AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION DEVICE

ADAPTATION FOR BILINGUALISM

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Background Terminology

Bilingualism

There is a large and growing bilingual population in the United States (Shin & Kominski, 2010). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2012), bilingualism is “the ability to speak two languages.” However, another definition of a bilingual individual is noted as one who uses two or more language in any modality, speaking, reading, or writing (Mackey, 1968). There is no clear definition of bilingualism at this time. Although true, many researchers establish similar guidelines for defining bilingualism, but differences do occur. Rivera (2012) states the two thresholds in acquiring bilingual proficiency; first, a threshold to avoid the disadvantages, and second, a threshold to obtain the advantages. English as a Second Language (ESL) is a term many times used to refer to multilingual students in higher education.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is defined according to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) to include “all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas” (ASHA, 2013). AAC devices may include pictures, boards, electronic devices, gestures, symbols, orthography, etc. The two main types of communication systems are unaided and aided. The first requiring only the use of the communicator’s body, the later requiring the use of devices or some sort of equipment ranging from complex to low-tech simple systems.

AAC Devices
Bilingual Children

Language development for children using AAC devices is an important topic in the field of communication disorders. Children who need AAC devices to communicate have consistently shown delays in language development, whether as a primary concern or as a secondary symptom of another present condition (Binger, 2007). Specifically, this is a concern for expressive language development in children as well as literacy skills (Harrison-Harris, 2002). Children who are also attempting to develop bilingual languages add a confounding affect evident in the little research that is available on this population. Harrison-Harris (2002) estimates that 40% of children who rely on AAC devices to communicate will come from a bilingual language home by 2050. Thus, it is important for speech language pathologists (SLPs) and other relevant professionals to be aware of the culturally and linguistically significant needs of this population of AAC users.

Bilingualism linguistically and culturally bleeds into many various aspects of communication, and professionals need to consider these overlaps and distinctions when working with children who are balancing two language systems with the added complication for balancing these languages and sociocultural ties while learning and effectively utilizing an AAC device. As previously highlighted, literacy is an important aspect of language development and is one that holds confounding difficulty in the AAC population and even more so with those who are bilingual (Harrison-Harris, 2002). Although researchers and other professionals have begun to focus in on this particular population’s literacy learning and challenges, much research still needs to be conducted and much is still unknown about how to facilitate literacy skills in the
most beneficial way. Correlations between those that are able to develop literacy skills and the ability to “make tremendous gains in overall language development and in use of their AAC systems” have become more noticeable in available research (Harrison-Harris, 2002). The reverse has been demonstrated as true as well. Individuals who are not able to make these gains in literacy skills struggle in overall language and the ability to use their AAC devices effectively.

Ability to develop appropriate literacy skills is an extremely important part of communication because it is the basis for how messages are formed for complete communication. In the AAC user, this becomes even more important as it can be a foundation for navigating communication breakdowns and conversational flow. Those who have interacted with AAC users know that communication partners take up more of the conversation generally because communication with an AAC device can slow down messages. Research confirms this as well.

In children developing dual language systems while attempting to develop skills to use their AAC device, literacy skills becomes especially important. It is well known that when dealing with the bilingual population, especially in children developing language, professionals should encourage and maintain both language systems as much as possible within appropriate clinical/professional opinion. AAC devices for bilingual adults, discussed in the next section, can be less complex in developing the skills necessary to use dual languages. Harrison-Harris (2002) encourages teaching words and concepts of the stronger, most comfortable language and then following with the second language version. For example, if the child is from a Spanish-speaking home and parents are more comfortable in that language then the communication
device should have words in that language first. Once these words are learned the SLPs can introduce the same words in the second language. Parents would still want to communicate in the primary language if it was still the most comfortable language, while the school can begin focusing on the second language while still supporting the first language. With lower tech devices this may be easier. Possibly two communication boards, one in Spanish and one in English, could be made to facilitate both of these languages in their appropriate contexts. However, if a more high-tech device is necessary for the child to communicate then dual language constructs would be more difficult to flip between. Unlike making a communication board, it is not logical to have two devices that costs thousands of dollars programmed for each language. If a child needs a more expensive and/or complex AAC device then the clinician may think of fading out a low-tech device while fading in a high tech device as the child’s dual language development increases. Although these are considerations for bilingual adults using AAC devices as well, concerns are presented somewhat differently.

**Bilingual Adults**

The developmentally appropriate acquisition of literacy skills is an important part of communication for AAC users in general, not just including the child but the adult as well. More so, the adult population of AAC users and especially those who use multiple languages may consist of more communication difficulties related to acquired conditions. Thus, these adults may already hold appropriate literacy skills needed for effective communication using an AAC device in all of the languages they were proficient in prior to the onset of their diagnosed condition.
condition. On the other hand, there are adults who may not have acquired sufficient literacy skills needs to use their AAC device appropriately in a bilingual context. For instance, the adult presents as with an acquired aphasia or other condition in which their language systems are confused in expressive communication or one language is almost completely wiped, it may be difficult to support lost or never acquired literacy skills needed for conversational use.

Professionals should approach scenarios involving bilingual adults with communication difficulties with this in mind. Possibly, professionals may need to develop a plan base similar to that of a child acquiring two languages in order to facilitate relearning, redeveloping of literacy skills using the AAC device. Using pictures to enhance the adult’s receptive understanding of words and concepts, following by introducing words in the stronger language, then reintroducing pictures with words of the secondary language, and finally fading out pictures (all taking into consideration the individual’s zone of proximal distance) may help to cohesively establish a strong connection and basis for better overall communication.

**Conclusion**

Many high-tech devices do provide multiple language systems for users who speak a language other than Standard English. A computer system is not the same as a human obviously so the ability to code-switch in an AAC device is not as seamless and cohesive as human beings’ ability to do so. IPad applications and simpler, less expensive programs have the ability for non-AAC users to translate words, phrases, and whole paragraphs into multiple languages that may hold some temporary and/or quick access to communication for AAC users as well. IPad
applications may be a less expensive, but higher-tech alternative to the extremes like low-tech communication boards and $10,000 high-tech systems. Overall, both bilingual adults and children who need AAC devices benefit from more complete literacy skill development. Current research available demonstrates that literacy skills are directly correlated to an individual’s ability to effectively and efficiently utilize AAC systems, especially when confounding factors such as bilingualism are considered. Although some research is available pertaining to this area of communication, much is still unknown and AAC systems are not perfect when it comes to facilitating bilingual language development, maintenance, and relearning.

References


