

USE OF SPEECH UNITS IN CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEED

Jonida Cungu

University “Aleksander Xhuvani”, Elbasan, Albania, jonida_cungu@yahoo.com

Valentina Haxhiymeri

University “Aleksander Xhuvani”, Elbasan, Albania, valixhafa@yahoo.com

Abstract: Language is the basic means of communication in human society and is realized through linguistic and non-linguistic means. The speech process appears different in different individuals for many reasons.

The aim of this paper is to describe, compare and analyze speaking habits and the use of speech units in children with special needs. As a case study were taken children with special needs of a special educational institution, where are studied the speaking habits, the amount of lexical units they use, the language competencies they possess, the language difficulties of the children, the difficulties in the semantic aspect and difficulties in expressive language. The obtained data served as a source material for the comparison and analysis of the teaching units used by these children. It has also been considered the amount of lecture units that children use more frequently or more easily, depending on the syndrome that accompanies them.

The methods used for this paper are field research methods, combined with the comparative and analytical method. The results of this paper will serve to create a presentation and classification of used speech units, according to specific syndromes of children, as well as what are the lecturing skills that children have easier to perceive, use and learn. Assessing the language of these children will help us to determine which language units are most likely to be used by children with special needs and to articulate different sounds during the act of speaking. We will also try to suggest different teaching strategies, which are valuable for the learning process in children with special needs.

Keywords: vocabulary, discourse units, special needs, speaking habits.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to nativist theory, the competence that every person possesses to master the units of language is also related to the ability of each individual to use in concrete situations (Chomsky, 1992). Therefore, we use all the language units stored in our brains to achieve the process of communication through language. The realization of the discourse through the concrete use and application of the sound materials, constitutes the oral discourse. It is important to study the sound flow used during expression. It must be articulated or segmented into smaller members or units, which are evidenced through semantic and phonetic connections placed between them. In the purpose of this study are the lecture units: phrases, semantic groups, words, syllables and sounds.

Language is the basic means of communication. The use of language units or signs gives the opportunity to exchange messages or receive information. By using linguistic or non-linguistic units, people manage to realize the process of speaking. The act of speaking serves to convey our thoughts and emotions to others. Speech disorders are present from an early age in children with special needs. Depending on their disability, they also show problems that accompany their ability to express themselves. The articulatory and pronunciation aspect presents significant problems in this group of children. For this reason, they can overcome these difficulties by being treated in the respective schools.

The educational philosophy for children with special needs in Albania is based on inclusive education. Inclusion is conceived as the inclusion of skills, values and practical elements that enable positive change in children with special needs (Hornby, 2015). Children can study in special schools, or they can be integrated into normal classes in normal schools. Their education is generally realised by the class teacher and the assistant teacher, who focus the work on preparing the child according to an individual education plan, which is drafted by the teachers in cooperation with the child's psychologists and parents.

The main focus of scientific research in this paper is related to the description, comparison and analysis of the use of teaching units and speaking habits in children with special needs in special school. Through the research method, data collection was realised during the language assessment of children with special needs. These data served to describe and compare the quantity and quality of the use of teaching units, as well as the ability to speak in this group of children. Also, during the assessment, were noticed considerable linguistic knowledge among teachers, in order to realize successfully speech therapy or their training in speaking skills. At the center of the study are children aged 8-15, who study in a special school in Albania. Children are assessed linguistically through a test prepared specifically for language assessment in terms of use. This language assessment test contained:

- questions on the identification of body parts and objects, in order for children to understand words and sentences;
- questions with simple sentences indicating actions, in order to identify the use of meaning groups;

- spontaneous creations on a certain topic, in order to notice the pronunciation of words, syllables or the articulation of sounds.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The working method used was direct observation by completing the language assessment test and interviewing. The data were obtained in real time, during the moments of working with this group of children. Assistant teachers and students' teachers were also present during the language assessment, so that emotionality would not affect the assessment process.

The language assessment was realised in a few days, in which 3 hours were spent with the children in a special school. A total of 60, female and male children were assessed with disabilities such as: childhood autism, severe autism; epilepsy; mild intellectual disability; moderate intellectual disability; Down syndrome; neurosensory disorders; mild mental retardation; moderate mental retardation, autism and epilepsy. The aim of the paper is to notice which teaching units are used most often by children with special needs and to articulate different sounds during the act of speaking. This test used contains:

- questions on the identification of body parts and objects, in order for children to understand words and sentences (children were asked to name specific body parts, accompanied by the use of signs, for example: "Show me your nose, mouth, foot, hands, etc.", "Look carefully at the drawings and point or touch with your finger an apple, train, banana, flag, dog, cat, icecream etc.", "Show in the picture which is the color red, yellow, green, blue, white, etc.", "Show how the following objects are called: the one to iron, to protect from rain, to wipe, to write, etc.").

- questions with simple sentences that indicate actions, in order to identify the use of meaning groups (the focus of the questions was to identify the different actions that children perform, directing questions such as: Show me in the picture where is what need to write, to read, to travel at sea, to wipe, etc. Or questions like these: Look at these pictures and show where is the rabbit running, the girl reading, the boy playing, the mom working, the dad writing, the teacher explaining, etc.).

- spontaneous creations on a certain topic, in order to notice the pronunciation of words, syllables or the articulation of sounds. (During these exercises, are used questions that contain more complex sentences and serve to indicate objects of objects, such as: "Show me the object that shines the night in the sky, the insect that bites you, the animal that we milk and makes milk, etc". Or sentences that they should repeat after the teacher like: "sit here, the car moves, the boy runs, brush your teeth after meals, this is the nose and mouth, etc").

3. RESULTS

Phrases are the basic units of discourse, which can be semantically further divided into smaller semantic groups. Their segmentation serves children with special needs to perfect their teaching skills, as well as assist them in the speaking process. Language difficulties have serious consequences for children with special needs if they do not engage in a long and effective treatment. During the language assessment performed on children, it was observed that only 4 children (with specific syndromes: epilepsy, mild intellectual disability, autism and mild mental retardation) are able to pronounce or read short sentences, which are repetitions of dictated sentences by the evaluator in support of the interactive function. This means that phrases are the most difficult discourse units to be realized by children with special needs, due to physical, cognitive causes or various difficulties of the child.

But the phrases can be understood by them. The segmentation of phrases into smaller semantic units, such as semantic groups, creates comprehension opportunities in children, to be in function of the expressive language. The number of children who understand, articulate, pronounce and answer questions with meaning groups is bigger than those who have the ability to communicate through phrases. This group also includes children with diagnoses such as: moderate intellectual disability.

Segmentation of semantic groups goes further into such units called phonetic words. Words serve in the act of speaking to exchange thoughts, ideas and emotions. About 30% of children manage to pronounce and respond with words. These teaching units are realized with different degrees of difficulty in children. Some of them manage to pronounce by segmenting the word into syllables, not giving the correct morphosyntactic structure of the word, or by not achieving the combination of sounds to form words. About 25% of children articulate only syllables, which in some cases are with phonological deformations. Such phonetic, morphological, semantic and syntactic difficulties accompany the incomprehensible speech of children or the incorrect pronunciation of words and discourse units in the pragmatic aspect.

Difficulties of a phonetic nature appear more frequently in children with special needs. Sound, as the smallest unit of discourse, serves to form larger units. But since phonological deformity appear in about 50% of children during pronunciation, then even the largest speech units formed by them, will be presented with incorrect combinations of

sounds. Generally, children who have problems with articulation of sounds, encounter significant difficulties in consonant groups:

-mb, nd, ng, for example at the words: mbaj (contain), këmbët (legs), mbaroj (finish), ndaj (separate), ndodh (happens), ndryshim (change), i ngushtë (tight), bangë (desk) etc;

-in consonants: shk, fl, rd, br, gr, for example at the words: shkallë (stairs), shkumë (surf), grup (group), brenda (inside), brez (generation), flamur (flag), bordi i anijes (board of the ship) etc.;

-in double consonants: sh, xh, zh, ll, nj, dh, th, rr

-in the deafening of consonants: v-f, d-t, b-p, gj-q, etc.

From the researched data it results that the impairments in the pragmatics of speech, although not appearing in all the children interviewed, still, remain the most pronounced disorders, being characteristic for children with autism, epilepsy and severe mental retardation.

The pragmatism of speech is most damaging to children, who suffer from the autism spectrum. The lesions of this group of children with disabilities are of phonological and morphosyntactic type at the same time. Whereas in children with Down syndrome we find that the use of speaking habits is not as present and with as high impairment as autistic children (Tager-Flusberg & Sullivan, 1999). This raises the immediate need for a logopedist to be present in special schools in Albania, or for individuals trained in speech therapy.

4. DISCUSSIONS

This study descriptively assessed the abilities of children with special needs in terms of use of teaching units. Their disorders are also determinant of students' rehabilitation ability. In Albania, special schools work with the same textbooks as normal schools. However, special school teachers also attach individual educational plans to children, which are developed in collaboration with parents and the psychologist. If we were to take a comparative approach to the competencies that these children should achieve in their schools, then we would notice that almost all children could not respond to the absorption of the curriculum that the school offers, which is not suitable for children with special needs. This curriculum is elaborated by the teachers, who manage to adapt it to levels that are accessible and perceptible by the children of the special school.

Interviewing students through the language assessment test (test is adapted from TVL model (Test di Valutazione di linguaggio), (Cianchiotti, C, Sannio Franciello, G, Ericson, Trento 1997) highlighted the fact that special school teachers did not have sufficient knowledge about such assessment tests, or about speech therapy. When the teachers themselves were interviewed, if they were able to realize speech therapy with these children, they expressed the need for further training and qualifications about this knowledge. Special schools in Albania do not employ individuals in the position of speech therapist. Even the law on pre-university education in Albania does not create space to enable the employment of a logopedist or speech therapist in special schools. Numerous studies have presented the effectiveness of speech therapy and the improvement of the expressiveness of speech for children with special needs.

The special school provided both information and data on the education of these children at an early age. Their education 3-6 years old has been near normal educational institutions, which do not provide specialized educational services for these children. Thus, they carry from early childhood problems and disorders with speech, which are transmitted in coming years of schooling. It seems that the late beginnings for the improvement of speech disorders and the treatment of the discourse aspect, have affected these children, who continue to show problems and low efficiency of improvement in the higher school years (McIntosh, 2007).

The motive for the study of teaching units by children with special needs is addressed to the opinion that the speech units that this group of children uses and implements are not just genuine units, as long as these children only try to build even the most minimal units, both phonemes and morphemes. Consequently we have to talk about units of a different type. They can be considered as fragmented units, which respond only to the construction function in fragments longer than the basic units of discourse. Poor ability to create semantic groups or sayings is an indication that discourse units fail to fully assimilate by them. Phrases can only be articulated by repeating dictated words. They can only understand the units which they use, but not pronounce them. In this regard, we cannot talk about the use of speech units by children with special needs in special school, but about the use of speech fragments.

Developing expression skills and perfecting speech units through speech therapy is a need, which should be implemented from an early age. Therefore, the task arises for the presence of a speech therapist or language therapist to be present in pre-school education institutions and further in pre-university education. Also, a better qualification of educators and teachers is required, who should be engaged in trainings and qualifications in order to improve students' expression skills. Linguistic assessment and speech efficiency should be performed by a team of staff, teachers, assistant teachers, parents, logopedist, speech therapists and psychologists.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The use of language units in children with special needs is of special scientific interest, not only for the common features that appear in their use, but also in the frequency and intensity of articulatory presentation from one individual to another. Consequently:

- learning units that are most often realized by children with special needs are sounds and syllables
- learning units that are rarely realized by children with special needs are meaning groups and phrases. These depend on the students' disabilities, but the largest percentage of students manage to understand the meaning groups and sayings, but do not always manage to realize them.
- difficulties of phonetic character bring the inability of the child to combine sounds correctly and difficulties in language skills. Problems in the articulation of sounds, result in all the disorders in the use of language units and skills.
- it will be better to talk not about the use of speech units by children with special needs in special school, but about the use of speech fragments.
- language competence of children with special needs to master their language system in concrete situations, depends on their intellectual and individual ability. But full-fledged school teams can effectively develop and improve language competence, such as the disadvantage they carry from early childhood for speech problems and disorders, which are transmitted in coming years of schooling.
- although there are individuals among them who cannot articulate or pronounce properly, they cannot be considered passive speakers of the language, as the creative character of the language gives the opportunity to children with special needs to develop the act of re-creation. This was observed when students were asked to formulate simple sentences or give answers through a simple sentence. Some of them could answer, creating simple sentences, a result which is achieved by the creative character of the language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cianchiotti, C., Sannio, F., & Ericson, G. (1997). TVL (Test di Valutazione di linguaggio), Trento/Italy.
- Chomsky, N. (1992). Knowledge of language, London.
- Dodi, A. (2004). Fonetika dhe fonologjia e gjuhës shqipe, Tiranë/Albania.
- Ertmer, P. A., & Newby, T. J. (2013). Behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism: Comparing critical features from an instructional design perspective.
- Flusberg, H.T., & Sullivan, K. (1999). "A componential view of theory of mind: evidence from Williams syndrome", a University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA, USA.
- Fuandai, C. (2010). "Catering for children with special needs in the regular classroom: challenges and the way forward".
- Gillon, G. (2004). Phonological awareness: From research to practice. New York, The Guilford Press.
- Hornby, G. (2015). Inclusive special education: The need for a new theory, British Journal of special education.
- Memushaj, R. (2009). Hyrje në gjuhësi, Tiranë/Albania.
- Mcintosh, B., Crosbie, S., Holm, A., & Dodd, B. (2013). Enhancing the phonological awareness and language skills of socially disadvantaged preschoolers. An interdisciplinary programme:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/43478341_Enhancing_the_phonological_awareness_and_language_skills_of_socially_disadvantaged_preschoolers_An_interdisciplinary_programme
- Memisevic, H., & Hadzic, S. (2013). Speech and Language Disorders in Children with Intellectual Disability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Researchgate.net publications.
- Thomai, J. (2006). Leksikologjia e gjuhës shqipe, Tiranë/Albania.
https://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/aftesi_e_kufizuar_manuali_1.pdf