

Interpersonal Communication – a study about pupil's with hearing loss and intellectual disability

Introduction

The all-embracing aim of this study (Anderson, 2002) is to look closer into the communication in cases where Sign Language and Sign Supported Speech are used. In focus are pupils with hearing and intellectual disabilities. The starting point is that the participants in a communicative encounter are active and that each person contributes in their way to uphold the conversation. During the interpersonal encounter something happens and the consequences that follow are dependent on how different conversation partners act and react in relation to the contribution of the other.

Aim of the Study

- To describe and interpret patterns of interaction, form, use and content in the communication of the participants.
- To study the possibilities and obstacles within the environment as well as the individual, which might have an impact on the communication process.

Method

The study has a micro-ethnographical onset; data consists of video-observations during one year in eight school-classes, supplemented with questionnaires, interviews, field notes and participant observations. The subjects are nine pupils, their parents, classmates and school staff.

Theoretical Frame Of Reference

Bloom and Laheys (1978, 1988) model gives a collected representation of different factors that are important for language development. For the interpersonal communication to work and develop, it is necessary to pay attention to the individual and the conversation partner as well as the social and physical environment. In this study WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001) has been used to describe the function, the activity and participation of the pupils. The contextual factors in the ICF can be related to Bronfenbrenners bio-ecological model (1989). This model describes different phenomena, which at different levels, proximally (micro level) to distally (macro level), might have an impact on children's learning and development. In this study the model has been used to explain phenomena in the interpersonal communication and in the surrounding environment of the participants, with the purpose to throw light upon the factors, which facilitates or obstructs communicative development of an individual.

Result

From the microanalysis of the video-observations patterns in the interpersonal communication were identified, which have been categorised in following spheres of interest:

- Informal and formal conversations.
- Content and course of the conversations.
- The language as a tool

When the children initiate informal conversations they often have a lot to tell. Mutuality occurs when both code and focus are in common. The informal conversations between the partners are where the child is concerned characterised by participation and mutual exchange, existence of peer conversations, pleasure in communicating and ability to carry on a topic that is interesting. The adult participant adapts in greater extent to the perspective of the child in the informal conversation, supports and elaborates the initiative of the child, but can also pass on to become task-oriented and ruling if the linguistic activity of the child is low. In formal conversations do the non-linguistic expressions of the child seldom attract attention, the child has to force its way into the adult's monologues, answer questions from the adults, carry out instructions, adapt to the perspective of the adult and accordingly has a low level of participation.

The content in the messages which the parties convey in different conversations do not always correspond, i.e. they communicate about different things, which leads to misunderstandings, interruptions or that the conversation comes to an end. It is common that adults in communication and interaction with children with severely disabilities not wait for the response from the child. The adults often are too hasty or change too quickly into a different topic or action.

The analysis of the video material has resulted in that three different ways of dealing with communication and language been sorted out.

- The child that observes
- The communicatively active child
- The linguistically active child

The results show that there are both possibilities and obstacles that respectively facilitate and obstruct communicative and linguistic development. These can be related to micro-, meso-, exo and macro levels. The children's communication was mostly functional, but the adults did not always notice their intentions. The pupils were met by staff members with varied skills in Sign Language and Sign Supported Speech and it was evident that their communicative and linguistic needs was not as a matter of course accompanied by a supportive environment that facilitated communication development. Peers as well as adults should be seen as important conversation partners and they should be supported in their roles as communicative and linguistic models for the children. Adult's communicative and linguistic competence is partly inadequate, i.e. they do not adapt enough to their conversation partners. Nor is this competence sufficient, why adults ought to further develop their linguistic and social skills in the communication with children with intellectual and hearing disabilities.

References

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