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Errors in communication with people having speech and language difficulties from their perspective

Abstract: The paper relates to communicative situations which make people with speech and language difficulties feel uncomfortable. They may manifest themselves in the form of communicative errors. Instances of problematic circumstances experienced by people who stutter and people with developmental dysphasia constitute a focus of our deliberations. Also, an attempt is made to consider some opportunities of creating more positive conditions for communication with people who stutter and those with developmental dysphasia.

Key words: stuttering, developmental dysphasia, speech rate, fluency of speech.

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Błędy w komunikacji z ludźmi mających problemy z mową i językiem widziane z ich perspektywy

Abstrakt: Tekst dotyczy sytuacji komunikacyjnych, które sprawiają, że ludzie z trudnościami językowymi czują się nieswojo. Mogą one również objawiać się w formie błędów komunikacyjnych. Nasze rozważania koncentrują się na przykładach problematycznych okoliczności doświadczanych przez ludzi, którzy jękają się, oraz tych, którzy cierpią na dysfazję rozwojową. Co więcej, podejmuje się próbę rozpatrzenia pewnych możliwości tworzenia pozytywnych warunków do komunikacji z ludźmi, którzy jękają się oraz cierpią na dysfazję rozwojową.

Słowa kluczowe: jękanie, dysfazja rozwojowa, tempo mowy, płynność mowy.

Speech therapists enter a counseling relationship with their clients within the frame of speech diagnosis and therapy. The quality of this relationship is positively affected by functional, alias healthy, communication. Vybíral (2009) described the characteristics of functional communication in detail, one of which being an interest in the patient and in what they have to say. We also maintain eye contact in communication, listen carefully, we are patient, our facial expression and our voice are friendly. We tune in, which means that we focus on the topic and do not look through our documents when talking to our clients. Another principle of functional communication is reciprocity or mutuality in which each participant has his or her opportunity (time or space) to express him/herself on equal princi-

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ples in a dialogue or in group interaction. Each participant's turn to speak should not be disturbed, e.g. by not listening or not letting the speaker finish. This seemingly obvious rule is sometimes violated. A situation in which a speech therapist is able to bring about and maintain open communication, in which the client openly expresses his or her feelings, opinions and attitudes is considered as advantageous. Also, we should act consistently within the frame of functional communication, i.e. if we end our conversation on a good note and then, after we have left, we find out that our partner spoke negatively about us in our absence, then such act is inconsistent.

We will demonstrate some sample situations which may complicate communication with clients displaying communication disorders. We decided to prepare an open testimony of three university students who struggle with stuttering. They will be referred to as people who stutter (PWS). Their statements have a qualitative nature. The first respondent is a 20-year-old student H., who has been struggling with stuttering for 15 years. The second respondent is a thirty-year-old student K., who has had a stutter for 23 years. The third is student J., who is currently 24 years old and has experienced trouble with fluency for 20 years. These statements have been obtained by the author of this paper during an interview which was recorded on a dictaphone, with the consent of the interviewees, and then transcribed word for word for the purpose of this paper.

Lechta (2010a, p 28) defines stuttering as follows: "It's a complex disruption of coordination of organs participating in speaking, which is manifested most strikingly by characteristic involuntary pauses disrupting the process of speaking fluency and thus disturbing the communication plan. It is a multidimensional, dynamic and variable syndrome of impaired communication abilities with complex symptomatology, which is often the result of several partial, mutually interconnected, related or reciprocally and cumulatively reacting causes".

As an example of problematic teacher-student interaction with the involvement of stuttering, we demonstrate a situation described by student H. As part of the class, each student had to prepare a presentation. Student H. prepared a presentation, but when she wanted to present the content to her classmates, the teacher stopped her, waved her hand and asked another student to present H.'s work because of her stuttering.

Let us consider the following questions:

1. What was wrong with the teacher's attitude?
2. How did the teacher breach the principle of communication reciprocity?
3. What was wrong in the teacher's nonverbal component of communication?
4. Did the teacher support communication with the student?
5. Was the teacher's attitude in accordance with the principles of functional communication?

Student J. described his experiences associated in primary school: "When encountering an unknown group of people, I just did not experience a pleasant feeling. I sat at the back of the class so as not to be easily seen and no one unnecessarily questioned me on anything. The first block and a maximum heart rate appeared during introductions. Each student stood up and said their name, their favourite sport and interests. As my turn approached, I could hear my heart pounding and I started sweating. In addition, I have bad luck that my name is Jakub, and the letter "k" causes problems. The nervousness came and so did the letter "k." I could not avoid stuttering. Those who don't stutter cannot understand what it is like to hear the silent laughter in class, which undoubtedly belongs to you. Fortunately, it was only one of few taunts experienced at that school. As it turned out, most of my classmates were my teammates and part of our football club. And also, thanks to sports, I earned the respect of others at primary school."

Student K. explained the circumstances which affected the flow of his speech in the following fashion: "I speak better in a quieter environment, if the communication partner is in a pleasant mood and has time to talk to me. If I have to handle some other business, I usually like to speak, but the problem comes with the first block. The fact that the block occurs is a slight disappointment for me, I try to choose the right words in which I don't have dysfluency. I usually say only a necessary minimum of information, then communication becomes less pleasant for me and I don't have any further motivation to speak. I am disappointed that the flow was not better. I think the listener has less sympathy for me when I block. If I see that the listener does not have much time or is nervous, I do not want to complicate the situation. I recognize from facial expression that a person does not have much time. Some people respond by giving a clear look of surprise or shock. I start to stutter, my interlocutor is waiting and wondering why I speak so. It is often the first experience with stutters which people have. The interlocutor does not know how to talk to me. Sometimes I explain to him that I stutter and he is glad that he has understood the situation".

Student H. describes an unpleasant communication situation as follows: "The interlocutors are afraid to talk to me, experience a feeling that they are hurting me and think that I suffer when speaking. It happens to me when I start talking with people, my interlocutor does not respond and starts to talk with someone else or leaves, because they do not know how to behave".

Some adults with stuttering, and also our three respondents, report that they feel discomfort when their interlocutors complete their words and phrases. It sometimes happens that interlocutors come up with words different from those the person with a stammer wanted to utter. Here is an example of how student K. perceives these situations: "The problem is that interlocutors do not expect that a person with a stammer would like to

say something else. In such cases, it is difficult to explain the original meaning of the sentence and note that the prediction was wrong. I have to go back and say the original idea from the beginning. I usually anticipate that in the same place I will have dysfluency – a block. Therefore, my communication takes time and if I see that my interlocutor is in a hurry, it is easier not to say the idea again, silently agree and not waste his or her time”.

Another phenomenon in communication with a person with a stammer is non-visual contact. Interlocutors do not know whether to keep eye contact or not, thereby showing uncertainty and avoiding it. One student stated: "It is better and easier for me when the person I'm talking to looks at me and gives me time. I usually don't keep eye contact, rather I look at the ground or another place for fear of a sneer from my interlocutor”.

K., college student, testified: "I speak worse and it's harder for me to start talking if my interlocutor does not pay attention and give me time, browses through documents, doesn't maintain eye contact with me and indicates that I have a restraint, which happens to me at the post office, other offices or at the university”.

A survey of 40 adults with stuttering was done by Táborská (2010). 9 out of 40 respondents (21.4%) acknowledged significant deterioration of speech fluency in communication with officials. Ten respondents (23.8%) of the reference sample considered phone calls the most dreaded situation. One respondent said: "It's very difficult to solve a problem on the phone. It happens that I get stuck and the other person just hangs up.” 7 out of 40 respondents (16.7%) found it considerably difficult to make introductions. "When I introduce myself, I prefer to think of another name, because I'm 100% sure that I will get stuck on my own name. It's better than to embarrass yourself on the very first word you say", said one of the respondents. Our three respondents H., K. and J. have problems with introductions as well. 5 (11.9%) said they felt very unpleasant if someone completed their thoughts.

Another survey on adults with stuttering was conducted by Nováková (2012). When asked, "Could you describe your specific experience associated with stuttering and school attendance?" one respondent said: "When I was in high school in a German class, I was chosen to read an article. After the first words the teacher told me to leave the class, calm down in the hall, and then come back in and read it properly. If I had not been able to read without stuttering, he would not have let me graduate. A week later I was transferred to a different school at my request”.

Students K. and H. consider it unpleasant when they talk with dysfluency and their interlocutors offer that they should write it instead. Student K. thinks that the possibility to communicate in a written way is suitable for situations when they do not have enough time. In other cases, he would not offer this option, because in his opinion it reduces the stammerer's self-esteem. You feel embarrassed when you have to write the information instead of saying it.

Student H. does not like it when other options, different from what is offered to her classmates, are offered to her. One example would be written examination instead of oral examination.

Student H. states that she feels uncomfortable when she sees impatient looks and mocking grins. In view of the fact that she has stuttered for 15 years, she does not let it upset her.

Student K. said that he spoke worse in a group setting: "Spontaneous speeches in larger groups are more collective, there is more heckling and people interrupt each other more often. It bothers me when I speak with another person at the same moment. Most of the attention is received by the person who was the most heard and whose thought was best understood, which is usually not the stutterer. Either we don't finish the thought or, because of fear of disfluency, we express the idea quietly and the idea is ignored. Stutterers would rather not verbally participate, unless someone asks them something and gives them enough time to talk".

Recommendations supporting communication of children, adolescents or adults with a stammer are stated by Lechta (2010a, 2010b):

- We listen carefully when a client speaks and consider what they talk about;
- We speak slowly and we extend pauses between sentences;
- we observe a situation when the speech fluency improves or worsens and we encourage verbal communication during smooth phases;
- At the time of disfluency, we provide enough time without expression of impatience and finishing sentences for the client;
- We do not interrupt our client during their speech and we do not correct improperly pronounced words;
- We do not draw attention to talking, we avoid advice like "Speak more slowly!" and we speak calmly and slowly;
- We provide enough time to respond and for communication;
- We try to reduce whatever may have a negative effect on fluency (e.g. time pressure);
- We reduce the number of questions that we ask (Lechta, 2010a);
- We maintain eye contact even at the moment of stutter. Interrupting eye contact, for many stutterers, is a negative signal of their failure;
- We provide an appropriate voice and speech pattern, try to talk calmly in a relaxed way, but not extremely slowly;
- If there is a stutterer in the classroom, we avoid competitions with a large amount of pressure such as "the first person who can say the answer, calculate...". These competitions usually significantly increase psychological tension in stutterers;
- In most cases, it is appropriate for students with a stutter not to be forced during bad days to answer aloud before the whole class;
- For children with a stutter, it can help when the class is informed of their classmate's speech problem, so other classmates know how to behave during communication and the problem is not tabooed. Other stu-

dents should not feel that their classmate who stutters is somehow favoured within the frame of school duties. Other conditions, such as in the most difficult cases when the student has to respond in writing, should be based on empathy of other classmates. Pedagogical tact is essential (Lechta, 2010b).

Recommendations on how to talk with someone who stutters, provided by Peutelschmiedová (1994):

- Do not add words for stammerers, do not prompt words. You will just make the situation worse. Maybe the person wants to say something different than you think;

- Maintaining natural eye contact expresses your interest;

- Wait until the stammerer tells you everything they wanted to say. Try to not fall into awkwardness;

- Do not evoke the feeling of time pressure. Accentuate your interest in what he/she says, not how he/she says it;

- Check your own speech. Speak slowly and naturally;

- Do not give well-intentioned advice: "Take a breath". "Relax". "Once again". The more the stammerer focuses on his speech, the worse it gets. You can cause a blockage of his speech;

- Respect the personality of the person with the stutter.

Valuable information on how to effectively help a stuttering child is described by Lechta and Králiková (2011), Dell (2004). Fraser (2010) and, as such, it focuses on effective counseling.

Communication with clients with developmental dysphasia can be problematic because they may have difficulty with understanding spoken and written language. Usually dysgrammatisms occur in their spontaneous spoken and written language. Dvořák (2007) defines developmental dysphasia as a specifically impaired language development, manifested by a complicated ability or inability to learn, to communicate verbally although the conditions for language development are suitable.

We create more favourable conditions for communication with persons with developmental dysphasia when, for example:

- We significantly slow down the speed of our speech;

- Questions and instructions are formulated clearly and we verify if the client understands (i.e. by their actions);

- We maintain eye contact. We create a quiet, unhurried atmosphere so that the client can concentrate on the communication;

- We leave some time between each phrase or question. The client with developmental dysphasia needs enough time so he/she can process the information. We start from the current level of language skills of a given pupil;

- We wait for a verbal or nonverbal response, even if it is accompanied by latency and is not accurate. It is effective and the response still has value;

- We "tune in" to a level slightly more advanced than the current language level of our client;
- We repeat the client's speech or we reformulate it properly so that the speech does not contain dysgrammatisms;
- If the client does not respond to our question while commenting and practicing other non-direct and communication techniques, which include short unambiguous questions, we must expand our answers or hints and we properly answer ourselves (Mičáková, 2011) ².

We are aware that a unified approach to clients with impaired communication abilities does not exist. This is because each client has their own unique life story, experiences, specific family background, very specific causes of their problems, individual symptoms, possibilities and limits. We are looking for an individual approach tailored differently to each client, so that it fits them perfectly.

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² The article is about errors in communication with people having speech and language difficulties. It is a current theme and is a sub-part of a specific research project on Pdf_2012_012 "Impaired communication ability in terms of the impacts of the symptomatology on interdisciplinary co-operation of professionals and family in comprehensive intervention – specific role of a special pedagogue and speech therapist" (Main investigator: Vitaškova; co-investigators: Mičáková, Langer, Říhová, Čermáková, Weilová, Kunhartová). This specific research project is designed at the Institute of Special Education Studies at the Faculty of Education Palacký University of Olomouc.