



Does communication partner training improve the conversation skills of speech-language pathology students when interacting with people with aphasia?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Aphasia is a common consequence of stroke. Despite receiving specialised training in communication, speech-language pathology students may lack confidence when communicating with People with Aphasia (PWA). This paper reports data from secondary outcome measures from a randomised controlled trial.

Objective: The aim of the current study was to examine the effects of communication partner training on the communication skills of speech-language pathology students during conversations with PWA.

Method: Thirty-eight speech-language pathology students were randomly allocated to trained and untrained groups. The first group received a lecture about communication strategies for communicating with PWA then participated in a conversation with PWA (Trained group), while the second group of students participated in a conversation with the PWA without receiving the lecture (Untrained group). The conversations between the groups were analysed according to the Measure of skill in Supported Conversation (MSC) scales, Measure of Participation in Conversation (MPC) scales, types of strategies used in conversation, and the occurrence and repair of conversation breakdowns.

Results: The trained group received significantly higher MSC Revealing Competence scores, used significantly more props, and introduced significantly more new ideas into the conversation than the untrained group. The trained group also used more gesture and writing to facilitate the conversation, however, the difference was not significant. There was no significant difference between the groups according to MSC Acknowledging Competence scores, MPC Interaction or Transaction scores, or in the number of interruptions, minor or major conversation breakdowns, or in the success of strategies initiated to repair the conversation breakdowns.

Conclusion: Speech-language pathology students may benefit from participation in communication partner training programs.

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1. Introduction

Aphasia, an acquired language disorder, is a common consequence of stroke (Pedersen, Stig Jørgensen, Nakayama, Raaschou, & Olsen, 1995). Given that the management of communication disorders is core practice in speech-language pathology, during their university training speech-language pathology students are required to rapidly develop effective interpersonal and clinical skills for interacting with People with Aphasia (PWA). Despite receiving specialised training in communication, research has demonstrated that speech-language pathology students can lack confidence and experience anxiety when communicating with PWA. Jagoe and Roseingrave (2011) found that speech-language pathology students were highly apprehensive at the prospect of communicating with PWA during a service learning module involving pairs of students visiting a PWA. More recently Finch et al. (2013) found that a cohort of 49 speech-language pathology students reported low levels of confidence and limited knowledge of strategies for communicating effectively with PWA. The combined effect of a lack of confidence and strategies for practically applying communication skills can be magnified by an unfamiliar clinical environment, potentially creating anxiety for students and detrimentally shifting the focus away from learning valuable clinical reasoning skills (Finch et al., 2013).

One potential approach to improve the confidence and knowledge of strategies for communicating with PWA is through Communication Partner Training (CPT). CPT has been defined as: “An intervention directed at people other than the person with aphasia with the intent of improving the language, communication, participation, and/or wellbeing of the person with aphasia” (Simmons-Mackie, Raymer, Armstrong, Holland, & Cherney, 2010, p.1814). A systematic review by Simmons-Mackie et al. (2010) revealed that CPT can effectively improve the communication activities and/or participation of communication partners in conversations with PWA. Twenty-five of the 31 studies included in the systematic review involved caregivers or family members, that is familiar people, as communication partners. However, in everyday life, conversations are not usually restricted to only familiar conversation partners. This is particularly relevant for PWA who may interact regularly with a variety of health professionals as part of their stroke management. Accordingly, over the last few years, there has been a move towards investigating the effects of CPT or other supported communication programs with unfamiliar conversation partners, such as health professionals and health professional students (Cameron et al., 2015; Horton, Lane, & Shiggins, 2016; Wilkinson, Sheldrick, O'Halloran, & Davenport, 2013).

In terms of research investigating the effects of CPT with unfamiliar communication partners, a randomised controlled trial by Legg, Young, and Bryer (2005) found that CPT improved the communication skills of sixth-year medical students when obtaining case histories from PWA. Specifically, the CPT trained students' abilities significantly improved with respect to exploring the patient's issues, structuring the case history session, developing rapport, and acknowledging and revealing the communicative competence of the patient (Legg et al., 2005). A more recent study by Saldert, Forsgren, and Hartelius (2016) examined the effects of a lecture and/or interactive workshop on medical students' knowledge about communicating with people with speech and language disorders. All students received a lecture about speech and language disorders, with a subset also participating in a workshop. The students' self-ratings of confidence in knowledge about communicating with people with speech and language disorders were compared with speech-language pathologist ratings of their ability to select appropriate communication strategies. The lecture and workshop increased the students' confidence in their own knowledge about communication disorders, however, only workshop participants displayed a statistically significant increase in their ability to select appropriate communication strategies. Interestingly, students' self-rated confidence and the speech-language pathologists' ratings of their ability to select appropriate communication strategies were not significantly correlated (Saldert et al., 2016).

In terms of students from other health disciplines, Cameron et al. (2015) found that CPT, involving a theoretical lecture about aphasia followed by the opportunity to practise the communication skills in a supported, non-graded environment, significantly improved the confidence and knowledge of effective communication skills of occupational therapy and physiotherapy students. Whether or not this then equated to changes in communication strategy use during conversations with PWA is unknown. Increased confidence when communicating with PWA following CPT programs has also been reported with speech-language pathology students (Finch et al. (submitted); Jagoe & Roseingrave, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2013). Students in a study by Jagoe and Roseingrave (2011) reported heightened confidence and lessened anxiety after conversing with PWA during a reflective letter writing task as part of a service learning module. A participatory research approach by McMenamin Tierney, and MacFarlane (2015), involving PWA and other key stakeholders (notably speech-language pathologists and students) as both research participants and co-researchers, found that students and PWA reported improved confidence levels and that the non-stressful, nonclinical environment facilitated conversations. The CPT program involved pairs of third year speech-language pathology students visited people with aphasia 10 times over 14 weeks (McMenamin et al., 2015).

As communication support training programs should ideally be evaluated in an observational context (Parry & Brown, 2009), there is a need to investigate the effects of CPT on the interactions of speech-language pathology students with PWA to examine whether CPT programs produce a beneficial change in conversation behaviours. While previous research has demonstrated that CPT can improve students' and health professionals' confidence and knowledge of effective communication strategies for communicating with PWA (Cameron et al., 2015; Finch et al. (submitted); Jagoe & Roseingrave, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2013), we do not know whether this also translates into more effective communication behaviours during conversation. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to address this knowledge gap by comparing the communication behaviours of students trained in CPT with untrained students during conversations with the same PWA. Specifically, the aim of the present study examine the effects of CPT on the communication behaviours of speech-language pathology students during conversations with PWA. The current study sought to determine whether there was a difference between the groups at a global participation and support level and then at a more microscopic level of conversational analysis. It was hypothesised that the CPT trained group would obtain higher scores on communication participation and support measures, display greater use of conversation strategies, and experience fewer conversation

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