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Turning On The Spotlight

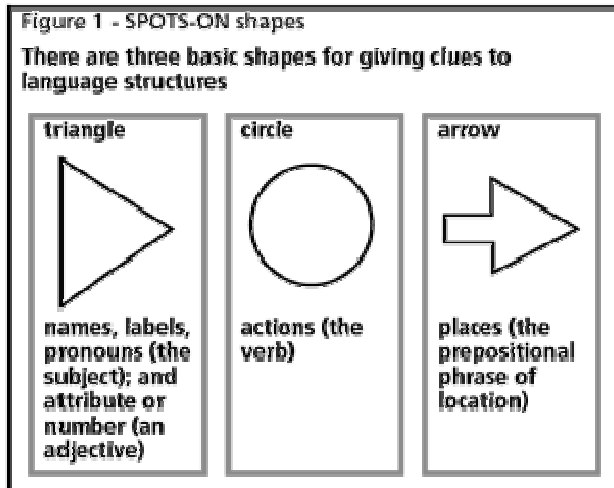
*In 1984, **Carole Kaldor** devised a multisensory approach to language intervention, now known as the **Spotlights on Language Communication System**®. Although it has been modified for children with various difficulties, it was initially used to meet the functional communication needs of adults with dysphasia. Here, Carole and her colleagues, **Janet Tanner** and **Pat Robinson**, highlight its benefits and applications. Although they focus on children with specific language impairment, the principles and methods are just as relevant for adult neurological and adult learning disability client groups.*

The Spotlights on Language Communication System® [SPOTS-ON] has gradually developed over a 16-year period to meet the functional needs of giving and receiving messages. It was first used to assist dysphasic adult clients and then children with mild learning difficulties and language impairments. The idea behind the 'Spotlight' stems from using different coloured beams in a special torchlight as if it were a spotlight on part of a scene in a theatre, but instead used on pictures or actions. Central to the approach is the use of basic shapes (figure 1).

For several years the system has been further modified for use with 4-7 year olds within a school for children who have speech, language and communication impairments, some of whom may have characteristics associated with the autistic spectrum.



This has involved making use of the knowledge gained from the work of authors in different disciplines to devise, support or confirm aspects in the system.



Responsive

Aims are within an overall approach that is responsive to the child from moment to moment, and therefore highly flexible in its rules. In general, the system aims to:

- make it possible for children with specific language impairment to make use of their various and successful modes of communication and of their creativity

and

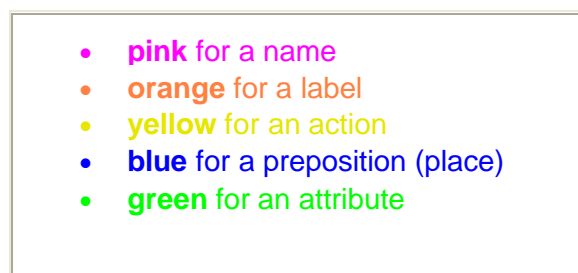
- encourage the children to use their memory, mainly through their five senses - and especially through their actions and sense of touch.

More specifically, it aims to

- enable young children to become proficient in understanding and using verbal language in its early stages of development for their own thinking, learning and communication
- provide a link between their process of pre-verbal thinking - which is highly personal and can be pictorially based - and adult verbal language used around them
- provide a consistent method to help children become aware of verbal language structures as a means of communication.

These colours to indicate different linguistic information (figure 2) were developed by Philip Conn (1973) and, because this was the system used at Meath School in 1988/9, these colours have been superimposed onto the shapes. The coloured shapes are presented in three forms: see-through acetate; card; outlines. The different coloured acetate shapes are used as hand-held overlays to act as spotlights. These can capture a child's involuntary visual attention to create a potential shared focus. The focus could be an actual object or action, a pictured event or, later, written language.

Figure 2 SPOTS-ON colours (after Conn, 1973)



The acetates can be used anywhere as spotlights; for example, a yellow circle

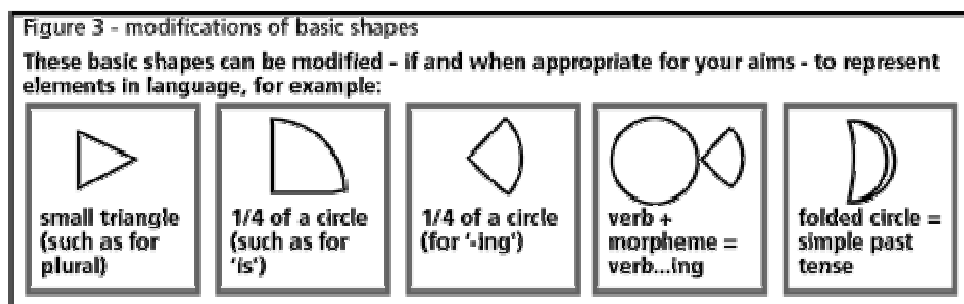
- held over a child's hand as they stir cake mixture so they focus on their action
- used as an overlay on part of a child's drawing, or
- on a video of the child at play.

The overlay can be used to create a sense of anticipation and the use of a specific coloured shape can provide a clue for the child to map meaning onto a visual scene. The coloured acetate shapes provide a primary linking device in the system, making it possible to make connections between the event and the verbal language.

Concrete and practical

The coloured card shapes are used in tasks to assemble (construct) the verbal message in a linear form from left to right. They also act as a clue, when the card is blank, that information is needed for the formation of their verbal utterance. This information can be supplied by using an actual object stuck onto the card, a symbol, a photo, a drawing or the written word. In this way, the child can practise abstract verbal tasks in highly concrete and practical ways using the 'words' on the different card-shapes.

Outlines of the shapes can be drawn with coloured pencils as non-verbal clues indicating to the child where on the paper to place or stick the 'words'. A further stage in the process could be for the child to draw or write their 'word' within the outline. The outlines for a sentence or phrase indicate the number of different elements that make up the verbal utterance. It is not expected in the early stages that a child will be able to recall or work on the whole of the utterance and its morphemes (figure 3). From the adult's knowledge of the child's abilities, it is possible to indicate in a non-verbal way the number of elements he should attempt, and Paget Gorman Signing supports the words and the grammatical morphemes. The child's holophrases can be set out in the elements of a sentence so they can begin to see the separate words, or that their words may be combined.



The materials provide links for the question/answer situation in a social setting where the answers are unknown. The question is formed initially so that the answer is in the picture and therefore easily accessible.

The activities involved in the SPOTS-ON system are also designed to assist a child in understanding the passing of time in a repeating weekly cycle. Within the week events are also linked so, for example, on Thursday we revisit Wednesday's play activities as together we watch the video of them at play. This also provides the child with an opportunity to see their moving image and relate the action to a verbal label. These are just examples of what we do in class 1, and users of the system should make use of the materials, at a level of presentation appropriate to their particular client. Further, the life in the shared communication between therapist and client benefits from the therapist thinking up their own activities.

From the child's own impetus, through the adults' responses, communication is established. Together they work towards sharing a verbal world. The work of Lowenfeld and Winnicott and others in early infant and childhood development has confirmed and informed the approach,

especially in the early tasks of SPOTS-ON. The children have a tenuous connection with our communications and our language system so we need to be flexible in our responses in order to keep life continuously linked together and meaningful for the children. Initial interaction may be of very short duration.

Readiness

Goleman (1996) refers to readiness for school which he says "depends on the most basic of all knowledge, how to learn." He quotes a report from the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs and lists seven key 'ingredients' of this 'crucial capacity'. They are:

1. confidence
2. curiosity
3. intentionality
4. self-control
5. relatedness
6. capacity to communicate
7. co-operativeness.

In our management and general approach we accept these 'ingredients' are vital if the child with speech and language impairment is to access our curriculum. As staff we all acknowledge all of the time, as others do, that the children need to develop this school readiness and reach the emotional maturity that will help make the curriculum accessible to them.

SPOTS-ON has two key phases:

- I. Noticing words (pre-verbal to verbal experiences)
- II. Using words (combining, slicing and dicing).

I. Noticing words

Trevarthen (1993) states that "emotions... are necessary in the process of qualifying, creating and connecting meanings." Lowenfeld (1934) discusses the "emotions, which lie behind any successful education." Among the emotions she suggests are

- curiosity
- the desire for power...and control (in the sense of mastery of self and of all that surrounds the child)
- an interest in sensuous experience (by which she refers to an interest in and understanding of sensorial experience, processing that which comes through the five senses, and through this, the relationship with the environment)
- a desire to be looked at (and every child passes through a stage where they might be saying "watch me, look, I can do this").

The SPOTS-ON approach attempts to incorporate recognition of these areas for development. Curiosity is key. We work on building it and then hope to facilitate the child's own creativity, curiosity and responsibility in the learning process. So, the importance of a child's multisensory experience, actions and, in particular, the sense of touch and movement, useful to the child at their stage in development, are acknowledged by visiting an adventure playground. During the sequence of tasks, we give the children materials to touch - objects sent in from home as a reminder of events at the weekend. Power is given to the child in their efforts to find the power of words through their creativity. The desire to be looked at is satisfied in the one-to-one sessions and video viewing of each child at play.

Lowenfeld includes in her hypothesis on emotional development that "A child thinks with his hands." Therese Woodcock (tutor, Lowenfeld project) suggests that the child "touching" their "words" as they assemble them may be an important factor in their engagement in the task. Actual objects may be used to represent a word; for example, the train ticket from a recent journey stuck onto the relevant noun triangle.

Spensley (1995), referring to children with autism, writes of a "disjunction of looking and listening." She believes that these are "the two principle receptive modes, which, coming together, produce the 'big bang' of recognition and response." Keen et al (2000) refer to impairments in the use of eye gaze in children with autism, and difficulties in the scenario where pointing is a communicative act. These matters are addressed using the see-through acetate in an attempt to gain attention - perhaps holding it at eye level to capture gaze - and lead on to shared communication.

In the individual tasks of SPOTS-ON, the adults need to sit and listen to the children one-to-one as they communicate about the pictures they are creating. This provides the notion that 'listening' exists. The preparation of the child's picture, their record of experience, is all-important in the effort to reach words. It is possible that the experience of the child's involvement in creating their own visual memory of an event (a picture) triggers their own words. It has meaning to them. The picture is a memory of their multisensory experience, transformed in the process of producing their own drawing.

In using SPOTS-ON with children, it has been noted in more than one child's effort that the memory of their own movement often appears to have been the motivation for their drawing. One child returned to class with the wooden spoon he had used in cooking and spontaneously produced a picture resembling a circle scribble - his picture of 'stirring'. He first touched the relevant object which aided his memories of it. He provided a visual record of the action in memory, and the drawing then provided the focus for verbal communication to take place. In the subsequent task, the child used his sense of touch to assemble the sentence.

II. Using words

Once the child has begun to make links from his idiosyncratic, pre-verbal world across into our social, verbal world, work on combining words and "slicing and dicing" (Tomasello & Brooks, 1999) language can begin in earnest. SPOTS-ON provides the language-impaired child with help to analyse and synthesise language from the first words and holophrases to complex spoken or signed utterances, including the morphemes and, later, written sentences.

Starting as SPOTS-ON does with the child's impetus, it is possible to share the scene from the child's viewpoint. The materials with symbols or words on are used to create shared reference points. The scene can then be shared from different viewpoints, at first on separate occasions.

The Construction Grammar approach, as outlined by Tomasello & Brooks (1999), moves from this analysis of scenes and describes a developmental process in which the child uses specific and concrete linguistic phrases to partition their scenes. With practice and experience children are able to generalise discovered patterns in novel utterances. It is believed that the SPOTS-ON system provides the extra multisensory support and clues that speech and language impaired children need to discover for themselves the patterns in verbal language and then to make their own use of this knowledge in communication. The aim is that verbal language becomes the child's preferred and spontaneous means of communication.

Future focus

There are three main avenues to explore further when using the SPOTS-ON approach with our children:

1. The Verb Island Theory
2. Discovery, creativity and play
3. School readiness and the National Curriculum.

1) The Verb Island Theory

This theory may have some impact upon the current 'linear' order, left to right, in which we present SPOTS-ON to the children. As soon as the child shows interest in his actions, is it better to first present the verb on the page and then work on what comes before and after it? Lowenfeld's view on personal experience - preverbally - is that all in an event is fused together. Children have often focused on their own movement in producing a drawing, perhaps beginning to tease apart this fusion in memory. These factors may suggest reaching the linear form of language through the verb first.

2) Discovery, creativity and play

Tomasello & Brooks (1999) refer to the child needing to "discover" the syntactically relevant semantic features of the verb. They also refer to the fact that "the child's own generalisations across verbs in creating constructions is a central question in the study of children's syntactic development." It is in the nature of play that you are discovering and creating. In play, a child is also thinking, reasoning, problem solving and organising. Lowenfeld (1991) states that "play is to a child, work, thought, art, and relaxation, and cannot be pressed into any single formula. It expresses a child's relation to himself and his environment, and, without adequate opportunity for play, normal and satisfactory emotional development is not possible." Winnicott (1974) states that "it is in playing and only in playing that the individual... is able to be creative." Perhaps these acts of creativity and discovery in one mode, play, can be transferred to another: discovering and creating verbal language. This may suggest more activities where the child's multisensory play actions are the focus.

3) School readiness and the National Curriculum

At the same time as attempting to make good use of the National Curriculum for school-aged children, we also often need to respond to a child whose emotional maturity does not yet fully meet descriptions for school-readiness. This is not to say that school readiness is not within the children's grasp, especially if we concentrate further on those ingredients related to emotional intelligence and referred to by Goleman (1996), Lowenfeld's thoughts on successful education, and Trevarthen's ideas (1993) of "creating and connecting meanings." Another aspect to investigate further would be Winnicott's description of "the capacity to be alone in the presence of another" (1990) which presumably, if developed sufficiently, could make it more swiftly possible for a child to participate in classroom activity since, in the classroom, one is required constantly to work alone in the presence of others and then to slide from absorbed individual thought back into 'receiving mode' in order to listen.

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Resources

1. Carole Kaldor and Pat Robinson are planning a workshop on the SPOTS-ON system. Details from I CAN, e-mail training@ican.org.uk, tel. 0870 010 7088.
2. John Lea (1970) *The Colour Pattern Scheme - A Method of Remedial Language Teaching* from Moor House School, Oxted, Surrey.
3. The Lowenfeld Projective Play Therapy part-time MSc program is run jointly by The Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld Trust and Middlesex University. For a prospectus, contact Sue Barnard, 52 Barton Road, Haslingfield, Cambridge CB3 7LL, tel. 01223 872291. For further information, contact Susie Summers, Course Coordinator and speech and language therapist, tel. 0207 267 7439.
4. Paget Gorman Signed Speech (1994) - Details from Paget Gorman Society, 2 Dowlands Bungalows, Dowlands Lane, Smallfield, Surrey RH6 9SD.
5. Transparent paper in many colours from Lee Filters, Central Way, Walworth Industrial Estate, Andover, Hampshire SP10 5AN, tel. 01264 366245, fax 01264 355058, e-mail sales@leefilters.com.
6. The Squiggle Foundation exists to study and cultivate the tradition of D.W. Winnicott F.R.C.P. Administrator: 33 Amberley Road, London N13 4BH, tel. 0208 882 9744, fax 0208 886 2418.

Reflections

- Do I base language work on actions and sensory experience to build memory?
- Do I make sufficient use of video as a method of reinforcing learning?
- Do I have methods for capturing the dynamic nature of language, particularly verbs?

A child draws herself and her birthday cake.

Although she speaks mainly in single words, using SPOTS-ON we can produce a sentence together

– "I have 6 candles on my birthday cake."

