Encouraging people to be active communicators

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Article 9 in the series Facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. All the articles are available to download from my website at

http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website.

This article is based closely on a document used to support the Communication Policy adopted at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning. As Lead Speech and Language Therapist there, I took the lead in writing the original document in 2010.

For further information about RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, go to www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre

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When facilitating communication skills it can be tempting to believe that receptive skills should be targeted before the associated expressive skills. Using this model, the person’s understanding of, say, *chair* and *jump* would be developed before making any attempt to promote his/her use of these words. This approach is based on the notion that receptive skills emerge ahead of expressive skills. It is supported by the views of influential early workers in the field of learning difficulties, such as Mittler (1974), who believed that promoting receptive skills might be easier and more fruitful than facilitating expression.

However, the relationship between receptive and expressive skills is complex (Bell, 1984); for example, it is clear that many typically developing children use words before they fully understand them. Research has also shown that children can produce some sentence types despite failing to understand them in formal testing (Paul, 1990, cited by Miller and Paul, 1995).

There are also major drawbacks with facilitating receptive communication:

- it reduces the time available for facilitating spontaneous expressive communication, yet, as discussed elsewhere,¹ this is essential for many people with visual impairment and additional needs
- it places the communicatively disabled person in a responsive and passive position, with the facilitator very much in control; however, it is vital that facilitators share control with people who have visual impairment and additional needs²
- activities for facilitating receptive communication tend to be rather boring and repetitive, yet people learn most effectively when they are motivated and their interests are taken into account
- people with visual impairment and additional needs tend to find it difficult to generalise, so it is necessary to ensure that communication takes place in natural, everyday situations, not in artificially constructed activities³
- many people with visual impairment and additional needs have very limited receptive skills which cannot be reliably assessed; facilitators often have to rely on nothing more than a guestimate of how much spoken language a person understands; in the absence of clear assessment information, it is not possible to set targets to facilitate the acquisition of new receptive skills.

¹ See article 7.
² See article 8.
³ See article 11.
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It is, then, inappropriate to facilitate the acquisition of increasingly mature receptive communication skills. However, receptive communication is vitally important. What facilitators should do is provide support to people with visual impairment and additional needs to ensure that they understand as well as possible in all situations.\footnote{In particular, see article 2.}

With regard to promoting increasingly mature communication skills, facilitators should focus on functional expressive skills. In order to do so, it is essential to take account of the fact that typically developing children are actively involved in the process of acquiring communication skills (Bloom and Lahey, 1978; McLean and Snyder-McLean, 1978; Clark, 1980). Ensuring that people are active participants in acquiring expressing communication is helpful in several ways: in particular, it supports their attention and motivation, and enables them to learn through social interaction (Prizant \textit{et al.}, 2006).

People with visual impairment and additional needs must be active participants in their acquisition of communication: they must communicate in order to learn how to communicate. This parallels how all skills are acquired; typical children become skilled communicators only if they communicate a great deal; they only become fluent readers if they read a lot; people only become competent drivers if they practise frequently.

Facilitators should provide as many opportunities as possible for people to be active communicators. Doing so relies on

- creating a responsive environment\footnote{See article 14.}
- encouraging people to take the initiative\footnote{See article 7.}
- allowing people to have control.\footnote{See article 8.}
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References

Bell, I.P. (1984) ‘The focus on meaningful production.’ Mental Handicap, 12, December, 155-159


