

How ACE and Reynell can be used to support language development



case study

One of the greatest challenges when attempting to improve the language development of children with severe hearing difficulties, reflects Joyce Sewell-Rutter, an educational consultant with the Ewing Foundation, is knowing where to start. “There are so many areas that are likely to need attention that being able to prioritise the most important areas is vital.”

The Ewing Foundation has been helping deaf children to improve their language skills since 1952. It is committed to raising the educational and social achievements of deaf children by encouraging the maximum use of their residual hearing and promoting the development of spoken language.

To achieve those aims, its educational consultants need to be able to pinpoint specific areas of weakness in a deaf child's language development which then allows professionals to create appropriate therapy packages.

Assessment of Comprehension and Expression 6-11

Joyce has been using GL Assessment's Assessment of Comprehension and Expression 6-11 (ACE) since it was launched in 2001. ACE helps Joyce diagnose specific areas where the child's language development requires special attention, and it helps her plan and monitor interventions with other professionals such as Teachers of the Deaf, Teaching Assistants and Speech and Language Therapists.

“To take just one example, inference and idiom are difficult skills for deaf children to master. But using ACE enables the tester to quickly identify gaps in knowledge and develop an appropriate therapy package,” she explains.

ACE measures verbal comprehension, expression and grammar, plus aspects of semantic and pragmatic knowledge. The tests are designed for use with children aged between six and 11 years, with the results providing standard scores, percentile ranks and confidence bands

for each aspect of language development. This ensures therapists can rapidly and accurately identify significant and unusual patterns of language development.

ACE uses engaging pictures and stories as springboards to elicit responses from the children, guiding the therapists through the series of standardised tests. Care has been taken to ensure the materials hold the child's attention throughout the test. “The children seem to really enjoy the tasks. It doesn't seem onerous.”

“Given that children tend to demonstrate optimal performance in their language development when speaking spontaneously, a good assessment will encourage children to demonstrate their syntactical formulation in elicited responses. ACE is very good at this,” says Joyce.

While ACE provides a robust framework for delivering a standardised test, its use of engaging material ensures accurate measurements can be made. Moreover, because the format of the assessment is tightly defined, therapists can be confident that subsequent retests – usually conducted 12 months later – will precisely chart a child's progress, making the task of identifying further goals easier.

Whilst the Ewing Foundation has seen huge benefits from administering ACE with deaf children, the assessment is typically used by Speech and Language Therapists for the identification of language development issues across all groups of school children, helping to detect hitherto unidentified development needs.

Indeed, it is a measure of ACE's flexibility that the Ewing Foundation has been able to adopt the tests for use with deaf children. For the last three years, Joyce has been training Teachers of the Deaf how to use the assessment. While typical test administrators make use of audio

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recordings, Joyce finds it useful to video the tests. She finds that the video helps teachers capture the phonological detail of responses, which gives more accurate information about the expressive language and its development.

Joyce is delighted with the results. "I think the style of material is very good for deaf children. There is a lot of visual support and the activities are the sort of thing that they'd be required to do in the classroom."

She believes that one of ACE's greatest strengths is its connection with the day-to-day activities in the classroom since it covers all aspects of language. The assessment has been designed so teachers can build a child's language development needs into their Individual Education Plan. This allows teachers to add the necessary syntactic, semantic and speech development activities in to their classroom teaching – delivering an inclusive education for the child.

"Our ultimate successes are those instances where we no longer need to build therapy packages for a particular child, because they have all they need to succeed," says Joyce.

Reynell Development Language Scales III

Recently, Joyce has also been able to test language development in younger children between the ages of 15 months and seven years, using the Reynell Development Language Scales III, also published by GL Assessment.

Reynell is a gold-standard, comprehensive assessment for Speech and Language Therapists working with children with suspected language difficulties.

Like ACE, Reynell uses engaging pictures, and has toys and puppets to help maintain the younger child's

interest throughout the testing session. It takes into account the needs of multidisciplinary teams involved in the management and education of children in need of additional language development.

Since ACE and Reynell are based on the same language development principles, there is a common thread for therapists to follow as the child gets older. This allows them to build consistent therapy packages to support children as they grow.

"As with any form of standardised assessment, qualified professionals are frequently sceptical about the usefulness of the tools before they have used them," says Joyce.

"For the time invested, you get such a degree of beneficial information back that therapists quickly become advocates."

When providing training in the use of the tools she finds questions are frequently raised as to why certain approaches are being taken and whether alternatives may elicit better results. "We all have different views on what works best. It's really when the professionals start using the tests with children that they really understand the power of the tools."

"For the time invested, you get such a degree of beneficial information back that practitioners quickly become advocates," she enthuses.

"And when it comes to building therapy packages for children with delayed language development, the more insight a therapist can draw on, the better they are able to help the child."

Benefits:

ACE

- Simple and quick to administer
- Colourful pictures and engaging stories help hold the child's attention
- Can be used flexibly according to the needs of individual children
- Provides standard scores, percentile ranks and confidence bands for each sub-test
- Covers many aspects of language – ie vocabulary, semantics, syntactic formulation, narrative, inference and idiom

Reynell

- Uses both toys and pictures as stimulus items to elicit more reliable results for the youngest children and children with complex needs
- Includes separate raw scores for the Comprehension and Expressive Scales, which can be converted to age equivalent scores and percentile scores
- Offers true reliability and validity through a large and representative standardisation

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