

Evaluation of the effect of school language environment upon language development in hearing impaired children: a quasi-experimental study.

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ABSTRACT

This small scale study aims to investigate the effect of the school language environment on the language development of the hearing impaired child. Advances in digital hearing aid and cochlear implant technology are giving profoundly deaf children better access to sound and language and earlier diagnosis, aiding and interventions are enabling profoundly deaf children to gain earlier access to speech and language. The language environments of some schools are considered to be impoverished and it is the effect of these environments on the hearing impaired child's language development that is of interest in this study.

Two hearing impaired (HI) subjects were matched for age, gender and cognitive ability with two normally hearing (NH) subjects in the same language environment. This study involves the collection of data about the language environment of the subjects and their language development over a two year period. The quantitative method of research has been used for collecting the data. The research is quasi-experimental. A survey of the four subjects was carried out. A direct observation survey of the language environment was recorded, transcribed and analysed giving numerical data for the language environment. The data relating to the subject's language abilities were obtained from specific language tests involving oral questionnaires and interviews as part of the survey research. Within methods triangulation is used in an attempt to validate the results and show different aspects of the same concept that of language development.

In Year 1 all the subjects experienced the same language environment. In Year 2 the NH subjects and Child 4 HI experienced a language environment with a lower score for vocabulary and complexity of language structures, while Child 2 HI experienced an environment that used simpler vocabulary but a range of more complex language structures. All the subjects demonstrated progress in the development of their vocabulary, comprehension and expression skills over the two year study period. The progress in these areas during Year 2 was measured as less than in Year 1.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from this research because of its small size and limited data. The results indicate that the language environment of the subjects involved does not appear to affect their language development positively, or negatively. However, there are too many variables to draw any clear conclusions. With early identification of permanent childhood hearing loss due to the NHSP and children entering mainstream education with age appropriate language (Yoshinago-Itano 1999) more HI children are going to school with minimal, if any, support from a Teacher of the Deaf. To ensure the continued language development of these hearing impaired children it is essential to establish that the school language environment is promoting continued language development, in order to ensure that hearing impaired children gain equal access and are given every opportunity to reach their full learning potential.