

# Encouraging people to be active communicators

**Ian Bell**

Specialist Independent Speech and Language Therapist

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](http://www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre)

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

**Ian Bell**

**April 2012**

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,<sup>1</sup> 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 needs<sup>2</sup>
- 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 activities<sup>3</sup>
- 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 guesstimate 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> See article 7.

<sup>2</sup> See article 8.

<sup>3</sup> See article 11.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 *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<sup>5</sup>
- encouraging people to take the initiative<sup>6</sup>
- allowing people to have control.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In particular, see article 2.

<sup>5</sup> See article 14.

<sup>6</sup> See article 7.

<sup>7</sup> See article 8.

## References

- Bell, I.P. (1984)** 'The focus on meaningful production.' *Mental Handicap*, 12, December, 155-159
- Bloom, L. and Lahey, M. (1978)** *Language Development and Language Disorders*. New York: John Wiley
- Clark, R. (1980)** 'Errors in Talking to Learn.' *First Language*, 1, 1, 7-32
- McLean, J.E. and Snyder-McLean, L.K. (1978)** *A Transactional Approach to Early Language Training*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill
- Miller, J.F. and Paul, R. (1995)** *The Clinical Assessment of Language Comprehension*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes
- Mittler, P.J. (1974)** 'The Teaching of Language Skills.' In *Language and the Mentally Handicapped: Conference Proceedings I*. Kidderminster: IMS
- Prizant, B.M., Wetherby, A.M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A.C. & Rydell, P.J. (2006)** *The SCERTS™ Model. A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Volume I Assessment*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes