

Grammar intervention in Developmental Language Disorders: active ingredients and future research

PANEL ORGANISER & AFFILIATION

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Background

Children with Developmental Language Disorders (DLD) show persistent difficulties in grammar (Leonard, 2014), which hinder daily communication and participation at school. Therefore, effective intervention is important, and fortunately, we see an increase in the number of studies on grammar intervention. Most of these studies show positive effects at a group level, but it rarely happens that every individual child shows progress.

Purpose

In this panel we will present an overview of effective grammar interventions for different age groups of children with DLD. Intervention methods and techniques may vary, in line with the linguistic and psychological theoretical underpinnings guiding these interventions. By comparing different approaches, we will search for the ‘active ingredients’ of grammar intervention. Together with the audience, we will explore future directions for grammar intervention research.

Method

Four different interventions will be presented in short oral presentations. The focus will be on their specific approaches, such as implicit versus explicit learning; a functional imitation approach versus a more communicative approach; interventions that are designed for certain age groups or specific intervention goals.

1. A pilot group intervention study for toddlers with DLD. In this intervention, functional imitation techniques were used during play and daily activities in special care toddler groups for children with DLD. Speech therapists and pedagogical assistants worked together on morphosyntactic goals in the groups. Selection of grammatical targets was guided by the Dutch LARSP profile chart. Children improved on MLU measures, pedagogical workers became more aware of the grammatical problems of the children and of their own language use. Speech therapists and pedagogical assistants experienced a stronger cooperation as a result of this research project.
2. ‘Language in Interaction Therapy’ (LIT), a communicative intervention approach, based on focused stimulation, script therapy and milieu teaching. LIT focuses on well-defined targets during interaction with the child in a structured play setting. The effect of LIT aimed at morphosyntax in children with DLD aged 4-5 years enrolled in schools for special education, was studied using a single subject design, repeated in 15 children. Some children showed progress in MLU, while others used more complex sentences or made fewer grammatical errors. The differences in improvement between the children will be discussed as well as possible explanations.
3. The Shape Coding system developed to explicitly teach the grammatical rules of English to school-aged children with DLD. Explicit teaching with visual support may help children with DLD learn to both produce and understand a wider range of grammatical structures. Two randomized control trials have shown the effectiveness of Shape Coding for production of verb argument structure and comprehension of coordinating

conjunctions. Other studies give indications of effectiveness for production and comprehension of passives and production of the past tense. On-going studies targeting comprehension of complex sentences will also be discussed.

4. The Building Complex Language Project's early phase treatment study will be presented. This involved English-speaking children with specific language impairment, aged 10 to 14 years. The protocol used a wide variety of target stimuli and deductive (metalinguistic) activities to improve production of complex sentences involving adverbial clauses, object complement clauses, and relative clauses. Although these different clause types share the status of being subordinate to a main clause (i.e., dependent), they are structurally quite different from each other. The three sentence types were treated consecutively with identical procedures that included exposure and repetition, identification, and scaffolded manipulation activities in one-on-one sessions. Children were treated at two dosage levels, and performance compared to determine if treatment effects varied by treatment intensity and sentence type.

The following will be discussed: (1) What are the active ingredients of therapy and what are the recommendations for researching these ingredients? (2) How can we make sound choices for specific interventions and tailor them to the particular needs and characteristics of an individual child? (3) How can we measure the effect of grammatical therapy on language comprehension? (4) What do we know about dosage, improvement of practice outside the therapy situation, and transfer to spontaneous speech? Audience questions and comments will further our understanding of grammar interventions and guide future research aimed at improving the effectiveness of interventions for grammatical problems.

SPEAKERS ON THE PANEL AND THEIR AFFILIATION

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