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Interactive Storytelling Therapy: Task effects and generalisation to conversation

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Introduction

Everyday communication with family, friends and colleagues is an essential vehicle for expressing opinions, displaying humour and solving problems. One aspect of everyday communication relates to sharing stories or anecdotes. Storytelling plays a vital role in expressing identity and making sense of the world, particularly following a traumatic life experience (Kellas & Trees, 2006). People with aphasia (PWA) engage significantly less in storytelling than non-aphasic counterparts (Davidson et al., 2003), such that the benefits of storytelling are beyond the grasp of a population who would stand to gain from this social activity. The reduced frequency of storytelling by PWA may reflect a problem relating to the language deficit, such as difficulties organising language to explain a complex event or story (Marshall, J., 2009). Alternatively, the problem might relate to the PWA's communicative environment, such as the communication partner (CP) not providing sufficient time within interactions (Beeke et al., 2007). Storytelling presents a rich therapeutic context for targeting PWA's linguistic skills as well as the interactive behaviours of CPs. Existing approaches to interaction therapy involve fine-grained qualitative analysis (Perkins, 1995), which presents challenges for service delivery in busy clinical settings (Correll et al., 2010; Armstrong et al., 2007).

Methods

Four participants with chronic non-fluent aphasia and their conversation partners used an innovative intervention called Interactive Storytelling Therapy. For the PWA, principles of 'thinking for speaking' (Marshall & Cairns, 2005) and story grammar (Jorgensen & Togher (2009).⁹ targeted storytelling; for the partner, therapy drew on the principles of conversation coaching, to increase facilitative behaviours to aid the co-construction of shared understanding (Simmons-Mackie, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative measures investigated direct effects of treatment (analysis of the pre and post therapy storytelling data) and indirect effects by examining samples of conversation unrelated to the treatment between the PWA and their partner.

Results

There were numerical gains in information exchange for three of four couples, where the conversation partner displayed improved understanding of the PWA's story. There were direct effects of therapy across simple and complex storytelling for two of the four couples. An in-depth single case analysis of one couple indicated increased active participation in story construction and shared

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understanding, in line with the partner's individual therapy goals. Samples of conversation indicated similar changes in interaction as those seen in the storytelling task.

Discussion

Interactive Storytelling Therapy has shown positive results. The novel outcome measurement was able to highlight change in the task itself and in conversations. The results offer positive evidence when targeting an important aspect of everyday communication, using a standardised task.

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