

Naturalistic Play Activities That Yield Maximum Practice

This document summarizes current research on phonological and articulation treatment activities. It focuses on four key goals put forth by Dr. A. Lynn Williams. These aims are applicable to students with both phonological and articulation needs. In 2005, she wrote:

“Any phonological intervention program should be structured to include the following goals:

1. Provide opportunities for the child to discover the rule(s) that are being trained
2. Provide focused practice on the new target(s) in order for them to become automatic
3. Provide the child with linguistic/communicative feedback with regard to the semantic meaning of the child’s production
4. Provide opportunities to practice the new target(s) in naturalistic play activities”

Overview

Dr. Williams suggested that one of the four tenets of treatment should include the provision of “opportunities to practice the new target(s) in naturalistic play activities.” Similarly, Hoffman and Norris (2005) suggested that children “produce words in a range of simple to complex contexts.” As motor learning stipulates, children need to practice sound production during connected interactions because these are the contexts in which they will use their new skills. Such practice should mirror that of fluency treatment in that children use sounds in multiple, meaningful contexts. This section will describe activities that yield such opportunities for practice.

Centers

Classroom instruction frequently gives children opportunities throughout the day to participate in various centers (e.g., writing centers, math centers). Based on this observation, Taps (2005) developed the idea of “speech centers.” During a given session, students are given the chance to partake in different activities while practicing sounds. Centers change from session to session to keep treatment interesting. Each center features an activity and a treatment target. At one center, one student may assemble a puzzle while practicing a different sentence each turn. Simultaneously, another student may tell a story (featuring his or her sounds) into a tape recorder, while another child says words while drawing pictures on the board. “Switch” is called at random intervals allowing children to get practice at different levels in a given session.

This arrangement requires them to be independent and allows them to get well beyond the recommended 150 correct productions of the target sound per session. During this process, the SLP circulates to ensure that children are maintaining their best productions, sometimes providing subtle reminders to modify sounds. Moreover, the clinician may ask the child to talk about his or her activity. This requires the child to switch to a different mode of communication while continuing to utilize his or her best sounds.

Sample activities

Below are sample naturalistic play activities that offer multiple opportunities for practicing sound production (Taps, 2005).

1) Shopping for items with target sounds

Children enjoy playing with a toy cash register or money for this activity. One child acts as the “store owner” while the others shop at the store. The store owner owns the cards (with target words) of the other children. He or she sets the price for each card, about which the other children inquire. The child looking to purchase one of his cards may say, “How much does the ‘sled’ cost?” To that, the cashier may reply, “The ‘sled’ costs two dollars.”

Given this basic scenario, children adopt these roles and practice their sounds frequently during a short time span. Both children producing the target words works one of two ways. It may be the case that both children are working on the same sounds, in which case they are afforded more opportunities to practice the targets. Alternately, the child playing cashier may be working on different sounds. In this instance, he or she provides a good model of the target sounds for the child learning the sounds represented on the cards.

2) Hide and seek with cards

Children love to play hide and seek or to partake in scavenger hunts. One quick way to generate fun, meaningful practice is to play hide and seek with the child’s cards. For the last five minutes of the session, one child is selected and his or her cards are hidden by the other students while he or she does not look. As he or she looks, the other children know the location of the cards and say “You’re getting close to ‘thread’” or “You’re far away from ‘street’.” When the child locates the card, he or she says “I found ‘thread’” or “‘Street’ was under the desk!”

3) Guessing targets

For this activity, one student displays all of his or her cards for a partner to also see. The partner mentally notes one card without revealing its contents. The child guesses until he or she identifies the card in question. For instance, a child may practice prevocalic /r/ with the cards, “read,” “writing,” “running,” and “ready.” The guessing child may say, “Are you thinking of ‘read?’” to which the other child may reply, “No, I’m not thinking of ‘read.’” This process is continued until the proper card is selected. During a short amount of time, both students practice the sound in several meaningful trials. Regardless of whether both students share the same target, they will each have multiple opportunities to practice and/or model the sounds.

4) Retelling stories

Whenever possible, therapy should link to classroom content and curriculum. Classroom text offers an excellent opportunity to accomplish this goal while practicing sound production at a higher level. Students self-monitor while reading aloud text or while retelling familiar stories.

Both complex tasks require careful attention to maintain optimal sound production. Reading text or retelling stories also provide excellent opportunities for home practice.

5) Role playing

Role playing provides more opportunities to practice classroom content at a higher level. Children may act out historical events or other subjects of study in the classroom. Again, during all of these activities, students are responsible for self-monitoring their sound production.

6) Puppet shows

Puppet shows provide more opportunities to practice classroom content at a higher level. Children may act out stories from the classroom. As mentioned previously, self-monitoring of sound production remains the responsibility of the students.

7) Fishing pond

Many SLPs are familiar with magnetic fishing ponds. Discovery Toys sells one with letters on each fish: <http://slpath.com/abseas.html>. This set can be utilized for a fun randomized activity. After a child catches a fish (corresponding to a letter), he/she looks at the chart below to determine which level to practice. For example, if a child catches "A," he or she says two sentences with the target sound. For "D," the child tells a story including the target. This activity encourages active participation from students and creates opportunities for massed practice.

A	2 sentences	O	5 words
B	4 words	P	4 sentences
C	5 sentences	Q	2 words
D	story	R	3 words
E	3 sentences	S	2 syllables (part of a word)
F	4 words	T	6 phrases (2-3 words together)
G	1 syllable (part of a word)	U	5 phrases (2-3 words together)
H	6 syllables (part of a word)	V	5 sentences
I	4 words	W	3 syllables (part of a word)
J	3 phrases (2-3 words together)	X	2 words
K	story	Y	story
L	4 sentences	Z	3 phrases (2-3 words together)
M	story	Shark	story
N	1 sentence		

SLPs can also download this chart at: <http://slpath.com/abseas.html>.