesell, 1992), as well as with older children exhibiting communication problems but who do not have hearing loss (Kuvshinoff, 1993; Whelley, 1993).

What are the implications for clinical practice when adopting a communication interaction perspective? First, one must have a clear understanding of what constitutes effective communication interactions, including the ways in which we communicate with one another and how communication shapes our choices and uses of language forms and the meanings they encode. Second, assessment procedures that support this perspective must not describe how the code is acquired apart from the context of its actual use in communication. Exclusive use of context-stripping language tests must be abandoned. The use of such tests to qualify children for service or to satisfy an accountability goal may be necessary, but the documentation of actual language use through portfolios or samples of interpersonal, classroom, or written products with analysis and reflection (i.e., nontraditional assessment) is strongly recommended. For example, the speech-language pathologist/audiologist could videotape authentic classroom and school events to view them with the teacher or the students themselves. Discussions concerning these communication interactions could lead to the identification of specific problems, along with potential solutions. Retaping subsequent classroom sessions could be used as documentation of progress as part of a video portfolio on the improvement of interpersonal or school discourse. Subsequent re-tapings could be used to form new goals and solutions in a recursive pattern, and are, of course, invaluable in discussions with parents concerning a student’s communication status. Third, language instruction goals must be focused on communication or discourse outcomes rather than simply on the acquisition
of specific grammatical or semantic constructions or the mastery of isolated academic skills. Thus, the speech-language pathologist/audiologist and teacher must take time to observe children throughout the day, noting the nature and outcomes of communication. When the communication strengths and needs are clear, the creation of authentic communication situations becomes an easier task.

DISCOURSE PATTERNS IMPORTANT TO LEARNING
In order to succeed in regular educational settings, students with hearing loss must be able to accomplish at least two important tasks:
• They must be able to reason through academic and social problems to develop solutions that are effective and congruent.
• They must master the key discourse structures that are commonly used (in either interpersonal exchanges or in print) to share knowledge and to solve problems. These discourse patterns include narration, description, explanation, instruction giving, and persuasion (at a minimum).

Use of Language in Problem Solving
To have dynamic and meaningful lives, individuals must feel that they have some control. Part of this control is engendered by the ability to solve problems. According to Vygotsky (1978) and his advocates (Wertsch & Stone, 1985), children watch experts solve problems, engage these experts in conversation regarding the solutions, and internalize these conversations as frameworks for thinking through future problems they encounter. It is not uncommon for adults to “talk out the solution” to a problem by overtly conversing with themselves. Children who are privy to such self-directed activities, as well as to interactive conversations with adults, have a distinct learning advantage. According to Greenberg (1993), children with hearing loss are rarely exposed to either of these aspects of conversations. In most school situations, children are exposed to problems, and they may have conversations with experts concerning how to solve them. But, too often, such conversations are limited to explaining the solution itself and not how one arrives at the solution. In addition, exposure to adult self-talk is virtually nonexistent. This lack of access to self-talk is a problem whether the child relies primarily on sign or on spoken language for the reception of communication. Spoken self-talk is generally inaudible, and signing to oneself doesn't routinely occur because it may be seen as odd behavior on the teacher's part. Failure to model intrapersonal communication, however, seems to be a critical oversight when the learner is a child with a hearing loss.

Discourse forms used in problem-solving. To achieve proficiency in problem-solving, children with hearing loss also need to achieve mastery of the primary discourse patterns of English through which knowledge is obtained and shared. Mastery of processes such as narration and description allows the child to assume and hold the floor beyond one or two sentences. This public-speaking ability assumes particular importance in school, and may be critical in other aspects of life as well. Unfortunately, not only is a knowledge of English expression assumed before entry into regular education, but the ability to quickly learn how to use discourse patterns in the classroom is expected. For many children, particularly those with hearing loss, such assumptions may be unwarranted. English has a number of discourse patterns to hold one's turn for more than one or two sentences. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss fully each of these discourse patterns. Therefore, only the two that assume particular importance in the classroom, namely, narration and description, will be considered in some detail.

Use of Narration In and Out of the Classroom

From preschool on, children engage in narration, both in and out of school. The ability to narrate is a critical mechanism for establishing friendships and other social contacts (Prendeville, 1991; Tannen, 1989) and bridging to literacy regardless of the reading method used (Cazden, 1988; Graves, 1989). It is also one of the key foundations on which most academic disciplines are built (Egan, 1994; Hicks, 1993; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992). Indeed, a knowledge of narration may make or break a child's successful inclusion in regular education settings. Narration involves telling stories. In societies that have strong literary traditions—whether oral or print—at least two types of stories predominate: personal and literary. Literary stories follow the traditions and conventions of the particular society. For instance, in English-speaking societies, literary stories include “once-upon-a-time” discourse regarding the presence of a conflict that become resolved through the course of the story (Botvin & Sutton-Smith, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Personal stories, on the other hand, involve the sharing of one’s own experiences. Personal stories are complicated affairs requiring interaction and adjustment depending on how much information is shared among the participants (Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Prendeville, 1991; Tannen, 1989). If more than one participant is privy to the same background information, there is a strong tendency to build stories together, with each person contributing as they remember pertinent information. Imagine, for example, a group of alumni at their 25th high-school reunion reminiscing about the “good old days.” Anyone who has participated in such an activity knows immediately how personal stories are built and shared. In addition to telling stories to others who have shared your experience, one frequently relates stories to groups of people—some of whom have no common experience: others who have some knowledge of the persons, locations, or temporal frames: and even some who have considerable information but did not participate in the event under discussion. Stories told to listeners who have considerable information but no direct participation often involve the venting of personal feelings or talk concerning personal accomplishments rather than the transmittal of information (Tannen, 1989). Imagine a student telling her parents about a school day in which a close friend accused her of cheating on an examination. Such stories usually are replete with preambles that set the stage or with emotionally laden statements that explain the narrator’s reactions. Such stories also contain numerous disruptions in temporal sequencing in order to explain emotional responses or courses of action that were required to complete a task successfully.

Finally, personal stories can be related to individuals who have no previous direct or indirect information concerning the participants, activities, or temporal frames involved. In this case, the primary purpose of the story is probably the transmission of information (Heath, 1983). These types of stories tend to take the form of expository reports in which the speaker must provide all necessary background information, order the information so there is “logical” connection between events, and connect emotional statements to ongoing activity so that there is a clear reason for reporting such information. These stories border on explanations.

Children typically tell and listen to all these types of personal stories everyday: they have access to models and to communication partners that help them learn about variations in personal narration. Unfortunately, children with hearing loss may not overhear home narratives or may have limited opportunities to construct their own stories. Thus, they begin the task of learning how to use classroom narratives with much less information than typical and certainly much less experience. Classroom narration presents another challenge because it is strongly biased in favor of the expository personal story (Cazden, 1988). It has been shown repeatedly that teachers expect personal stories conveyed during sharing time to be framed as expository efforts with sufficient background to keep the listener oriented through clear links between temporal and affective aspects. Moreover, it is expected that each child will know how to invoke this type of discourse alone without assistance from others—even those who may have participated in the event.
Use of Description In and Out of the Classroom

A second common discourse function is description. Even though we can describe many aspects of life, including our emotional state. I would like to focus on the description of physical objects or locations and how this pattern is used in everyday and classroom discourse. The first description strategy involves providing a sufficient picture of an object or location to ensure that it could be chosen from all others or providing sufficient information about a topic so that conversation can progress (de Villiers. 1988). The second common type of description involves making a verbal photograph to better share the impact of an object or experience with others (Ehrich & Koster. 1983).

Descriptions for these two purposes are organized differently. Making a choice or establishing a topic requires descriptions that highlight the attributes of the object or location that make it unique. Such descriptions need not be linearly organized. For instance, when describing new apparel. identifying the brand name may be followed by comments on bagginess, color, or comparison to clothes worn by sports or entertainment figures. Photographic descriptions, on the other hand, are linearly ordered efforts that detail physical aspects in a prescribed order from well-established reference points, such as top to bottom or right to left. There is also a conscious effort to include all aspects of the object, whether they are unique or not.

In everyday conversation, both of these descriptions occur, although the unique item description tends to be the predominate one. In classroom discourse, there is a distinct bias in favor of photographic descriptions. When children attempt to describe objects from their lives in school, they will often be interrupted by the teacher, who reminds them to make their efforts more “complete” or more “organized.” Indeed, if such descriptions do not contain all aspects of the object or location, or if they do not proceed in a linear fashion, the child may be stigmatized as a “disorderly” thinker. Surveying demands for narration, description, and other discourse functions in and out of the classroom can provide a framework for communication intervention. I hope that the reader has already concluded that refining the child’s ability to use everyday and classroom discourse can be a significant way to shift intervention goals away from details of the language code toward the development of interactive communication.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING DISCOURSE

It seems to be the case that speech-language pathologists and audiologists accept the implementation of communication-based programs as workable when there is ample time or small caseloads. But, because such conditions rarely occur these days, discourse/interaction approaches are not implemented in most cases. I think that there are at least two solutions to this dilemma. First and most preferable, the speech-language pathologist or audiologist can work as a collaborative consultant in the classroom and school. assisting the teacher, child, parents, and others through modeling appropriate language use in various communication situations. The benefits of collaborative approaches to speech-language pathologists are abundantly demonstrated in contemporary literature (see Prelock, Miller, & Reed. 1993: Secord, 1990 for a few examples). A language in the classroom approach need not be the only way to interact, of course, because for some communication problems, it may neither be desirable nor possible The professional can still plan with school personnel to meet the academic as well as the interpersonal communication needs of the child (Nelson. 1990). Mini-conversations that allow the child to be exposed to concentrated doses of targeted discourse pattern practice in anticipation, of classroom, school, or non-school needs can occur (Johnson & Griffith. 1986: Stone, 1988). For instance, oral book reports. narrating a personal
story, or other school or non-school routines or activities can be rehearsed. In such instruction, the child is given authentic, yet important, communication problems that he or she might face on a regular basis. These problems can be derived from situations, both in and out of school, such as attempting to get an increase in the child’s allowance, solving a playground dispute, obtaining the correct change, ordering hamburger, and/or asking questions to solicit information during a classroom discussion. Scenarios should be framed to force the use of the discourse process with which the children are having difficulty. For instance, if children are having particular problems with photographic descriptions, they could be placed in a scenario where they have to provide a detailed description as part of a class project. It needed, the clinician and each child could switch roles to model a satisfactory communication outcome. Then, roles could be reversed once again to allow the child another trial. If the situations are as real as possible, such exposure a practice has the potential of generalizing to communication both in and outside the classroom. To encourage generalize Lion, the speech-language pathologist or audiologist should arrange opportunities for the children to use the patterns practiced through scenarios. These scenarios could also provide an opportunity for the clinician to model self-talk in problem-solving, as described in an earlier section. When children assume a teacher role, the clinician can observe whether they have an awareness of intrapersonal conversations or need help in developing this aspect of communication.

**DISCOURSE IN PEER INTERACTIONS**

It is now generally agreed that the discourse requirements of talking to adults such as teachers is quite different from those needed to talk with peers (Corsaro, 1985). Focus on school discourse cannot be considered successful if the student can only converse with adults. Unfortunately, communication between individuals with severe to profound hearing loss and peers with normal hearing is often limited at best (Brown & Foster, 1991). In many cases, this is due not to their inability to communicate with one another, but rather to their lack of common experiences. In some cases, developing interaction with peers with normal hearing means introducing children with hearing loss to aspects of child or teen culture that is neither well known nor positively regarded by many members of the adult society, such as Power Rangers or gangsta’ rap. The availability of captioned television and the computer information highway can be important ways to access the dominant culture. The introduction of children with normal hearing to those experiences that may be more familiar to children with hearing loss, such as hearing tests, Marlee Matlin, or the burgeoning literature on deaf culture, when appropriate for a particular child, makes sense as well.

Within schools, the students develop their own discourse patterns that operate as the unwritten classroom curricula (Brown, Bauer, & Kretschmer, in press; Nelson, 1990). Children with hearing loss may not always be privy to these discourse patterns. Improving communication for children with hearing loss with their peers requires careful observation of the situations in which students perceive that they have problems. Do not rely solely on reports from the children themselves, however, because they may recognize that there are difficulties but may be unable to pinpoint the source because they are unaware of the unwritten curricula that exists within the classroom and/or school.

Observation ensures that the rules of interaction among children will be recognized for their difference from the rules between children and adults. Child-to-child communication interactions are in fact quite different from what teachers and others believe them to be (Corsaro, 1985; Elgas, Klein, Kantor, & Fernie, 1988; Healy-Romanello, 1987; Messenheimer-Young & Kretschmer, 1994). For example, in early childhood classrooms, children learn to enter interactions with teachers by using more formal terms of address (Mr. K., Mrs. W.), by raising their hands to gain permission to speak, or by making polite requests, such as Can I ask you something? In entering play interactions with peers, these forms are neither expected nor employed.
Preschool children enter play, not by requesting admission but simply by joining in or assuming appropriate roles within a play sequence. Overt requests to be admitted ten to be ignored.

The importance of providing appropriate advice on how to gain access to play was addressed by Messenheimer-Young and Kretschmer (1994), who reported that the adult advice given to a child with hearing loss when he indicated lack of acceptance by other children was “Well, just ask ‘Can I play?’” Detailed observation showed this entry move to be his least successful strategy, even though it was frequently backed by teacher intervention. To successfully aid the child with hearing loss to enter into and sustain interactions with other children, the clinician should base advice on the rules that have been established by the children themselves and not on what adults think is appropriate or what they would like to see. Seeking advice from children themselves concerning teaching styles and classroom communication rules is a well-proven strategy for improving school and everyday discourse among peers (Tattershall, 1994; Tattershall, Kretschmer, & Kretschmer. 1988).

SUMMARY

The task of helping children with hearing loss to improve communication is a complicated, but not impossible, one. In the past, the focus in intervention has been solely on the child as a language producer—an approach that has been less than successful. I would like to argue that there is a need to refocus intervention with children who have hearing loss by viewing communication as an interactive process—whether in classroom or interpersonal contexts. We need to clearly understand children's abilities to participate in social interactions and their prowess with extended discourse. This requires that professionals who work with children with hearing loss apply the available information concerning how English conversations work and how they can be facilitated to meet these students' needs.

Discourse processes such as narration or description, as well as others such as explanation, persuasion, and instruction giving, are especially critical to success in classrooms and in everyday life. Discourse practice can best be extended through the collaborative efforts of speech-language pathologists and audiologists, classroom teachers, peers, and even the children themselves. Observations and the examination of authentic interactions provide the basis for the soundest advice regarding how to improve the communication interactions of children with hearing loss.

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