Language Intervention: A Pragmatic Approach

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The approach to language intervention described in this paper provides a means of teaching pragmatically appropriate and effective uses of language in conversational contexts while simultaneously teaching the production and comprehension of specific linguistic forms. The approach, developed in work with seriously language-disabled young children, consists of a series of communication games. These games, which focus and intensify certain characteristics of conversational situations, teach vocabulary, syntax, and articulation as devices for serving the same pragmatic functions these devices serve in ordinary conversation. The games integrate the advantages of the traditional language lessons and those of incidental teaching. Spontaneous speech data collected before and after a 4-month interval from trained and contrast-group children suggest the positive impact of the intervention on the language performance of children with no or moderate cognitive delays, but the results do not suggest a similar impact on children with severe cognitive delays. The results suggest that the intervention merits further application and evaluation, with particular attention to the control of cognitive level.

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The goal of any language intervention effort is to enhance children's ability to use language as an effective means of communication in their everyday lives. Recent research on pragmatics, particularly on children's development of pragmatic ability (e.g., Bates, 1976; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979), has led teachers, clinicians, and researchers to embrace the ideal of teaching meaningful language in conversational contexts (Seibert & Oller, 1981). This concept has been difficult to translate into specific intervention strategies. Incidental and interactive teaching methods (e.g., Allen, 1980; Hart & Risley, 1975; Rieke, Lynch, & Soltman, 1977) encourage teachers to converse with children and to create opportunities for incidental teaching. When, however, a child clearly needs to work on specific syntactic, semantic, or phonological forms, practitioners rely heavily on conventional language lesson approaches like asking children to repeat adult pronunciations, mimic adult sentences, label objects, or otherwise produce language for no apparent communicative purpose. Such teaching approaches reflect a continuing reliance on a context-free, structure-oriented approach to language teaching rather than a conversational one.

This paper describes an alternative approach to language intervention for young language-disabled children. This approach, which consists of a series of communication games, provides a means of teaching pragmatically appropriate and effective uses of language in conversational contexts while simultaneously teaching the production and comprehension of specific linguistic forms. This paper first describes the intervention itself, the details of which appear in Conant, Budoff, and Hecht (1983), then presents material concerning the evaluation of the intervention.

THE COMMUNICATION GAMES INTERVENTION

The communication games range in difficulty from simple games suitable for children who produce only a few words to challenging games for children who produce multiword utterances. The games use a variety of formats (described in the appendix), reminiscent of referential communication tasks (i.e., Krauss & Glucksberg, 1969), and teach a variety of linguistic content. The materials used in the games are toys, drawings, and photographs, including photographs of the toys used in the games and photographs of the participating children. While the level of difficulty, the format, the materials, and the content may differ, the basic structure of the game-playing process is the same in all games. In every game the participants share two roles: those of speaker and listener. Two or more players may share one role, and the players take turns as speaker and listener. All games have only one basic rule: Use words. The speaker must transmit information verbally.