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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
USED BY TEACHERS
AT A SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

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An independent study
sponsored by
Dr. Norman P. Erber

Central Institute for
the Deaf

I. Design for the study

Rationale and Purpose

In a typical study of the teaching process, the investigator limits himself to the manipulation or study of antecedents or consequences of classroom activity, and he rarely observes classroom behavior itself to see how the teacher teaches or how the pupils learn.

In the special case of instruction of hearing-impaired children, a look into the classroom may provide suggestions for valuable research. If the hearing-impaired child is to understand the content of messages presented to him, he must attend carefully to what is communicated orally by the teacher. Because this activity is complicated by auditory limitations, ambiguity in visual cues, and complexity of language structure, successful oral communication between a teacher and a hearing-impaired child is a task which requires knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and flexibility.

In attempting to communicate with a hearing-impaired child, a teacher often employs various strategies. He/she typically does this when the child demonstrates an inability to understand an intended message correctly. The term, "strategy", refers to a pattern of behavior intended to overcome partial or complete failure in communication.

The purpose of this study was to describe the alternate approaches to communication with a hearing-impaired child which currently are employed by classroom teachers. This study did not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies described, nor did it compare methods and/or teachers. A later investigation may allow greater control of variables and may attempt to relate the strategy categories described here to success in communication.

The emphasis was necessarily on the classroom teacher, although it is recognized that a teacher's reactions are determined partly by pupil response or lack of it. Most teachers probably acquire their repertoire of communication strategies through observation of master teachers during their student-teaching experience or through later trial-and-error when they become teachers themselves. If teachers-in-training were given the opportunity instead to study the alternate approaches

available to them (not by brief in-class observation but by a careful analysis of these approaches presented on prepared video tapes), they could quickly become familiar with these communication strategies and experiment with them during practice teaching.

The long-term goal of this study was to provide teachers-in-training with a set of tactics and strategies that are basic to successful communication with hearing-impaired children. Teachers should be able to choose their communication strategies out of preference based on knowledge and not because they are unaware of other alternatives. If this result can be accomplished, then greater flexibility and oral communication success may result.

Categories for Description

Examination of transcriptions of classroom observations and analytic discussions of the teaching process suggest that the basic approaches to (remedial) communication can be classified into at least four major categories:

Repetition - reiteration of all or a selected part of an utterance

Emphasis - special prominence given to one or more words or syllables within an utterance

Structural Change - alteration of an utterance through manipulation of its structure

Supplementary Information - provision of additional cues or prompts within the context of an utterance

Method

Subjects: Ten teachers with at least one year of full-time teaching experience were observed. Since this study was a preliminary undertaking, the factors of age, sex, and recency of training were not controlled. It was recognized that ten different teachers would exhibit

different teaching styles and that the children in their respective classes would represent a range of ages, hearing-threshold levels, and learning capacities.

Procedure: In order to specify the communication strategies that were employed, data were collected during systematic observations of teacher-child interaction within the classroom setting. Initially, ten teachers were observed for one hour each. Then two teachers were selected from this group who demonstrated a wide range of strategies employed (Table 1). These two teachers (C, J) subsequently were observed for five hours each. The observer visited each classroom a few times before she began actual recording of information so that the teachers and pupils would become accustomed to her presence. The live-observation approach was the most feasible since it did not require expensive equipment or special facilities. The teachers were not informed of the precise nature of the study but were told only that teacher-child interaction was the general topic being investigated. The teachers were told that the study did not involve an evaluation of their performance and that complete anonymity would be maintained. These precautions helped to insure that the strategies employed by the teachers were not influenced by the presence of the observer.

During each observation, the observer used an audio tape recorder to record classroom activities. The observer also took running notes in a special shorthand developed for the purpose (see Table 1) and recorded sequence, frequency, and simultaneity of strategy occurrence. Later, the audio tape recording was used to supplement these notes. Ideally, video-tape recordings would have been used, but due to its distracting nature and to the lack of suitable observation rooms, that type of data acquisition was not used.

II. Basic System for Description (Table 1)

The description of teacher-child interaction is based on a system of categories devised to describe the strategies employed. Criteria for the items in these categories were

- (1) the observer would need only brief training to observe the behavior
- (2) the item would be short enough that all items could be memorized easily
- (3) the item would require no qualitative judgements

The following is a listing of the items within the four major categories, along with examples to illustrate each item.

1. Repetition (R) reiteration of all or a selected part of an utterance; may take any of three possible forms.

1.1 Repetition of a sentence (Rs)

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?
C: (no response)
T: What do you wear on your feet?

1.2 Repetition of a phrase (Rp)

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?
C: (no response)
T: on your feet.

1.3 Repetition of a content word (Rc)

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?
C: (no response)
T: feet.

2. Emphasis (E) particular prominence given to one or more words or syllables within an utterance; may be visual and/or acoustic in the sense that exaggerated articulation and/or duration, loudness, or pitch change are possible forms.

- 2.1 Emphasis of a sentence (Es) Loudness level of a sentence obviously greater than that of immediately preceding speaking level.
- 2.2 Emphasis of a specific word (Esw) May be by means of any one or combination of visual and/or accoustic mechanics mentioned above.

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?
 T: wear

- 2.3 Emphasis of a content word (Ecw)

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?

- 2.4 Emphasis by abnormal patterning (Eapt) Utterance exhibits obvious deviation from normal patterning of speech.

- 2.5 Emphasis by abnormal pause (Eap)

Example

T: What do you wear on your feet?

- 2.6 Emphasis by exaggerated articulation (Eart)

Example

T: What do you wear on your f—eet?

- 3. Structural Change (SC) alteration in the immediately-preceding utterance resulting from manipulation of its structure.

- 3.1 Structural change by word order (SCo)

Example

T: It doesn't really move the electrons.
 T: The electrons don't move.

- 3.2 Structural change by word addition (SCa)

Example

T: Read the story very carefully.
 T: Read the whole story very carefully.

3.3 Structural change by word deletion (SCd)

Example

T: How do you feel about that?

T: How do you feel?

3.4 Structural change by word substitution (SCs)

Example

T: What are we going to look at?

T: What are we going to see?

3.5 Structural change by clause inversion (SCci)

Example

T: If you go to the game, you are in the audience.

T: You are in the audience, if you go to the game.

4. Supplementary Information (SI) additional cues or prompts within the context of an utterance; may be in the following forms.

4.1 Supplementary information--verbal (SIV)

Example

T: What is that called?

C: lake

T: There is a special name for it. (SIV)

4.2 Supplementary information--gesture (SIG)

Example

T: Doesn't this go below the line? (using hand to indicate lower half of blackboard)

4.3 Supplementary information--picture/object (SIP/o)

Example

T: What is this? (holding a shoe in her hand)

4.4 Supplementary information--reading from text (SIRD)

Example

T: What is that called?

C: lake

T: There's a special name for it.

T: Look in your book. (SIRD)

4.5 Supplementary information—writing on the board (SIwr)

Example

T: What do you call a big body of water? (T writes "a big body of water" on the board.) (SIwr)

The categories and items within each seem to cover most, if not all, of the different strategies employed. Although all categories and respective items may appear in some observations, some may appear rarely or not at all in others.. This is viewed as related more to differences from class to class and different teaching styles than to the nature of the category system.

Further distinctions or differentiations could be made. This relates to the limitations deliberately imposed on the scope of the system in the interests of time and efficiency.

III. Results

Occurrence of the Major Categories

The initial observations of ten different teachers resulted in the following general trends regarding the four major categories listed in Table 1: Using Table 2 as a reference, the occurrence of those categories is shown as well as the individual preferences for their use. Considered in entirety, the category of Emphasis ranked high as a basic approach in all ten observations, while Repetition was employed frequently in seven observations. Supplementary Information and Structural Change were employed by fewer teachers.

Occurrence of major categories in ten observations (Table 2)

<u>TEACHERS</u>	<u>CATEGORIES</u>			
	Repetition	Emphasis	Structural Change	Supplementary Information
A		X		X
B		X	X	X
C	X	X	X	X
D	X	X		
E	X	X		
F		X		
G	X	X		
H	X	X		X
I	X	X	X	
J	X	X	X	X

Occurrence of the Specific Strategies

Table 3, below, illustrates the specific strategies that were most frequently employed by each of the ten teachers. All other strategies listed in Table 1 do not appear here due to rare incidence or non-occurrence during the observations.

The category of Structural Change proved the most interesting in the analysis of specific strategies. The transcripts showed a relation between kind of structural change involved and level of the class observed. In the lower level classes, the teachers employed a small and varied combination of word addition, word deletion, and word substitution if and when structural change was the utilized approach. At the upper levels, structural change occurred quite frequently and was of a more complex nature. The latter is the specific strategy designated as "other" in Table 3. This included such examples as transitions from statement to question forms and vice versa or from one question form to another.

Upon completion of the initial observations, two teachers were chosen to be observed for five hours each. The two exhibited a wide variety of the strategies within the major categories. The purpose of the more detailed observations was to determine sequence and simultaneity of strategy occurrence. However, analysis of the respective five hour transcripts revealed that both aspects were far too complex to be determined by methods available to this observer. These subsequent observations did provide information regarding consistent employment of certain strategies. Table 4 illustrates this information.

Consistently-employed Strategies of the Two Teachers in Detailed Observations

(Table 4)

<u>CATEGORIES</u>	<u>TEACHERS</u>	
	C	J
Repetition		
Sentence (Rs)	X	X
Phrase (Rp)		X
Emphasis		
Content Word (Ecw)	X	* X
Abnormal Pause (Eap)	X	X
Structural Change		
Word Substitute (SCs)		X
Other	X	
Supplementary Information		
Verbal (Siv)	X	
Gesture (Sig)	X	

The consistent use of certain strategies rather than others (Table 4) leads to the conclusion that each teacher has adopted a set of communication strategies which he/she has come to accept as effective. His/her dependence on these specific strategies may result from a combination of factors. For example, some teachers may adopt their individual approaches to communication through observation of master teachers during the student-teaching experience. The particular strategies used by a teacher also can depend upon the educational level of the class. An illustration of this effect is the employment of more complex structural changes by teachers in upper-level classes. If a teacher realizes that his/her lower-level class cannot comprehend a wide variety of more difficult language constructions, he/she may use a strategy of repetition to facilitate communication instead. The strategies selected also may depend upon which strategies are reinforced by the children, i.e., which appear to result in successful communication. Emphasis by abnormal pause, for example, may have served in the in the past to hold the children's attention and so is selected as a basic approach. The hearing-threshold levels and general communication abilities of the children might be other factors which influence the strategy-selection process.

Two communication strategies were observed which were not considered in the original system (Table 1). One of these involved establishing a meaningful context through some sort of preparatory activity such as announcing the topic of discussion, listing key words on the blackboard, or orientation through pictures or objects. These can be described as anticipatory activities. The second observed approach might be called re-direction of communication. This may involve changing the topic of discussion, asking another child to serve as an oral interpreter, or simply initiating communication with another child. The former approach occurred often during classroom observations; but the latter was observed rarely and only under conditions of extreme teacher and child frustration.

As a preliminary undertaking, this study was quite useful. However, the general area of teachers' communication strategies appears to be much more complex than was anticipated. A later study might include

observation not only of the teacher's strategies but also aspects of the child's response which influence the teacher's behavior. Another investigation might relate the specific strategies described in this report to effectiveness in communication. Through a careful evaluation of the results of those studies, one may achieve greater oral communication success with hearing-impaired children.

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Summary

VIII-6

Communication strategies used by teachers of the deaf. Carol Williams (supervised by Erber).

It has been observed that a teacher employs various strategies in anticipation of, or following, a failure to communicate orally with a hearing-impaired child. The term "strategy" refers to a pattern of overcoming the possibility or actuality of failure in communication. This study describes the several alternate approaches to oral communication and instruction that are employed by a group of classroom teachers at Central Institute for the Deaf.

Ten teachers with at least one year of full-time teaching experience were observed for a minimum of one hour each. The observer took extensive notes and recorded each session on a tape recorder for later transcription. Analysis of these notes and recordings indicated that the communication strategies could be subdivided into five main categories: (1) repetition of a sentence, phrase, or word; (2) optical or acoustic emphasis (e.g., exaggeration) of a sentence, phrase, or word; (3) structural change of a prior utterance through word order, addition, deletion, or substitution or by clause inversion; (4) provision of supplementary information through speech, gesture, picture/object, reading, or writing; and (5) establishing a meaningful context through a preparatory activity such as announcing the topic of the day, listing key words on the blackboard, or picture/object orientation.

Not all categories of behavior were observed in all classes. This result may be a function of differences in teaching style and/or class composition. In general, "emphasis" and "repetition" were the most frequent approaches observed. The type of "structural change" employed varied as a function of class level. In lower levels