

Communication Disorders

The music education curriculum offers many opportunities to increase language experience and facilitate speech. A differentiation needs to be made between these two skills – language being *what* is said, and speech *how* it is said. Both depend primarily on the auditory skills of discrimination, memory, and sequencing, as well as the ability to physically produce a voiced sound.

Language Although language can be a factor in any music activity, song is clearly the most obvious source of language experience in music. Traditionally, music education curriculums were primarily devoted to building a repertoire of song material. More recently, curriculums have treated singing (along with listening, playing instruments, and moving to music) as one way in which basic music concepts can be experienced and, hence, understood.

Language acquisition includes two dimensions: *expressive* (encoding) and *receptive* (decoding). Expressive language is necessary to express one's thought through the spoken or written word. Receptive language includes both the ability to understand the spoken word and the ability to comprehend language in written form. Children described as having aphasia are usually those in whom the developmental process has failed to produce expressive language. Although a significant number of children have difficulties with receptive language, the inability to express oneself through the spoken word is far more common. Since language is the most abstract of all developmental tasks, it is frequently a secondary handicap to conditions that affect cognitive functioning, such as retardation and neurological impairment. People with hearing impairments have difficulty developing language because of the physical inability to hear speech sounds accurately. Children with perceptual handicaps may have language deficiencies because of their inability to discriminate, remember, and sequence speech sounds.

Children who are language handicapped may:

- Lack the ability to coordinate breath and vocal mechanisms
- Lack vocabulary
- Speak in incomplete sentences
- Demonstrate inaccurate speech rhythms and inflections
- Have poor articulation of speech sounds
- Be unable to remember speech sounds
- Mix up the syntactical order of words in a sentence
- Mix up the order of syllables within a word
- Use incorrect word endings or tenses, and make other grammatical errors
- Demonstrate language development significantly below the norm

It should be emphasized that while one child seldom exhibits all these problems, a language handicapped child will *consistently* demonstrate a cluster of them. A word of caution should be made about overreacting to any problem other than failure to develop language at all. Syntactical and grammatical errors,

articulation problems, and dysfluency are all considered perfectly normal during certain stages of the developmental process.

If one considers the natural developmental sequence of language in infants, it is apparent that the child spends many months vocalizing before being ready to verbalize meaningful speech sounds. This time is mainly spent learning to listen and attach meaning to sounds that are heard. Gradually the infant begins to experiment with reproducing some of these sounds. It is during the vocalization period that the muscles of the mouth and tongue are conditioned for speech, the breath control increases, and the child learns to reproduce, with accuracy, speech sounds heard. Random vocal sounds eventually develop into sounds characteristic of the pitch and rhythms of the native tongue. It is interesting that the acquisition of the mother tongue follows the same developmental sequence in every country. When children lag in language development, it is wise to keep in mind the importance of the preverbal stage and focus goals on those skills needed to *prepare* for verbalization before attempting specific verbal goals.

Language does not consist *only* of vocabulary. Although vocabulary is certainly a prerequisite to both *receptive* and *expressive* language, a child will never become competent in communication skills without mastering the syntax and grammar of language. Children need many opportunities to use language to express their needs and thoughts, no matter how limited their vocabulary may be. The child who uses one-word statements or responses exclusively must be guided to the next level of expressive communication. Two-word sentences may consist of subject/verb, verb/object, subject/object, or any of these with a modifier. The three-word sentence, which includes subject, verb, *and* object, is usually achieved between the ages of two and three in the average youngster. In language-handicapped children, this milestone in language development will undoubtedly occur much later, perhaps even years after most children have reached it.

Many song collections for children are largely made up of folk songs, which in their authentic versions often are not models of modern English grammar and syntax. Children still in the developmental language stage are unable to recognize these grammatical differences, and it may be wise to change the words to more acceptable forms or look for other material. Similarly, children of ethnic backgrounds should never be given the impression that their speech or language is inferior or incorrect. Linguists have studied the speech and language patterns of certain black American groups, for example, and confirm them to be bona fide dialects. The child who learns English at home that is characterized by speech patterns and word forms that are slightly different will learn, as many Europeans have, when and where each is appropriately used. Our job as educators is to ensure that each child develops language skills for communication with as many people as possible.

Sign language can be used in singing with children who must rely on this medium for language communication. In fact, some songs can become useful action songs when signs are added, and they give a very beautiful visual effect. However, care should be taken to select only songs in which signs can convey

adequately the rhythm and meaning of the words without compromising correct grammar, tenses, or word endings. Teachers should also be aware that children who sing and sign will undoubtedly focus more attention on watching the teacher sign than on listening to the teacher's voice. The use of sign language is quite limiting when teaching music concepts and skills. As one would expect, there are very few signs that relate to music terminology (beat, rhythm, melody, and so forth). As sign vocabulary is constantly being revised and expanded to meet the language needs of the deaf in modern society, perhaps we can look forward to more relevant music vocabulary in the near future. It is also worth mentioning that sign language is sometimes used as a teaching aid with *hearing* children in whom neurological or emotional disorders have hindered language and speech development.

Speech Poor speech articulation can be due to physical problems (e.g., teeth and mouth formation, oversized tongue), motor involvement, or auditory perception problems. Vowel sounds are usually secured in the vocalization stage. When consonants are added, speech sounds begin to emerge. The first consonant sounds to develop during infancy are the plosives, such as *b* and *p*, *along with m*, which often is first produced accidentally when the baby vocalizes a vowel with a sucking reflex. High-frequency sounds (e.g., *s*, *t*) and blends (*sh*, *ch*) may come as much as a year or two later. The timetable and sequence of development are often quite different for a speech-handicapped child. To avoid confusion, the music teacher must be cognizant of the specific goals and procedures of other professionals working with the child in this area (e.g., speech therapist, classroom teacher). Once it is determined which speech sounds are the focus of attention, music activities can be selected that utilize these same sounds.

Songs with nonsense syllables and foreign language texts are good sources for articulation experiences. However, if children have serious *language deficiencies* in addition to articulation problems, careful consideration should be given to the propriety of using these songs. If children are unable to comprehend that nonsense syllables are speech sounds without meaning or that language sounds differ from country to country, it would seem wise to avoid these materials.

Speech of the deaf is most often characterized by a lack of pitch variance, by improper rhythm, and by misplaced accents. In English, stressed syllables are most often accompanied by a higher voice pitch. Try saying the following, accenting the underlined word. "I know!" "Oh, no." "Oh, oh." In each case, the tendency is for the voice to rise in pitch on the underlined word. Singing helps children discover and extend the pitch range of their voices, but unless this opportunity is afforded to the hearing impaired while they are still young and developing speech, it is unlikely to become part of their natural speech pattern. Experiences in practicing the melodies and rhythms of speech are definitely beneficial for all children and are essential for the hearing-impaired child. The Orff approach to music education, which combines speech, music, and movement, has been very successfully used with speech-handicapped children.

To summarize, language and speech difficulties often accompany other handicapping conditions. Language skills include both the ability to understand language and the ability to use language in expressing thought and ideas. Meaningful speech is preceded by a period of vocalization in which the physical and aural aspects of speech are developed. Music activities in general, and singing in particular, offer many excellent opportunities to aid language development and speech articulation in children. Specific goals include vocalization, breath and muscle control, verbalization, receptive language, expressive language, and accuracy of speech rhythms and inflections.