Don’t teach – intervene

Ian Bell
Specialist Independent Speech and Language Therapist

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This article was originally published as follows:


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Ian Bell
January 2013
5. DON’T TEACH — INTERVENE

Ian Bell

SUMMARY
There are reasons for believing it is inappropriate to refer to teaching communication and language skills. This article explains why this is so; argues that “facilitators” can accelerate communication and language acquisition in children with mental handicaps by “intervening” in their environment; and outlines the principles on which intervention should be based.

Introduction
Previous articles in this series (Bell, 1984a, 1984b) have outlined a communication and language curriculum for children with mental handicaps. A fundamental assumption was made: that it is possible to accelerate the children’s acquisition of communication and language. Elsewhere it has been argued that it is necessary to teach them these skills (Bell, 1979). It is, however, now recognised that it is inappropriate to refer to teaching communication and language skills.

The following definition from the Concise Oxford Dictionary helps to explain this.

“teach (1) Enable or cause (person, etc. to do) by instruction and training
(2) Give lessons at school or elsewhere...
(3) Give instruction, educate...
(4) Explain, show, state by way of instruction...”

Why communication and language cannot be taught
Bloom and Lahey (1987), argued that language acquisition is a process of induction: it involves inducing relationships between concepts, linguistic forms, and contexts. This is true for the child who is having problems with language as well as for the younger acquiring language normally: all must learn the rules for creating, understanding, and using utterances. Unfortunately, these rules cannot be given to people who do not possess them: for one thing, not all the rules of language are known explicitly (Slobin, 1974); and, in any case, explanations or descriptions of the rules inevitably involve the use of language, which would not be understood by those lacking the rules. For example, it is possible to explain that, in English, the subject normally precedes the verb in a statement, and that the object normally follows it. Children, however, do not acquire language by having rules stated to them like this, yet such rules must be learned. Children come to know the rules in the sense of being able to use them, rather than being able to state them: they use them to understand other people’s utterances and to create utterances of their own. This can only be achieved through a process of induction involving repeated exposure to meaningful language: language cannot be taught to language (Jeffere, McConkey, and Hewson, 1977).

There are also many pre-linguistic behaviours which cannot be taught. For example, one behaviour often included in sequences of early development is: “When distressed, is comforted by a gentle voice”. This appears to be a stage in “normal” development, and might well be important for communication and language acquisition. Some children, though, particularly those with profound handicaps, seldom or never show distress so that there are few opportunities to attempt to calm them with a gentle voice. It would be most unethical to deliberately distress a child in order to increase such opportunities. In any case, how could a distressed child be taught to be comforted by a gentle voice?

One curriculum aim specified in the second article of this series (Bell, 1984a) is: the child uses language... to initiate interaction... This is vital: without initiation, performance seems inhuman (Brown, 1976), and the child will be unable to use language effectively for many of the functions specified in the curriculum aims, such as expressing needs and emotions, making demands, giving instructions, seeking information, and forming and maintaining social relationships. All these require the ability to use language spontaneously.

Yet it is probably not possible to teach spontaneous language production. For one thing, language production is completely under the child’s control, and it is impossible to physically prompt him to speak (McConkey, 1979). Gestural prompts would be useless, and a verbal approach would be ineffective. Signing systems might appear to have an advantage over spoken language as the child can be prompted to produce manual signs. Prompting, however, is undesirable. It removes from the child the very thing that is to be encouraged — the initiative — and imposes topics on him — undesirable because conversations between a young child and his primary caregiver are most successful when the child has initiated the topic (Wells, 1981b). It seems most unlikely, then, that children could be taught to use language spontaneously and functionally.

Another difficulty concerns feedback, which is generally regarded as an essential element in the teaching process. The precise nature of the feedback and the way in which it is given depend on the child’s needs and abilities, and on the teaching approach being used. Positive feedback, in the form of a favourite food, physical contact, or praise, for example, is thought likely to promote learning. Unfortunately feedback of this sort is probably artificial and may not be effective in fostering the acquisition of communication and language.

It is not entirely clear how children acquiring language naturally are reinforced. It tends to be the truth of utterances, not their grammar, to which parents of young children respond (see McLean and Snyder-McLean, 1978; de Villiers and de Villiers, 1979). Mahoney (1975, citing Brown and Hanlon, and Nelson) claimed that children are most frequently reinforced for attempting to communicate. The most natural and powerful reinforcers are probably (a) controlling the environment (Guess, Sailor, and Baer, 1974), and (b) communicating and interacting successfully (Bloom and Lahey, 1978). Thus, for maximum success in accelerating communication and language acquisition in children with mental handicaps it is important to: (a) encourage them to communicate purposefully, and (b) ensure that they do so successfully, at least most of the time. Indeed, ensuring their success is the best way of encouraging them. This approach requires something far removed from teaching.

According to Snyder and McLean (1976), language acquisition is an interactive process in which the learner must play an active part. Bloom and Lahey (1978) believed that children acquiring language selectively attend to the environment, and actively seek and process new information. Teaching would seem undesirable as it would involve directing the child’s attention and giving him new information, perhaps even imposing it upon him. This might weaken or destroy his desire to seek new information for himself, so reducing his active participation in the acquisition process. There is certainly a danger that teaching would confine the child to a passive role.

IAN BELL is the Deputy Headteacher at the Beaufort School, Coleshill Road, Birmingham.
But if children with mental handicaps are to acquire language they must interact with the environment and the people in it. Communication and language skills may be required at any time and in any place. Efforts to accelerate their acquisition in children with mental handicaps should not be confined to short, isolated sessions (see, for example, McLean and Snyder-McLean, 1978; McConkey, 1981a). This too suggests that teaching is inappropriate, for it is normally thought of as occurring in lessons — a view confirmed by the dictionary definition given above.

There are, then, several reasons why communication and language cannot be taught. But that does not mean it is impossible to foster its acquisition in children with mental handicaps (Jeffree, McConkey, and Hewson, 1977). Bloom and Lahey (1978) use the terms “facilitator” and “intervention”: their use is strongly recommended. They are explained as follows.

**INTERVENTION**

Intervention, in this context, is the process of manipulating the environment in order to accelerate the acquisition of communication and language. Three basic elements of a child’s environment can be manipulated (Bloom and Lahey, 1978): (a) linguistic forms; (b) objects and events; and (c) the social context. Intervention, for the child who is mentally handicapped, involves manipulating these elements to minimise the difficulties he has induced the relationships within and between them (Bloom and Lahey, 1978).

**FACILITATORS**

Facilitators are the people involved in communication and language intervention (Bloom and Lahey, 1978). The term is extremely versatile, being applicable to everyone involved in intervention — parents, speech therapists, residential care staff, nursery nurses, teacher aides, and so on, as well as teachers.

**Basic principles underlying intervention**

The article will now outline the principles on which it is believed intervention should be based.

1. **Increasingly mature forms of communication are expected from the child, so that ultimately he communicates in the standard way for the community.**

   People who are mentally handicapped must be able to communicate effectively with others if they are to be accepted into the community and are to avoid exploitation. Ideally they need to master the standard means of communication in society: a sophisticated level of spoken language. This requires that they have well developed grammatical abilities. (These ideas are discussed more fully in Bell, in preparation). The problem for facilitators is how to help them progress to acquire the necessary skills. A basic need is to expect increasingly mature forms of communication from the child, so that ultimately he communicates in the standard way for the community. This is one of the principles proposed and explained by MacDonald (nd), whose paper is strongly recommended.

2. **Children must be encouraged to make choices and to control events and people.**

   As noted earlier, language production is completely under the child’s control. One of the facilitator’s most important roles is to provide him with the motivation to communicate. It has already been suggested that controlling the environment, and communicating and interacting successfully, are the most powerful reinforcers for acquiring language. Facilitators must exploit this. The need to allow children who are mentally handicapped to exercise choice and to control events and people in school has been stated (Bell, 1982), but this need is not restricted to the school setting: if intervention is to be truly successful, children must be encouraged to make choices and control the environment in all situations. Expressing needs and desires, and controlling the environment, are not only important for motivational reasons: they are important in themselves. Hence their inclusion as an aim of the communication and language curriculum (Bell, 1984a).
talking. Facilitators, however, can feel under pressure to fill silences (Robson, 1982). The more they talk, of course, the less the children can say. Spontaneous production is particularly likely to suffer if facilitators ask a lot of questions, make many demands for imitation, or issue lots of instructions. As Reynell (1969) noted, children need someone who is prepared to listen.

9. Facilitators should ensure effective communication with children who are mentally handicapped.

When talking to young children, mothers and other adults modify their language in many ways. Lack of space prevents giving details here but useful summaries are provided by: Snyder and McLean (1976); Bloom and Lahey (1978); de Villiers and de Villiers (1979); and Colmar and Wheldall (1984). Facilitators would probably find it impossible to consciously modify their language in all the ways reported by these authors. However, it has been suggested that mothers do not modify their language in order to teach their children, but to ensure successful communication (Snow, 1979). Facilitators, therefore, might be most effective if they concentrate on establishing and maintaining effective communication: if they succeed, the modifications which mothers make when talking to their young children might arise naturally.

10. Materials must be chosen with care.

In encouraging meaningful production, the use of objects rather than pictures is recommended for most purposes. Cocking and McHale (1981) found that the production of four- and five-year-olds was better with objects. McConkey, Martin, and Martin (1982) found that objects were more effective in eliciting action + object sentences from children with mental handicaps. Bloom and Lahey (1978) argued that objects are better because they can be acted on and experienced: a similar point being made by McLean and Snyder-McLean (1978). McConkey (1979) pointed out the difficulty of representing verbs in pictures.

11. Generalisation should be built into intervention.

The more artificial the learning environment, the less likely is that new behaviours will generalise to the natural environment (Colmar and Wheldall, 1984). Intervention should, therefore, take place, as recommended by Miller and Yoder (1974), in situations in which children spend most of their time, and should involve all the significant adults in their life (McConkey, 1981b). It may be appropriate to provide additional activities in the school timetable, specifically designed to facilitate communication and language acquisition. These need to be as natural as possible, and should be seen primarily as a means of increasing the opportunities for facilitator-child conversations.

12. Imitation and questioning should be used with great care.

Too much reliance is sometimes placed on imitation and questioning in intervention. These issues are the subject of subsequent articles in this series.

13. Conversations should be central in intervention.

Another aim of the communication and language curriculum (Bell, 1984a) is that: the child uses language . . . to maintain conversations. Conversations are usually regarded as being verbal, but McDonald (nd) uses the term more widely. Non-verbal conversations (or “joint activity routines”) are extremely important in establishing shared understandings, and verbal conversations develop from them. Conversations play a major part in language acquisition (see, for example, Bruner, 1975; Dore, 1979; Wells, 1981a and 1981b; McDonald, nd). Those between children and facilitators should be a major feature of intervention. They are the natural context for language acquisition, and are most likely to foster generalisable skills (see [11] above).

Concluding remarks

This series has stated that the behavioural approach is of doubtful value in communication and language (Bell, 1984a, 1984b). Colmar and Wheldall (1984) have gone further, claiming that the behavioural objectives model is inappropriate for language. However, it is not possible to sit back and do nothing. This article has explained why it is believed that communication and language cannot be taught, and has outlined the principles on which intervention should be based. Perhaps the approach proposed here can best be summarised thus: facilitators, by sharing experiences and holding conversations with children, should constantly strive for the maximum level of mutual understanding.

References

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