Language Intervention in the Classroom: What It Looks Like

Recently, I had the opportunity to observe a middle-school language arts class in session. The class, which meets five mornings a week for 45 minutes, has an enrollment of 14 students. On the day that I observed, the students were learning about Shakespeare’s plays. Sitting at large tables around the classroom, they took turns reading aloud from their workbooks and were occasionally interrupted by their teacher and asked to explain the meaning of words they encountered (e.g., *baritone, soprano, exclaim, proclaim*). When difficulties arose, the teacher or her assistant—both of whom were knowledgeable and enthusiastic—encouraged the students to look for context clues surrounding the words, examine morphological patterns, and consult a dictionary to clarify or confirm their understanding of the words. No snickering occurred if a classmate struggled to pronounce a word or took a long time to answer a question. Rather, the class waited patiently as the teacher or her assistant provided just enough scaffolding to ensure that every student was successful that day. I left the school feeling heartened by the many positive and productive interactions I observed between these middle-school students and their teachers.

Did this observation occur at a private school in an upper-income urban neighborhood, inhabited by well-educated professionals? No, it did not. Rather, it occurred at a public school in a low-income suburban neighborhood where many families are unemployed and some are even homeless. Perhaps even more surprising is that all of the students enrolled in the class had been diagnosed with language impairments, that their teacher is an American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)-certified speech-language pathologist (SLP), and that her assistant is a graduate student majoring in communication sciences and disorders (CSD) and completing an externship. What a wonderful way to conduct meaningful and focused language intervention, I thought, and if an impoverished school district such as this one can do it, why not others? And what a wonderful opportunity for a graduate student in CSD to see that it really is possible to adopt a nontraditional model of language intervention in a public school setting.

Nevertheless, several important questions may arise in the minds of readers, for example:

- Where is the evidence demonstrating that language intervention in the classroom is effective with students who have language impairments?

This, of course, is a key question. As a starting point, Throneburg, Calvert, Sturm, Paramboukas, and Paul (2000) reported that a service delivery model where language intervention is conducted in the classroom was effective in teaching key vocabulary to elementary school students. It was particularly effective when the SLP worked closely with classroom teachers to develop the intervention goals from the regular curriculum. Research is necessary to design, implement, and formally examine the effectiveness of classroom-based language intervention with middle-school students. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of any service delivery models with this population. On the positive side, funding for language intervention research in our field is growing through the generous support of organizations such as the American Speech-Language-Hearing Foundation, which emphasizes applied research.

- What if students have other communication impairments besides language that cannot be addressed efficiently within the classroom setting?

Classroom-based language intervention does not exclude the use of other service delivery models such as individual or small-group “pull-out” treatment for students who have additional needs. At the middle school where I observed, several students were also receiving individual treatment from the SLP specifically targeting stuttering, rate, or speech sound errors. These sessions, held in the speech room at school, were scheduled later in the day once or twice per week.

- What does it take to implement a nontraditional intervention model in the schools?

To accomplish this, it is critical that the SLP work cooperatively with other school-based professionals, especially with classroom teachers, special education teachers, and principals.

By working closely with classroom teachers, SLPS can become well-informed of the language demands of the regular curriculum. This may occur, for example, by
listening to teachers’ lectures (e.g., history, social studies, science), observing classroom demonstrations (e.g., chemistry experiments, first aid procedures), and reviewing materials (e.g., textbooks, videos) and upcoming assignments (e.g., speeches, debates, book reports). This will allow SLPs to gain insight into the level of lexical, syntactic, and discourse development required for students to succeed in school. Additionally, as SLPs become familiar with the subject matter covered in class, they can encourage students to talk about this information using appropriate words, syntactic structures, and organizational frameworks. By increasing the relevance of language intervention in this way, SLPs can help students gain a deeper understanding of classroom content and generalize what they learn from one setting to another. Moreover, SLPs will be able to share with teachers their expertise in language development, language disorders, and language intervention techniques—information that can benefit many students in a typical classroom.

By working closely with special education teachers, SLPs can help ensure that students’ other learning needs are met. At the middle school where I observed, many students with language impairments were also receiving instruction in word decoding, spelling, and other written language skills from the special education teacher several times per week. Moreover, as a result of open and ongoing communication with the SLP, the special education teacher was able to reinforce the students’ use of the newly learned vocabulary words in their written assignments.

Finally, by working closely with principals, SLPs can gain greater recognition of their unique contributions to the school, along with greater administrative support. When the principal at the middle school where I observed saw for himself how classroom-based language intervention helped the students feel successful, he began to appreciate more fully the fundamental role that language plays in the learning process. He also began to encourage the SLP to employ different intervention models and scheduling practices for students with different communication needs.

By nurturing supportive relationships with school-based colleagues, SLPs are likely to achieve higher levels of success with the students on their caseloads through enhanced flexibility, collaboration, and communication oriented toward problem solving. Under these conditions, students with language and other communication impairments can benefit in countless ways.

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REFERENCE
