This document is available to download from my website at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/visual-impairment-autism/

The article is based very loosely on a document I prepared in about 2009 for colleagues who were working with a young man with visual impairment and autism. Although he had a significant visual impairment, his autism was considerably more disabling. The young man required the Minimal Speech Approach and the original document was intended as a guide to those supporting him. This article also draws on the Resource Pack developed by the Visual Impairment and Autism Project. For a description of the Project and the Resource Pack, download the article which is available at the address above.

A range of other articles is available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/visual-impairment-autism/ and on other pages on the website. They focus particularly on addressing the communication needs of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities, including autism. They are also likely to be of interest to those concerned with children and adults who have learning disabilities.

Please refer to this document by acknowledging the author, providing the web address and noting the date that you accessed the article.

Ian Bell
January 2013
Introduction

The Minimal Speech Approach is commonly used with people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC). This is simply an approach in which those who come into contact with an autistic person deliberately reduce the amount of spoken language they address to him / her. They also simplify their spoken language. The Minimal Speech Approach is characterised by:

- reducing the amount of spoken language
- cutting out spoken language completely in some circumstances
- simplifying spoken language
- using long pauses to provide the autistic person with plenty of time to understand and respond.

This article first explains the need for the Minimal Speech Approach and then describes it in greater detail.

The Minimal Speech Approach can be used in conjunction with the Low Arousal Approach.¹

In fact, the Minimal Speech Approach, or some elements of it can be very supportive for people with learning disabilities who do not have autism, but whose receptive language skills are very limited.

The need for the Minimal Speech Approach

Most autistic people have some difficulties understanding spoken language. A factor that may help to explain these difficulties is that spoken language is quite clearly a social phenomenon – autistic people have difficulties understanding social interaction generally.

Another important issue is that many autistic people process information slowly, and seem to have particular difficulties processing spoken language. In this regard, an important feature of spoken language is that it fades very quickly: as soon as a word has been spoken, it disappears. This means that if an autistic person is finding processing very hard, there is nothing for him / her to refer back to. Once the message has gone, it cannot be retrieved.

¹ the Low Arousal Approach is described in a separate article, available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/visual-impairment-autism/
It may not be easy to accept that autistic people have difficulties understanding spoken language. One factor is that many autistic people appear to understand more spoken language than they actually do. This is especially true of those whose expressive language seems to be well developed. This can mislead people into believing their understanding must also be as well developed as their expressive language appears to be. But just because someone often uses sentences of several words, it does not mean he/she can always understand similar sentences of several words spoken by other people. Also, just because a person sometimes responds appropriately, it does not mean he/she has fully understood everything his/her communication partner has said. Autistic people often respond appropriately because they are familiar with the situation and know what to do.

It is important to remember that an autistic person’s ability to understand will vary according to the situation. They understand best when they

- are calm and relaxed
- are physically well
- are fully alert
- can readily attend to what the other person says; i.e. when they are not engaged in an activity which requires a considerable amount of attention
- they are in a “quiet” environment, that is one in which there is relatively little sensory stimulation.

Even if an individual autistic person can sometimes understand spoken language well, there are likely to be times when he/she is unable to do so. Those occasions cannot be predicted with any certainty. It is therefore important to accept that the person has difficulty understanding spoken language, and to address that difficulty.

It is essential to remember that an autistic person will understand less well when

- giving a considerable amount of attention to a task
- physically unwell
- tired
- stressed
- anxious
- experiencing sensory over-load.
Unfortunately, autistic people are typically unable to say when things are harder than usual. Sometimes those who know a person well can tell from his / her behaviour that something is wrong. But this is not always possible. This means there is a risk that long sentences are addressed to the person when he / she is not able to understand them. Therefore, in order to ensure that the learner understands well, the Minimal Speech Approach should be adopted and used at all times.

**Using the Minimal Speech Approach**

As noted in the Introduction, using the Minimal Speech Approach is characterised by:

- reducing the amount of spoken language
- cutting out spoken language completely in some circumstances
- simplifying spoken language
- using long pauses to provide the autistic person with plenty of time to understand and respond.

**Reducing the amount of spoken language**

Reducing the amount of spoken language requires people to use only key words. This may seem artificial and may be difficult at first, but it is essential. In fact, much of the spoken language we produce is actually unnecessary. An example is *Right. It's time for our music session. Great! We're going to the hall.* Of the 13 words here, only 1 is strictly necessary in many circumstances: *music.* For many autistic people this single word is sufficient. Not only would more words be unnecessary, they may prevent an autistic person processing, understanding and responding. In one set of circumstances, it would be necessary to add *hall,* and to say *Music. Hall;* this would be the case if the music session sometimes took place in another room.

Not only is it important to reduce the amount of spoken language addressed to an autistic person. It is often necessary to reduce the amount of language spoken in the presence of that person. For example, practitioners in a school, college or residential setting may need to avoid speaking amongst themselves. This reduces the risk of the autistic person becoming over-loaded with sensory information. It may also support the person to focus on the spoken language actually addressed to him / her.
Cutting out spoken language completely in some circumstances

Reducing spoken language also means that people should only speak when it is necessary, and that spoken language should be cut out completely in some situations.

Most autistic people are “single-channelled” – at any one time, they can handle information of only one kind. For example, when a single-channelled person is listening, he / she cannot also look; when looking, cannot also listen. So, when an autistic person is concentrating on a task, he / she is unlikely to understand any spoken language. Indeed, he / she may be unaware that someone else has spoken. In that case, of course, speaking has been pointless. If the person is aware of the spoken language, this may hinder, or even prevent, him / her from completing the task. This, in turn, could cause him / her to become very anxious, stressed or over-loaded.

Unfortunately, it is often impossible to be sure what another person is attending to. Neuro-typical people can usually “tune out” redundant sensory stimulation such as the hum of a computer, the smell of lunch cooking and the picture on the wall. But autistic people are often unable to ignore sensory information in this way. So, even when an autistic person appears not to be focussed on any task, he / she may be attending to a source of sensory stimulation most people would be unaware of. At such times, spoken language can add substantially to the level of sensory stimulation the autistic person is experiencing. Again, this could cause the person to become very anxious, stressed or over-loaded.

An unnecessary form of spoken language is banter. This should certainly be cut out when employing the Minimal Speech Approach. It can be tempting to use banter during tasks which seem to require the autistic person to pay little attention. However, as the person is likely to be single-channelled, he / she may simply ignore any banter; if so, it is pointless. Worse, he / she may find banter distracting or even over-stimulating and may be unable to focus on the task; if so, the banter does, of course, have a negative impact. In any case, banter involves humour and, therefore, often metaphor, simile, sarcasm or idioms. Because autistic people have literal understanding, it is advisable to cut out these forms of language.

Some autistic people go into “crisis” at times. In such situations they suddenly become unable to cope any longer. They may become very angry; may shout at those close by; may hit out; may very hurriedly move
away and seek somewhere quiet, to be alone. At such times they are very unlikely to be able to understand any spoken language at all, so it should be cut out completely.

It is essential to have clear guidelines for dealing with each autistic person who experiences crises. Because people are so individual, it is inappropriate to give any such guidelines here.

**Simplifying spoken language**

As discussed above, the Minimal Speech Approach requires spoken language to be reduced to key words only. In fact, by doing so, people are automatically simplifying their spoken language. However, it is important to simplify spoken language in other ways too. This includes:

- using intonation and facial expressions with care
- ensuring that spoken language is explicit and avoids ambiguity
- giving explicit instructions which avoid multiple steps and ambiguity
- repeating in exactly the same form something a person has not understood
- ensuring that only one person at a time gives instructions
- avoiding the use of negatives, such as *no, don’t, can’t* and *mustn’t*
- avoiding metaphor, simile, sarcasm or idioms
- asking only clear questions and limiting their use
- using personal pronouns carefully and consistently.

**Using intonation and facial expressions with care**

Many autistic people have difficulty understanding what are called the prosodic features of spoken language, such as pitch, emphasis, volume and speed: they have difficulty interpreting the meaning of these features.

In addition, many autistic people also have difficulty interpreting facial expressions. A personal anecdote illustrates this well. Several years ago I became involved with a girl with very severe autism. For the sake of this story, I will call her Mandy. A teaching colleague and I worked jointly with her. When I first became involved with Mandy, my colleague had already got to know Mandy well. She informed me that Mandy had difficulty understanding facial expressions. When I first met Mandy, I observed a
session in which my colleague worked with her. I deliberately tried to keep my facial expression neutral and static, to reduce the risk that it would confuse her. In fact, this back-fired: Mandy subsequently told my colleague that she did not like me because I looked angry all the time.

Mandy also found it difficult to understand intonation; for example, if she heard her father speaking loudly, she was worried in case he was angry with her. It is also important to note that an autistic person might become overloaded as a result of someone speaking in a loud voice.

As part of the Minimal Speech Approach, it may be advisable to use intonation and facial expression with care.

Ensuring that spoken language is explicit and avoids ambiguity

It is advisable to bear in mind that some very commonly used words and phrases that are readily understood by neuro-typical people are confusing to those with autism. For example, a neuro-typical person interprets *You can't run in the corridor*, as meaning *You are not allowed to run in the corridor*. However, an autistic person, interpreting this very literally, may think the speaker means *You do not have the ability run in the corridor*. The person, knowing he / she does have this ability, may become very confused, and even stressed.

Another important point is relevant here. Telling the person *I don't allow you to run in the corridor* is not very helpful. This is because it fails to tell the person what he / she is allowed to do. Autistic people need very clear information about what they should be doing. Telling them what they should not be doing is unhelpful.

A common source of ambiguity is words and phrases connected with time. For example, when responding to an autistic person’s request, it is best to avoid saying such things as *wait a minute, soon* and *later*. The person may not understand such time concepts and may become very impatient or confused. On the other hand, the person may have a very good idea of what a minute is and may expect to wait, literally, for one minute.

Being explicit and avoiding ambiguity are particularly important when giving instructions.
Giving explicit instructions which avoid multiple steps and ambiguity

As noted elsewhere, much of the spoken language we produce is redundant; in other words, it is actually unnecessary. The need to reduce and simplify spoken language applies as much to instructions as to other types of sentence.

Being explicit is essential when giving instructions. Another anecdote will be helpful to explain this need. It concerns an autistic boy (I will call him Mike here) participating in an art lesson. The teaching assistant gave him the following instruction: Mike, paint a mountain. Mike responded I can't paint a mountain. Because the teaching assistant did not appreciate that Mike has literal understanding, she became irritated, and repeated the instruction. Mike also became annoyed: he knew he could not paint a mountain. The teaching assistant repeated the instruction several more times, with Mike repeating I can't. The teaching assistant became increasingly irritated, and Mike’s stress level rose so much he went into crisis. When this incident was reviewed, it was explained to the teaching assistant that Mike has literal understanding and that a more appropriate instruction would have been Mike, paint a picture of a mountain.

Some autistic people respond to instructions given in question form in what seems to be a rude, cheeky or flippant manner. An example of this kind of instruction is Can you go to dinner now? An autistic person may treat this literally, and respond Yes, I can. This is not rudeness, cheekiness or flippancy: it is giving a literal response to the question that has been asked. "Polite" question forms of instructions such as this should be avoided, and explicit instructions given, such as Dinner now.

Indirect instructions such as I want you to have your shower should also be avoided. This is because there is a risk that an autistic person will respond by saying I don't want my shower, without actually carrying out the instruction. Indirect instructions such as this should be avoided, and explicit instructions given, such as Shower.

It is important to understand that many instructions actually refer to a task with multiple steps. For example, someone with limited receptive ability may not readily understand Put your coat on if his / her coat is not actually present.

This apparently simple instruction is actually quite complex: it requires the person to
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- stand up
- go to the cloakroom
- find his / her coat
- put his / her coat on.

Rather than give the instruction *Put your coat on*, it may be more effective to give a separate instruction for each step:

- *Stand up*
- *Go cloakroom*
- *Find coat*
- *Put coat on.*

**Repeating in exactly the same form something a person has not understood**

When someone does not respond to spoken language, it is natural for the speaker to assume that the other person has failed to understand. It is then natural to recast what was said, in other words, to express it in a different way. However, for many autistic people, this actually makes matters worse. It is possible that this is because the person regards the recast information, instruction or question as being completely different from the original, rather than another version of it. In most situations, it is better not to recast what has been said, but to repeat it in exactly the same form as the original.

**Ensuring that only one person at a time gives instructions**

An autistic person can become very confused in a situation in which two or more other people give instructions: this can cause uncertainty regarding which instructions to respond to. In any one situation, only one person should give instructions. In order to ensure people's safety, this is particularly important in potentially risky situations such as the swimming pool and crossing the road.

**Avoiding the use of negatives, such as no, don’t, can’t and mustn’t**

The use of negatives should be avoided because words such as *no, don’t, mustn’t* and *can’t* only tell the person what *not* to do; this is unhelpful. Everyone needs very clear information about what they *should* do.
Rules need to be expressed in positive terms, informing people of what they should do; this is considerably more helpful than rules expressed negatively, which tell people what they should not do. Ali talks a great deal about his favourite topic (vehicles), and used to do so during meals, to the extent that meal times became very extended, with Ali often refusing to eat his food when it became cold. He was initially given the rule No talking about vehicles during meals. This was ineffective. It is possible Ali failed to understand the word no in this context; in any case, the rule told him what he should not do, and failed to inform Ali of what he should do. The rule was amended to Eat during meals. Talk about vehicles in lounge. Ali understood this positively expressed rule and meals passed much more quickly, meaning that his food no longer became cold.

Not only is the word no difficult for some autistic people to understand; it should also be avoided because it can cause a rise in an autistic person’s stress level. This may result from confusion. Another possibility is that it results from associating the word no with unpleasant past situations, such as being reprimanded, or denied a favourite activity or item.

**Avoiding metaphor, simile, sarcasm or idioms**

Most autistic people understand language literally and do not understand metaphor, simile, sarcasm or idioms. Autistic people do not understand things such as Pull your socks up, Pick up the motorway and Trying to be clever again, are we? They should be avoided.

**Asking only clear questions and limiting their use**

Many autistic people find questions difficult to understand and do not respond readily to them. One reason that questions are so difficult for autistic people is that the questioner sets the topic. This can be very hard for an autistic person to accept. This is because an autistic person may converse well only about a topic he / she has selected.

"Open" questions (such as What did you do yesterday?) are particularly difficult for many autistic people. This is because they give little or no indication of the expected answer. In effect, an open question requires the person answering to choose the answer; many autistic people find making choices difficult, even when the number of options is very restricted and clearly stated.
When employing the Minimal Speech Approach, it is best to limit the number of questions, and to ensure all questions are clear. It may sometimes be appropriate to ask a simple yes/no question concerning a person’s needs or wishes: *Do you want a drink?*, for example.

Open questions should be avoided completely. It is better to present an unfinished sentence to be completed. For example, rather than asking *What year was the Battle of Hastings?*, it is preferable to say *The Battle of Hastings was in ……*

**Using personal pronouns carefully and consistently**

Personal pronouns (e.g. *I, me, you* and *she*) are a feature of language which many autistic people find particularly difficult. A factor involved in this is that personal pronouns shift meaning according to who is using them and the linguistic context. In part, personal pronouns depend on the user’s perspective. Autistic people do not readily understand that another person may have a perspective on the world that is different from their own. Thus some autistic people “reverse” personal pronouns, for example, using *he* or *you* instead or *I*. In addition, some autistic people refer to themselves by name, and do not use *I* or *me*.

In fact, many typically developing children are also confused by personal pronouns and may take some time to use them all appropriately. To support their babies, infants and young children, most parents naturally use few, if any, personal pronouns. For example, when talking to her child, it is common for a mother to say such things as *Mummy’s here* and *Give it to Mummy*.

People may need to reduce or eliminate personal pronouns when speaking with an autistic person. Although this comes naturally to most adults when addressing a very young child, many people find it difficult to do when addressing an older child and, especially, when addressing an adult. It is not possible to give any firm recommendations here, as people’s abilities and needs vary so markedly. However, the following may be useful as a “rule of thumb:” avoid the use of personal pronouns with people who:

- do not produce spoken language themselves
- confuse personal pronouns in their own usage.
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So, for example, instead of saying *I'll help*, I would say *Ian help*; instead of *Give me the box*, I would say *Give Ian box*. I would, of course, augment my spoken language as necessary, with gesture if appropriate, and/or with some form of visual or tactile support.

**Using long pauses to provide the autistic person with plenty of time to understand and respond**

Many autistic people process information slowly, and seem to have particular difficulties processing spoken language. This means it is very important to provide autistic people with sufficient processing time. It is impossible to be precise here because people vary widely in their ability to process spoken language. It is also important to understand that a person's processing speeds are likely to vary. They will depend on several factors, such as:

- how motivated the person is by the task/ topic
- how healthy the person is
- the person's level of alertness/tiredness
- whether the person is hungry or thirsty
- the person's stress/anxiety level
- the level of sensory stimulation in the environment.

Because it is easy to remember, a useful rule of thumb is *wait for eight*. That is, having spoken to an autistic person, you should wait for 8 seconds to provide processing time. In this context, 8 seconds can feel extremely long. For some people, in some situations, this may be more than enough. If this is the case, of course, the person will respond within 8 seconds, so waiting that long will be unnecessary. For some people, 8 seconds may never be long enough; indeed, sometimes processing may take 8 minutes, or even longer. Some people will respond quite quickly on some occasions, but need longer on others.

**Augmenting spoken language**

Although using the Minimal Speech Approach may be necessary for some autistic people, it may not be sufficient. It may also be important to augment spoken language.
In contrast to the very temporary nature of spoken language, many visual means of communication are, or can be, permanent. An object, photograph, or print can remain with the person. It does not fade or disappear; the person can retrieve and review it. Not only can this support initial processing, it means that the person can return as often as necessary for a reminder and for reassurance. This is why visual timetables / schedules can be so supportive for an autistic person: they allow the person to check what is happening later, without the need to continually ask questions. For many autistic people, this is enormously helpful in reducing anxieties.

It is common for those who support autistic people to augment their spoken language visually. This is because autistic people are regarded as coping most readily with information presented visually and as learning most effectively through vision. In addition, it is possible that visual means of communication are easier for autistic people because they are not so clearly a social phenomenon.

Furthermore, autistic people interpret language literally; they find abstract language particularly difficult. Indeed, many seem to find spoken language itself to be too abstract. Objects, photographs and visual symbols are (in varying degrees) more concrete than spoken language, and may thus be easier to understand.

When using the Minimal Speech Approach, then, it is important to augment all spoken language. Although most autistic people benefit from some form of visual support, this may not be the case if the person has visual impairment as well as autism. Nevertheless, because vision is so powerful for most autistic people, if a person has even a very little vision, it may be most appropriate to augment spoken language visually. Those with no functional vision may need to use objects or a tactile version of pictures, symbols or the printed word.

The method used to augment spoken language must be individualised. Many factors need to be considered. These include the person’s vision, cognitive and symbolic skills and his / her interests and motivation. If the person can read, printed words, or braille can be used.

Regardless of which form of visual support, or tactile alternative, is employed to augment spoken language, consideration should also be
given to providing a timetable / schedule. As noted above, many autistic people benefit greatly from a timetable / schedule.\(^2\)

**Closing remarks**

There is little doubt that the Minimal Speech Approach is very supportive for many autistic people. The approach is advocated for autistic children by Potter and Whitakker (2001). They argue that it *is important in the creation of a more communication-enabling environment* (p.42). This is the case not just for autistic children, but for adults too.

In fact, employing the Minimal Speech Approach, in effect, means communicating in an autistic-friendly manner. It also makes a key contribution to providing an Empathic Approach.\(^3\)

**Reference**


Another potentially useful source is the article *Adjusting the way we speak when we communicate with people who have visual impairment and additional needs*. This is Article 17, available to download from my website at [http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/](http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/)

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