

Communication Between Hearing Mothers and Their Deaf Children After Watching a Documentary: A Descriptive Study*

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Communication between hearing families and deaf children is of major importance for the communicative and linguistic development of the latter. This study arose from the need to understand and analyse the communicative adaptations that a family makes due to a child's deafness. The proposed situation consists of mothers and their hearing impaired children aged 7 to 9 years watching an audiovisual documentary together. The aim is to analyse the discourse of a group of 12 deaf children, how their mothers interact in order to complement their knowledge and the strategies that they use to stimulate oral expression. The main results show that the studied context benefits the comprehension of contents by some of the deaf participants, even those that are mainly transmitted via the auditory channel and in turn fosters communication with the mother, which stimulates comprehension of complementary knowledge and the use of oral language. The study offers recommendations for good practices in the use of audiovisual documentaries in order to improve the communicative and linguistic skills of deaf children, as well as acquisition of knowledge.

Keywords: deafness, audio-visual, communication, mother-child interaction, documentary

Introduction

The adult's influence on the development of children's language is a widely studied and demonstrated fact. In this regard, Bruner emphasises social interaction and assigns to the adult a central role as a provider of support and assistance as the child acquires language. Thus, parents build a framework that provides the means to make it easier for their children to learn. Bruner defines different communicative contexts in which such frameworks occur, which he studied in-depth and gave the name of "formats" (Bruner & Linaza, 1984).

One of the most studied conversational contexts in the analysis of exchanges between mother and child is the "picture-book reading" situation, which consists of looking at illustrations in books and commenting on them (Danis, Bernard, & Leproux, 2000; Frosch, Cox & Goldman, 2001; Symons, Peterson, Slaughter, Roche,

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& Doyle, 2005; Laible & Song, 2006; Garner, Dunsmore, & Southam-Gerrow, 2008). In this context, the mother acts as a facilitator and director of her child's social, emotional and cognitive knowledge (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Jennigs & Wartella, 2004; Howe, Rinaldi & Recchia, 2010; Bakar, Brown, & Remine, 2010; McGinty, Justice, Zucker, Gosse, & Skibbed, 2012). Generally, it is the mother that tends to take most of the initiative by naming the objects or actions in books and making adequate comments that are adapted to her child's knowledge and attention span.

Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan and Fischel (1988) define the high-level communication strategies, such as open questions, reformulations and expansions, used by mothers when reading stories as those that get their preschool age children to participate actively in the dialogue established between them. A study by Desjardin and Eisenberg (2007) conclude that the use of high-level strategies by mothers in a picture-book reading situation is positively related with the linguistic skills of their deaf children with cochlear implants. Specifically, open questions are identified as good predictors of how expressively a child uses language. According to Pullen and Justice (2003), these high-level strategies elicit the use of more complex vocabulary and better syntactic structures in children.

Interactions between mothers or adults and children have also been studied in terms of the mother's communicative sensitivity. In her work on attachment, Mary Ainsworth studied maternal sensitivity, considering it to be present in interaction when the mother is aware of the child's level of communication, interprets his/her communicative intentions, offers appropriate responses and answers adequately (Ainsworth, 1969).

Later studies have analysed, in different contexts, the quality of interactions between mothers and their deaf children by examining how maternal communicative sensitivity is affected by the fact that the child is deaf. Lederberg and Everhart (2000) note that a mother's intention to potentiate her deaf child's learning can lead to more direct control of the child's behaviour and thus a reduction in their conversational sensitivity. According to these authors, the control that mothers exert over deaf children is due to their intuitive adaptation to their children's language. In this regard, the study by Brown and Remine (2004), who compare the maternal style of mothers while playing with deaf and hearing children aged 28-30 to months, shows that the most frequent behaviour among mothers of deaf children is that of actively taking part in the game, while mothers of hearing children make comments about what the child is doing during the game (suggestions, descriptions, explanations, indications, alternatives, etc.), having a less direct impact on what the child is doing. However, more recent studies show that as advances in technology and speech therapy enable a more standard rate of oral language acquisition among deaf children, mothers will also be able to offer more spontaneous interactions.

For example, in relation to maternal behaviours that have a direct impact on children's language, the study by Silvestre (2008) exploring a play situation observes that the most frequent communicative style is to ask open questions and encouraging comments offer support and in most interactions an adequate verbal response is produced by the deaf child. The verbal maternal behaviours are highly positive because they show maternal communicative sensitivity that takes into account what the child is thinking and induces him/her to express him or herself orally as opposed to producing closed questions that can be answered with a single word or monosyllable and that therefore do not incite spontaneous production in the child.

In a similar vein, and also in a free-play situation, Bakar et al. (2010) highlight the high degree of "conversational sensitivity" among mothers with regard to their deaf children with cochlear implants during interactions as well as the importance of receiving the implants at an early age. The authors compare three groups: a group of children with hearing aids, a group of children who had a cochlear implant before the age of

22 months and a group of children that had a cochlear implant after the age of 25 months. Their results show that the mothers of children who had a cochlear implant before the age of 22 months were progressively more sensitive in comparison with the mothers of children that had a cochlear implant after the age of 25 months.

The language that the adult uses during interactions with her child is therefore determined by their individual differences and the context in which it is produced. As opposed to previous studies, this one is set in a new and original interactive context. First, instead of using a picture-book or a situation of interactive play as its material, it uses an audiovisual documentary, so the images come and go and the narration always progresses, so the information is therefore transmitted dynamically. Second, the analysis of the communication produced between the mother and child is made after viewing the audiovisual material together and not during the viewing process, as is often the method of exploration in studies of mother-child interaction when, for example, telling a story and commenting on the pictures together. In short, both for the mother and for the child, audiovisual materials are attractive and form part of family life (Jennings & Wartella, 2004).

Finally, we should consider that the most commonly studied discourse, both for picture-book reading and for audiovisual materials, is the narrative structure of stories, while studies of the expositive texts are less frequent. However, documentaries with an expositive structure, such as those on science, are of special interest for learning and may cause greater difficulties with comprehension among deaf viewers, as the information in voiceovers tends to be more necessary in order to understand the visual information than it would be when viewing fiction. In this regard, Cambra, Silvestre and Leal (2013) examine the difficulties that deaf adolescents have with the voiceover used in an audiovisual documentary on social science. The authors observe that the children's interpretation of the material is based on a description of the images, or inferences regarding the same, while they barely make any reference to the content offered by the voiceover.

For a deaf child, this is a valuable opportunity to achieve two basic objectives: to improve their conversational skills and oral communication, and to enrich their knowledge. In a relaxed situation, such as watching a documentary, the mother can, on the one hand, foster oral language skills and, on the other, complete knowledge, correct mistakes etc.

In short, the idea is to study how mothers behave with their children while they are watching an audiovisual documentary together, the ultimate aim being to offer criteria for good practices in this context to stimulate both the use of oral language among deaf children and to exercise their attention, memory and reasoning skills with regard to the presented content.

Objectives

The main aim of this study is to evaluate the strategies used by mothers to help their deaf children to understand the content of the audiovisual material better, considering what the child says that he/she has retained from it and, in turn, stimulating conversation and oral production.

The specific aims are therefore:

- (1) To analyse the content that the child expresses/omits from the information in the documentary when explaining it to his/her mother after watching it;
- (2) To evaluate the mother's intervention in terms of stimulating conversation and fostering verbal production by the child;
- (3) To evaluate the mother's interventions in terms of enriching the child's explanations by encouraging him/her to deduce knowledge or offer new ideas.

Methodology

Participants

The sample of deaf pupils was made up of 12 children (9 girls and 3 boys) aged 7 to 9 years with severe and profoundly prelingual deafness (deafness prior to the acquisition of language and hearing loss over 70 decibels). Eight of them wore a hearing aid and four had cochlear implants and their prosthetic gain was between 15 and 35 decibels. All of them used oral language to communicate, were the children of hearing parents and attended ordinary inclusive schools. The mothers that took part in the study were between 27 and 49 years of age (Mean Age = 38 years).

Material

The study used a documentary about dolphins in the Catalan language that lasts for 110 seconds. The video describes the physical characteristics of dolphins, defines what the different parts of their bodies do and explains the kind of things that they are able to do. The content of the dolphin video has been divided into four blocks (Table 1): the first is the definition of dolphins as mammals (D); the second block describes the functions of the different parts of a dolphin's body (FUN); the third presents the physical characteristics of dolphins (FIS); and the final block refers to the activities that dolphins are capable of doing (C).

Table 1

The Dolphins Documentary

Definition (D)	CODE
Dolphins live in the water, but they aren't fish, they are mammals.	D
Description of Functionality (FUN)	
They hold their breath underwater. They need to bring their heads out of the water to be able to breathe, otherwise they could die.	FUN1
They also have very fine hearing that they use to find their way.	FUN2
And they only use their teeth to fish or catch food.	FUN3
They breathe by bringing air into their lungs.	FUN4
(Flipper) ... that they use to keep their balance in the water.	FUN5
(Flukes)... which the dolphin moves up and down to get around and jump.	FUN6
Physical Description (FIS)	
The dolphin has smooth, flat, velvety skin.	FIS1
They have small eyes.	FIS2
and through what is called the blowhole.	FIS3
These are the flippers.	FIS4
This is the dorsal fin.	FIS5
And these are the flukes.	FIS6
Activities (C)	
Dolphins like to live in groups. The mothers do not leave their children until they are 4 to 6 years old.	C1
They eat fish. They like sardines a lot.	C2
But what they most like to do is sing, play with hoops, do acrobatics jump and say hello.	C3

Procedure

The documentary was viewed in a quiet part of the participants' homes. The mother and deaf child were told that they were going to watch a television documentary. First, the child was given the following instructions:

"You are now going to watch a video. Watch carefully because you'll be telling me about it afterwards".

Once this has been explained to the child, the mother is invited to help him/her to understand the content of the video better:

"Now perhaps your mummy can help you to understand it better"

The situation was filmed from the moment that they watched the documentary together until the mother had completed her intervention. The explanations given by the deaf children and the oral interventions of both the mothers and children were transcribed and put into different categories as detailed below.

Criteria for Analysis

The following are the criteria observed and the categories established for analysis of the participants' explanations after viewing the documentary and the mothers' interventions. In order to achieve the proposed objectives, the mothers' interventions were analysed from two perspectives: first, how much they stimulate the child to expand on their production of oral language and, second, how they support, provoke or provide new knowledge about the subject.

Analysis of the children's explanations.

The analysis of the oral explanations given by the deaf children after watching the documentary was made in observance of the criterion of the selection of the information that they retain from the content of the documentary, in accordance with the level of abstraction required and the modality, either visual or auditory and visual, in which it is presented in the documentary. Thus, the participants' productions were placed in the categories described below.

The types of definition or description were considered as follows: definition by the word that represents the concept, "mammal", definition by the function served by the different parts of the animal (for example, "teeth for fishing", "ears for sensing direction"), description of the physical characteristics without referring to their function (for example, "they have smooth skin", "small eyes") or by activities or preferences (for example, "they live in groups", "they eat sardines").

Finally, the fact that some contents can be perceived both in an auditory and a visual manner was also considered, such as references to the physical characteristics and some activities, while references to the definition and functions of the organs were mainly received via the auditory channel. The latter would certainly be much harder for the studied population to understand.

Maternal stimulation of the production of oral language.

To analyse the maternal interventions in terms of stimulation of the use of oral language by the child, the base criterion was an evaluation of the length of answers provoked by said interventions.

We hence established a scale between three categories: from behaviours that are closed to responses and which therefore do not encourage a long answer, to those that motivate the conversation to continue. The first category groups statements by mothers that only request monosyllabic answers or for the child to finish off a sentence started by the mother (for example: *And they said they live in...*). The second category includes productions that constitute a generic incitation to carry on providing information, (for example: *Is there*

anything else? What else did they say? What did you like the most?). Finally, there is a third category of phatic expressions that encourage the child to continue the conversation without asking for specific information and offering positive feedback and support (for example: *Well done*).

To summarise, there are three categories of maternal behaviour in terms of the stimulation of linguistic production:

- (1) Behaviours that only require very succinct verbal responses;
- (2) Behaviours that demand broader verbal explanations but on specific subjects;
- (3) Behaviours aimed at maintaining and stimulating conversation about the subject and that elicit long explanations.

Maternal support with the recognition and acquisition of knowledge.

To evaluate the strategies used by mothers to evoke and support the knowledge offered by the documentary, two general base criteria were used: the first refers to how they consider their child's previous knowledge by repeating it in order to introduce further information and the second refers to how they find out what the child has understood about the documentary but has not expressed spontaneously.

Regarding the first criterion, the verbal maternal behaviours were grouped into two categories: first, those that work on the basis of what the child said in his/her summary of the documentary (for example, the child says: *They're mammals* and the mother says: *Ah, they're mammals. Even though they live in the sea, they're mammals?*—affirmative gesture—*Well done*) and secondly, those that examine what the child might know from prior experience (for example: *Do you remember the day we saw them? There's never one on its own. There's always more than one*).

To evaluate what the child has retained from the documentary, mothers recur to a variety of strategies, such as offering dichotomous questions like 'yes-no' questions that the child must answer (for example: *Do they live with their mothers?*) or two alternative answers to a question (for example: *Are their backs smooth or rough?*), asking comparative questions that contain wrong information that the child can correct (for example: *And how do they live? On their own?*), asking semi-open questions that refer to specific contents (for example: *what is their skin like? What do they like doing? What do they do with their teeth?*), explicitly correcting mistakes about the content (for example, the mother asks: *And what do they like the most?* To which the child answers: *fish ...* And the mother says: *No, what they like most is singing*) and making clarifications about the content (for example: *They have very good hearing. They said that too. Did you hear that?*).

In summary, the maternal strategies to stimulate the recognition of information and the acquisition of new knowledge were organised into the following categories:

- (1) Repetition of the knowledge expressed by the children in order to introduce new knowledge;
- (2) Reference to knowledge experienced in the past that was not initially mentioned by the children;
- (3) Questions to evaluate what the child has retained from the documentary;
- (4) Corrections of errors made by the children;
- (5) Questions seeking cognitive confirmation of the knowledge presented in the documentary.

Inter-coder Agreement

Three Masters students were taught how to categorise the children's and mothers' productions during the interaction. Three random cases were selected and the observers then categorised the productions. An analysis of inter-coder agreement obtained an intra-class correlation coefficient for individual ratings of 0.95.

Results

In accordance with the proposed objectives, the following are the results obtained from evaluating the children's productions and mother's interventions in relation to the same.

Analysis of the Children's Explanations

In observance of the criteria defined previously with respect to the content of the documentary, 5.8% of the children's references were to the fact that dolphins are mammals, 44.2% were descriptions of the functions of the different parts of a dolphin's body, 9.6% were references to their physical characteristics and 40.4% were references to their activities.

However, it is surprising, given the hearing impairment that the participants in the study have, that none of them mentioned the function served by dolphins' ears.

If we separate the content portrayed using visual means (FIS and C) from that which is mainly portrayed in audio (D and FUN), the result is equally divided, with 50% of the references being in each group. However, a case-by-case analysis indicates that of the 12 participants, only one of them explained the video on the basis of information that had mainly been heard. This was the case with a girl whose hearing has been spectacularly improved thanks to a bilateral cochlear implant.

It all shows, therefore, that the participants do not attach more importance to visual information than they do to that which is auditory. Most show a clear predilection for dolphins' activities and a tendency to define the parts of their bodies by their functions rather than their physical appearance and the labelling of the concept, and not showing concern for whether the information is presented visually or not. Only the fact that just three of the participants mention the word "mammal" might indicate any loss of information due to hearing difficulties, although there is a chance that this is not a word that this group of participants is familiar with, which may be why they mention it so little.

Maternal Stimulation of the Production of Oral Language

In relation to the three categories of maternal behaviour established to stimulate linguistic production, in citation to continue providing information and positive feed-back (80% in total) are the two most commonly used strategies by mothers (32.6% and 47.4%, respectively) and those that require short answers are the least frequent (20%). This tells us that in this informal context, mothers tend to hold open conversations, in which there is little control of the same, which therefore stimulates the use of language by deaf children.

Maternal Support with Recognition and Acquisition of Knowledge

The following are the strategies used by mothers in terms of monitoring her child's previous knowledge and questions enquiring into the contents acquired by the child.

Consideration of the child's previous knowledge.

In some interventions, mothers go back to the same content of their children's oral production after watching the audiovisual by repeating or complementing it. Most of them (10/12) tend to complement the information that their children offered, seven of them do so with information seen in the images and three of them with information that was not visualised. Of the other two mothers, one of them repeated the information highlighted by her child and complements that production with new content, and the other mother provided no new information, but merely repeated what her child had said about the documentary while making reference to content seen in the images, namely the activities performed by dolphins.

As for the strategies used by mothers to draw upon their children's knowledge based on what has been learned from previous experience, this occurs in the cases of five mothers out of the total of 12 participants.

These two types of strategy are very useful because they work on the basis of the child's previous knowledge and extend and complete it.

Questions examining the child's knowledge about the documentary.

To verify the information that the child has retained but has not expressed, mothers employ various strategies. 14.7% are dichotomous questions that the child should respond to by answering "yes-no" or choose between two alternative answers, 4% are comparative questions containing mistaken information that the child should contrast with what is correct, semi-open questions are asked in 37.3% of cases, explicit corrections of errors in content in 12% and 32% are clarifications about content.

As is observed, semi-open questions are the most frequent ($M = 6.67$; $SD = 0.452$) and comparative questions containing a mistaken answer that the deaf child should correct are less frequent ($M = 2.67$; $SD = 2.535$), thus obtaining, on the basis of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, significant differences between both ($P = 0.008$; $P < 0.05$).

It is interesting to note that mothers use cognitive conflict strategies, even though these are not the methods that they use the most. These strategies tend to implicate children and are very useful for the construction of knowledge.

Conclusions

When they watched the dolphin documentary proposed by this study, it was observed that the deaf children in the sample especially remembered the functions of the different parts of the animal's body. This group of references was not visually supported by the images, but rather in order to receive the information they had to pay a lot of attention to the voiceover. Considering that the participants have hearing impairment this shows the functional adequacy of their prosthesis and that they take advantage of their residual hearing. However, in this regard, it is curious to observe that none of the participants mentioned the function of the dolphin's ears, one piece of information that, due to their hearing condition, one would expect to have been of interest to them.

The activities performed by dolphins that are explained in the video are also particularly highlighted by the participants. As well as being more motivating and more easily perceivable visual information, it should also be noted that these facts are mentioned at the end of the video and this may make them easier to remember. Mothers also tend to highlight visual information in the documentary rather than that which is more abstract, although they do this to complement and thus help improve their children's explanations. It is also observed that, in general, they show no interest in highlighting the content of the video referring to the dolphin's hearing and associating it with the children's deafness.

The types of intervention made by mothers tend to be to ask for more information through semi-open questions to recompose the content of the documentary. However, they also show sensitivity by encouraging their children to continue their explanations using phatic expressions that stimulate them to carry on providing information and thus maintain the communicative interaction between them.

The study shows that such family situations as watching television should be used to stimulate communication and language development in deaf children and also, from an educational perspective, to enrich the comprehension and acquisition of new knowledge. In addition to high level strategies, such as semi-open

questions, reinforcement and expansions to provide further information, which the mothers in this study have already been shown to apply during communicative interaction with their children, they should also potentiate others that are not used quite as frequently, such as those that use cognitive conflict or previous experiences to benefit the construction of knowledge.

The use of videos as an instrument for language development and the acquisition of knowledge among deaf children, and even among other children with linguistic difficulties, should be generalised in schools from the first years of primary education. The adult figure, as the mediator of learning, is able to manipulate the video by pausing the images and commenting on them at leisure depending on the content that he/she wishes to highlight. In fact, some studies have already been made that show improved learning when teachers use audiovisual materials (Lang & Steely, 2003; Golos & Moses, 2011; Linebarger, 2009).

There is a need to continue looking further into the study of the interactions produced between mother and child on the basis of the viewing of audiovisual material, an uncommon field of study but one of major interest considering the increasing use of new technologies from increasingly earlier ages. In addition, this study should be carried out with a control group of hearing children in order to get an impression whether deaf children and their mothers behave in specific ways.

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