

The Effects of Gesture Therapy on Individuals with Communication Disorders

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Research from a variety of sources has shown that there are significant benefits in conversation group therapy for individuals with communication disorders. Additionally, research has shown that usage of multimodal communication in a therapy setting may help individuals with communication disorders enhance their ability to converse in a natural setting. The purpose of this study is to examine the increase in usage of taught and untaught gesture usage over the span of a twelve week study.

This study was conducted over a span of twelve weeks. The first of these twelve weeks was used for baseline, which was used to determine the frequency of communicative and non-communicative gestures. The final two weeks of the study were devoted to baseline data, in which no gestures were taught or modeled, and the frequency of gesture usage for the participants was once again calculated. The participants in this study were taught a total of 63 gestures, split into 9 groups of 7 gestures over a period of nine therapy sessions. The seven gestures that were taught at the beginning of each therapy session were a mixture of noun, action, and emotion related gestures pertaining to the topic of that day's conversation. At the beginning of each therapy session, the participants were taught seven gestures that were rehearsed for the first 10 minutes of the therapy session. To teach the gestures, the investigator and the student clinicians modeled each gesture with the participants and then used this gesture in two to three sentences to firmly familiarize the participants with the gestures being practiced that day. In addition, the student clinicians spent a few brief minutes reviewing learned gestures from the previous week. The remainder of the therapy session consisted of an activity or a conversation theme. These themes were based upon themes that are familiar to this group from therapy sessions in previous semesters, such as movies and music. The participants were encouraged to use the learned gestures from that day as well as from previous sessions as much as possible, and the student clinicians assisted this by modeling gestures (both learned and unlearned) throughout the therapy session.

The videotapes from each therapy session were reviewed and observed for the participants' usage of gestures by the investigator and one other trained student in speech-language pathology. Any symbolic movement of the hands or arms that is used to assist verbal communication was counted as a gesture. The usage of both learned and unlearned gestures will be considered. During the final therapy meeting, the participants' usage of learned and unlearned gestures were counted and compared to the frequency of gesture usage during the baseline session. The results from the gathered data are currently being determined.