THE PRODUCTION AND COMPREHENSION OF REQUESTS BY COMMUNICATIVELY IMPAIRED INDIVIDUALS

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An ongoing issue in the literature on child language development is the distinction made between the form and function of language (Holland, 1975; Bloom and Lahey, 1978). Typically research on language development and/or behavior (Lee, 1974; Morehead and Morehead, 1976; Trantham and Pedersen, 1977) as well as tests (Darley, 1978; 1979) and therapeutic approaches (Kirk and Kirk, 1972; Bush and Giles, 1977; Worthley, 1978; Van Hattum, 1979) for the language impaired child, focus on the individual's knowledge of the structure or form of the language and not on its function. In other words there is a wealth of information on the acquisition of phonological, semantic and syntactic rules by normal and language disordered children; however how pragmatic rules—the rules that govern the use of language in context—are acquired by normal and communicatively impaired individuals is still not fully documented nor fully understood. With few exceptions (Bates, 1976; Morehead and Morehead, 1976; Bates, 1977; Prinz, 1977; Rees and Shulman, 1978) the literature on normal and deficient language remains concerned with presenting data on some aspect of the form and function of language.

From a pragmatic point of view the speech/language pathologist should be involved with not only helping clients communicate as clearly and as formally as possible, but in addition should facilitate the usage of language within the appropriate context. To paraphrase the contemporary sociolinguist Roger Shuy, language therapists need to concern themselves less with the accuracy of the language-disordered individual's speech and more with the effectiveness with which the
individual can communicate his/her needs to others. For some people who may not attain a "normal" level of competency in communication, it is of the utmost importance that they have as many assets going for them as possible. Pragmatic rather than formal competencies may help listeners adjust or overlook deficiencies of form in an individual's speech and language behavior.

As previously stated data on the normal development of pragmatic competencies and on the development of these competencies in the communicatively impaired are incomplete. It was the purpose of this study to investigate politeness as a pragmatic competency in a group of communicatively impaired individuals. More specifically this study was designed to assess, as a measure of politeness, these individuals' ability to use and understand polite requests.

The rationale for undertaking this study was twofold. First, the data obtained could be added and compared to the information already available on normal and language-disordered children's ability to produce, comprehend, modify and judge requesting strategies (Bates, 1976; Prinz, 1977). Second, the feasibility of using a university clinic population without disruption of the therapeutic routine and/or schedule would be assessed.

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects of this study were 10 individuals enrolled in speech/language therapy at the University of Colorado Speech and Hearing Center during the academic year 1977-78. All presented normal hearing but as a group evidenced a variety of speech and language problems, and an uneven distribution of sex (7 males, 3 females). They ranged in age from 4 to 25, with a mean age of 12.4. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Form A, was administered to each subject prior to the experimental session. Characteristics of the subjects are presented in Table I.
Table I. Characteristics of subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Speech/Language Problem</th>
<th>Chronological Age</th>
<th>Mental Age PPVT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>4-0</td>
<td>5-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>4-11</td>
<td>7-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>6-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>10-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Delayed language</td>
<td>7-6</td>
<td>8-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Delayed language</td>
<td>8-6</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>15-11</td>
<td>18+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>21-0</td>
<td>18+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Foreign language</td>
<td>24-2</td>
<td>12-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Functional articulation</td>
<td>25-0</td>
<td>18+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure. The Bates Politeness Assessment Test was conducted with each subject during a regular therapy session, and took between 10 to 15 minutes to administer. Instructions were given to the subjects for the four parts of the test were as follows:

(a) Making a polite request.

"I would like to play a game with you. Here is an old lady (hand puppet) who sells candy. Her name is Mrs. Jones. She is in charge of all the candy that you see here. You can have a piece of candy if you ask Mrs. Jones for it." Subject makes request
(b) Modifying request to be "even" more polite

"Mrs. Jones will surely give you a candy, but she just loves to hear you ask her. So could you ask her again in an even nicer way?" Subject makes request and Mrs. Jones gives him/her candy.

(c) Identifying the most polite request of a pair

"Now we'll play a game in which you are in charge of the candy, just like Mrs. Jones. I would like you to meet two frogs (hand puppets). They will ask you for a piece of candy. You must listen very carefully and decide who asked in the nicest way." Subject listens and gives candy to one frog. (See Appendix A for sample set of paired requests).

(d) Explaining reasons for choice

"Why was this one nicer?" Subject responds. "What did he say that was better?" Subject responds.

The experimental session was videotaped and data were gathered on the four behaviors tested: (a) production, (b) modification, (c) comprehension, and (d) judgment of polite requests.

Data Analysis. The data gathered during the experimental session were analyzed according to the procedures outlined by Bates (1977) for the four behaviors studied.

(a) Production: the subjects' requests were transcribed and a point was given for each strategy used by each subject which was indicative of a polite request (e.g. intonation, usage of "please", "can" and/or "may"). A total score was thus obtained for each subject's first request.

(b) Modification: the procedure described above was used and a score was obtained for each subject's attempt at modifying his original request.
(c) Comprehension: eight pairs of requests were presented to the subjects who were required to determine which request of each pair was the more polite. A total score of 8 could therefore be obtained according to pre-determined criteria (Bates, 1977).

(d) Explanation: the subjects' explanations of their choices on the comprehension task were scored correctly (+1) or incorrectly (0) according to their identification of the polite strategy used.

RESULTS

Production of Requests. The subjects' ability to make polite requests was analyzed to determine if there was a direct relationship between the number of polite strategies used and chronological age (Figure 1) and/or PPVT-Mental age (Figure 2). The three subjects with MA's below seven scored the lowest in making polite requests. The others averaged 5.3 points, ranging from four to seven. The findings suggest a possible relationship between mental age and ability to move to a higher type of polite request.

Modification of Original Requests. The ability to increase politeness followed the pattern of the Request category. The three subjects with MA's below seven were unable to improve on the politeness of their request. The others' improvement averaged 1.7 points, ranging from one to four points. The latter was scored by the foreign student, CA 24-2. The findings suggest a possible relationship between mental age and ability to move to a higher type of polite request.

Comprehension. Of the eight requests the ten subjects correctly identified an average of 4.9 requests as "more polite". The lowest number of correct comprehension was three, made by two subjects (6-9 CA, 10-4 MA) and (8-6 CA, 6-10 MA). The highest score was seven correct, made by the
FIGURE 1
Comparison of task scores according to chronological age

COMPREHENSION
EXPLANATION

PRODUCTION
MODIFICATION

1980 MALC
SCORES

CA
4-0 4-11 5-8 6-9 7-6 8-6 15-11 21-0 24-2 25-0
Subject #
#1 #2 #3 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8 #9 #10
FIGURE 2
Comparison of task scores according to PPVT mental age.

COMPREHENSION
EXPLANATION

PRODUCTION
MODIFICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPVT MA</th>
<th>Subject #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-4</td>
<td>#1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-4</td>
<td>#3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>#6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-1</td>
<td>#2</td>
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<tr>
<td>8-3</td>
<td>#5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-4</td>
<td>#4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-11</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+</td>
<td>#7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
foreign student (24-2 CA, 12-11 MA). No direct relationship seemed to exist between individual comprehension and either CA or MA.

The comprehension scores did show a relationship to the linguistic developmental levels represented by the requests as evidenced by the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Correctly identified</th>
<th>Type of request</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Can/Hay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Formal/Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Conditional/Indicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Implied/Direct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explanation of Choice. The subjects' ability to explain their choices was analyzed. The three subjects below the CA of six were able to offer correct explanations of their choices an average of twice. The language delayed subject (8-6 CA, 6-10 MA) correctly explained only three judgments. The other six subjects offered either seven or eight correct explanations. This finding suggests that age, both CA and MA, may be a factor in ability to explain choices.

DISCUSSION

Several areas for further research became evident as a result of this study. While no direct relationship was evident between individual comprehension scores and age, there did seem to be a direct connection between the comprehension scores and normal linguistic developmental levels. Perhaps the most important finding was the 100% recognition of the politeness inherent in the softly spoken request. This supralinguistic ability should be developed in both students and teachers (or therapists). When a statistically valid
number of subjects are studied a correlation between comprehension scores and age may become apparent. Further research in the area of politeness comprehension could have considerable impact on classroom and therapy session communication strategies.

Since usage of all levels of politeness depends on competence to evaluate the situation, learning must be done in various situations. Being polite cannot be divorced from the "to whom" and "when". Such pragmatic awareness is encouraged by the discussion on the reasons for various levels of usage. The findings indicate that the ability to explain well reached the adult level at MA 8-3 and was maintained. While maturity may bring about the development of pragmatic competencies in the subjects with articulation problems, special help may need to be given to the subject with delayed language. If that subject were unable to differentiate among situations, it might be necessary to teach basic politeness habits which would generalize to all situations.

The ability to make and improve upon polite requests seemed to be related directly to mental age. If this is so, assessment of an individual's mental age would indicate his/her politeness potential. Such information would have valuable implications for teachers, both to aid in developing programs, and to make more realistic their expectations of politeness usage by their students. Using this strategy, further research including more subjects, homogeneous groups and longitudinal designs, is not only possible but strongly indicated.

In further research, videotaping could add the challenging dimension of non-verbal communication (kinesics). More research is needed to establish criteria for what is "polite". This may well vary by age, race and geographical location. Especially interesting would be the comprehension of written requests by a deaf/hearing impaired population of varying ages. These findings would have important bearing on the areas of speech/language remediation, diagnostics and mainstreaming classrooms.
APPENDIX A

Name ______________________ Age __________

PRAGMATIC COMPREHENSION TEST

ORDER #1
(there were 8 orders of these requests; each randomly arranged.)

1. L Give me some candy.
   R Give me some candy please.

2. L I want some candy.
   R I would like some candy.

3. L Can I have some candy?
   R May I have some candy?

4. L Miss/Mr. (LAST NAME), give me some candy.
   R FIRST NAME, give me some candy.

5. L Do you have any candy left?
   R Will you give me some candy?

6. L Would you give me some candy?
   R Will you give me some candy?

7. L Can I have a piece?
   R Could I have a piece?

8. L Give me some candy! (soft intonation)
   R GIVE ME SOME CANDY! (harsh intonation)
REFERENCES


