Imagine More Collaboration: Hot Topics in AAC

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Considerations for merging speech pathology and behavior analytic perspectives on Aided Language Stimulation, Prompting, Core Vocabulary, the meaning of Robust and Presuming Competence

In recent years, the number of Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) has increased dramatically. As such, it is increasingly common for BCBAs to be part of the educational team for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disabilities. There exists an overlap in the scope of practice between Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) and BCBAs. Though knowledge from differing fields should result in better student programming, collaboration between the two fields can sometimes be difficult. Often, the two fields have the same goal and sometimes the teaching strategies are similar. However, the jargon used to characterize these educational concepts is different and may lead to miscommunication. This paper will explore several current hot topics in teaching Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), while defining the differences in jargon and teaching approaches between SLPs and BCBAs.

One such discrepancy exists in the use of the term aided language stimulation, which has also been termed augmented input, natural aided language, aided language modeling and aided AAC modeling (Sennott et al, 2016). Generally speaking, speech pathologists define this type of approach as pointing to pictures on the learner's communication device during a naturalistic communication opportunity. Initially, there is no expectation that the learner respond in a direct, observable manner. In contrast, in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), modeling is used as a teaching strategy. It is commonly assumed that in order for modeling to be effective, the learner must be attending to the materials and/or communication partner. There is also the expectation that the learner will imitate the model. And so, imitation skills are considered another important prerequisite skill. In merging the information from both fields, a new slightly more accurate term should be considered to better define this teaching strategy and so the term, "Aided Language Exposure (ALE)" is proposed.

Another difference in philosophy appears to be related to prompting strategies. Given several common AAC prompt hierarchies, physical assistance is listed as the last step of the hierarchy and denoted in red. Further, recommendations often specifically exclude hand-over-hand prompting with hand-under-hand prompting sometimes considered more acceptable. In contrast, behavior analysts generally define prompting as help that is provided to teach a new skill. Prompt types are selected based upon the skill targeted and individual learner characteristics, rather than in a prescribed order based on perceived "intrusiveness". In an attempt to merge philosophies, it is recommended that teams determine the most effective prompt for each learner with specific plans to eliminate prompts in order to ensure communicative independence.

Another common difference in perspective between SLPs and BCBAs exists in regards to the topic of core vocabulary. Many AAC language systems include options for a core vocabulary arrangement. These items comprise a vocabulary of words that are produced at high rates in the naturally occurring speech of typically developing toddlers and young children (Beukelman, Jones, & Rowan, 1989; Banajee et al., 2003). In contrast, fringe vocabulary refers to words that are more specific to a topic, environment or individual. The concept of core vocabulary can be reviewed from a developmental perspective, including considerations of both chronological age and "language age" during which items from the original core vocabulary list typically appear. From a behavioral perspective, Skinner's Analysis of Verbal Behavior can be referenced to classify the conditions under which the core versus fringe vocabularies generally appear. Many of the words on the original core list would be best classified as "generalized mands". This is the case for words like, "more" that the learner may use to gain access to a variety of different edibles, items or activities. Because many of our early learners engage in challenging behaviors when their specific items/activities are not delivered, many practitioners using a behavioral approach to teaching language may first focus on teaching specific vocabulary. To summarize information from both perspectives, a comprehensive model should be considered that eliminates the question of core versus fringe. Rather, we recommend the inclusion of core vocabulary as appropriate and not a transition to core.

On a related note, within the field of AAC, consistent recommendations seemingly include a "robust" communication system. In researching use of the term, robust is most frequently used by SLPs to refer to features of the device (text-to-speech, word prediction, etc.). In contrast, the term is rarely used in the field of behavior analysis. In a recent paper, Bondy (2019) suggests, "at least 50 communicative units (uniquely articulated spoken words, differentiated signs, discriminated pictures/icons, etc.) would represent a robust outcome." In sum, SLP usage of the term robust tends to refer to device characteristics, whereas behavior analysts focus on student outcomes. Merging these two views supports the need for careful feature matching to ensure that each AAC system meets the individualized needs of the student to ensure student-defined robust outcomes.

There are also differences in perspective regarding the concept of presumed competence. The term was first used in conjunction with the idea of the least dangerous assumption, which indicates that, "in the absence of conclusive data, educational decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the likelihood that students will be able to function independently as adults" (Donnellan, 1984). Subsequently, this term has received notoriety in justifying the use of debunked treatments such as Facilitated Communication. Today, exact definitions of the term vary widely. SLPs generally use the term to refer to the idea that learners with complex communication needs should be spoken to in a similar fashion as same-aged peers. In contrast, many BCBAs equate the term with its sordid history and prefer an approach that assesses the current skill level and creates educational programming based upon individual student performance. A blend of both perspectives should be considered that includes the notion that all students can learn, yet balances this assumption with ongoing data review to ensure that all learners make meaningful progress.

It's only with careful evaluation of these concepts, as well as newer and ever evolving terms, that we can ensure that we are providing the best possible learning environments for all of our communicators. Knowledge from both SLPs and BCBAs will assist practitioners in helping all learners reach meaningful outcomes.

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