MUSEC Briefings

Macquarie University Special Education Centre

Using scripts to teach conversation skills to students with autism spectrum disorders
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Statement of the Problem

Many students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty with conversations and often show a lack of reciprocity during social exchanges. Children with ASD typically have difficulty reading social cues and this contributes to their difficulties of remaining on topic and responding appropriately in conversation.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

Scripts provide explicit prompts for an interaction or give examples of an appropriate exchange in a predetermined situation. Scripts may be visual (written or pictorial) or audio, and need to be faded out. Interventions include teaching students to make a relevant statement in the presence of a specific stimulus. For instance, a student could be explicitly taught to say "chocolate is yummy" when he sees a Kit Kat bar in a shop or "I play soccer with my dad" when in a sporting goods store. When audio scripts were used, students were taught to activate a recording device, look at their partner and verbally repeat the script played. For example, when a teacher gives the student a toy he would look at the teacher and say "Wow! What a cool toy".

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

The script is a form of prompting. Audio scripts provide a model that may be imitated and may be easier for some students with ASD to use. Audio scripts can also be used with non-readers who have good verbal skills. Visual prompts that are faded draw attention to natural stimuli in the environment. This may make it easier for students to generalize the skills learnt to other settings. The use of scripts has often been combined with artificial reinforcers, at least in the early stages of intervention.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There are fewer studies with audio scripts than with visual scripts, but the results from all studies are promising. The skills that have been taught using audio scripts included making appropriate verbal answers to social questions whilst maintaining eye contact with the initiator. Visual scripts were used to teach students to maintain a conversation based on the partner's topic of interest rather than their own. A number of studies have looked at generalisation and maintenance of skills, but the extent of the examined generalisation was often very limited and did not extend to particularly natural contexts. Students seem to learn the scripted exchanges and be able to transfer the exchange to situations with minor changes, but there are fewer data on novel exchanges.

Conclusions

The available research evidence is limited but there is evidence that scripts can improve conversational initiations and verbal interactions with appropriate eye contact. More research is needed to show evidence of efficacy for a wider range of student abilities, as the participants in the studies were mainly students with high-functioning autism but based on the available research it is an intervention worth considering. Given uncertainty about generalisation into natural settings, practitioners should plan for monitor generalisation.

The MUSEC verdict
Worth a try

Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx