

### Language: A Learning and Teaching Experience

I am going to begin this assessment of learning by describing a little about the role of a Speech-Language Pathologist. An SLP provides services for clients of all ages and communication disorders ranging from articulation, phonology, language, voice, and fluency. In this paper I refer to articulation and language disorders. An articulation disorder is a problem in a person's ability to produce speech sounds, which may include substitutions, omissions, distortions, and/or additions of sounds. A language disorder is a delay in the normal acquisition of language, or a disruption, such as trauma or stroke resulting in problems in expressive language (e.g., what the client says), receptive language (e.g., what the client understands), or both.

My first semester in graduate school for speech-language pathology I was assigned two pre-school age children with articulation delays. My first thought was 'thank goodness I didn't get a language delayed client'. I believed language therapy to be impossible, difficult, and not concrete. Articulation therapy was "easy", I could follow a basic guide, almost like stages the client should go through. I did not know what to do with a child diagnosed language delayed nor did I care to learn about aspects of language. I would have been happy to graduate with my masters by avoiding child language. This class has helped me become aware of my myths, how and why my myths about language therapy have changed.

### Myth about Language Therapy

Despite all the child language classes I had completed and the experience I had working in the schools I lived with the personal myth (Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991) that I was no good at language therapy. I did not see how I was going to teach a child language skills if I did not understand the skills myself. When I arrived at Truman State University to begin graduate school, I arrived to find out that the expert child language professor, Dr. Cochran had taken a sabbatical and that the first year grads would be having a visiting professor. I was fine with this change until I realized that I was not learning much material applicable to child language. Most of what I learned was about theory and not about child language development, specific syndromes related to language delays, or language therapy. The spring and summer semesters went by, I had completely avoided being assigned a child language client. THEN, this semester I got him, the language delayed client.

### Learning to Learn Language

I thought the hardest part of learning language would be learning to learn the skills I needed to help others to learn language. The question weighed on my mind: “how I am to teach concepts of language to a child when I do not even know how I learned the concepts?” The professor on sabbatical I spoke of earlier, returned this semester and held child language seminars for the second year graduate students once a week for the past month. I knew this was something that would be beneficial to me because of my myth that I did not know anything about language or how to apply it

in a clinical setting. Consequently, my learning conversations began. I was determined to learn what I needed to know to be knowledgeable about language therapy. At the first meeting, along with learning new strategies, I found myself contributing to the conversation and applying what I thought I did not know. I knew what I was talking about. How could that be? What I did not realize was that “The greatest resource of learners is their own experience” (Harri-Augstein, 1991, p. 15). I taught children ages three to five in an early childhood special education program for a year. I interacted with and taught children developing language every day. The experience I had teaching has now become more valuable to me than ever by applying what I learned to teaching language. What is now evident to me is that I did have the knowledge to provide language therapy, however I was never aware of the process in which I learned that knowledge. Experience has been a powerful tool helping me learn, specifically learning to learn language.

#### Turning Learning into Helping Others Learn

I am not saying I know everything there is to know about child language, but thanks to Dr. Cochran and my experiences I now understand the steps I have to take to make language therapy successful. 1. Language therapy needs to be pragmatically appropriate or “real”. Lots of times teachers will hold up an object, (e.g., fish) and ask the child “What is this?” This is weird! You know it is a fish, the child answers to get approval, but it is not “real” communication. Language therapy can be successful if we ask ourselves “How can we make it real?” Make-up a fishing activity, *before* the child

fishes, ask the child “What are you gonna catch?”, the child responds, “a fish”. This time the communication is real. 2. Know the developmental acquisition of the concept being taught. For example, when teaching prepositions we would not want to target “below” and “above” before we target “in” and “on”. 3. Don’t give up the power. Be selfish, hold onto the materials and use them to your advantage. This is a great way to target “power words” (e.g., no, mine, my turn, all done). For example, when using a puzzle in therapy, keep all the pieces and continue to say “my turn” until the child must use language to get a turn. If we dump all the pieces out we have given up a purpose to communicate. 4. Don’t play by the rules. It is okay when pasting things on a face that the mouth goes upside down on the cheek and the ear goes on the chin. When playing a card or board game, ask the child what the rules are. 5. Develop activities based on the child’s play skills (e.g., solitary, parallel, or cooperative), this will make planned activities successful.

### Applying Creativity to Language Therapy

I am now able to identify what Roger von Oech (1987) describes as methods of creativity to help me expand on my creative capabilities and apply to the learning process. My “Explorer” is my brainstorming mechanism to come up with themes and ideas such as camping, things we eat, our bodies, and animals and the zoo to use in language therapy. My “Artist” takes the ideas and does something creative with it, yet makes sure the therapy is pragmatically sound. My artist is my number one strength for

creativity. For example, searching with a flashlight for plastic bugs we might find on a camping trip to teach the concept of “same” and “not same”. My “Artist” also helps me explore the best options for teaching difficult concepts. For example, when teaching pronouns such as “I” and “you”, having a third speaker makes the communication “real”. If the child fails to use “I” or substitutes “me” for “I”, it is difficult to model the correct pronoun because you are no longer talking about the child. However, if a third speaker is added, “I” can easily be modeled. I use a puppet during snack time to model pronouns, so the clinician and the puppet can use “I”. My “Judge” is my second most helpful strength. My judge challenges me by asking “Are the activities pragmatically appropriate?” and “Is this *real* communication?” The judge is always applied, helping me decide what works, what does not work, and what changes need to be made. I have learned that when working with children, things may not go as “planned” and my judge alerts me when to be flexible. Finally, my “Warrior” puts the plan or revised plan into play.

## Conclusion

In William Glasser’s book, *Control Theory in the Classroom*, he discussed the need for individuals to have five basic needs fulfilled in order to learn effectively. The five needs are survival, love (belonging), power, fun, and freedom. I have discovered this is why I am good at child language therapy. I love working with children, and having the power and knowledge to teach a child language while having fun learning it. Teaching

language gives me a sense of belonging with other SLP's that understand language concepts,

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and gives the child a sense of belonging because they have the freedom to communicate with others. The different readings and discussions from class have helped me realize and understand my own learning styles, which in turn help me become a better teacher. My negative myth in the beginning, has now become a positive myth, which will be valuable to me as I continue to learn more and more about language and myself as a speech-language clinician.

#### References

- Glasser, W. (1986) Control theory in the classroom. New York, New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Harri-Augstein, S. & Thomas, L. (1991). Learning conversations. London: Routledge.
- Von Oech, Roger. (1986). A kick in the seat of the pants. New York, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

## Self-Evaluation

1. From the process of this project I learned my process of learning and about my personal myths and how they affect my life. I also have a clearer view of how my experiences, including writing this paper have helped me learn and teach language. Lastly, I found the process a difficult one. I had to look within myself and critique why and how I learn, which was not easy for me. However, I believe I have created a great paper because it has helped me realize what I need to do to be a better teacher.
2. My project is personalized. I am my own individual person and no one will ever experience something in the same way I have. In the paper I explore specific steps to help me in providing language therapy to children and hopefully my ideas will help others. My eyes were opened to a negative myth and I was able to search and find ways I conquered that myth. Now that I am aware of this process it will be beneficial overcoming negative myths in the future.
3. The readings began my awareness about how humans learn, however looking within and searching how I learn and how I've helped others learn completes the puzzle. I will forever be learning new ways of learning and now I hope to be more aware of the process of my learning. I think the knowledge of my process and when I am learning will be a powerful tool in helping me grow as a teacher.
4. My project emphasized to me the importance of experience and the process of my learning and how to apply to others learning processes. I identified my own myths

and why they were holding me back, which in turn will help me be aware of my students myths about learning. During discussions I was exposed to many different learning styles and preferences of my classmates. This project has helped me realize to be aware of preferences and to provide an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

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