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HOW IMPORTANT IS ORAL LANGUAGE COMPETENCE?

by Robert Shaw

In *Justice Reflections 45 - JR229* (2017), Alan Forsyth makes some very salient points about the demands for oral language competence, which are often enforced by prison authorities to the detriment of prisoners. For example,

- cognitive-behavioural psychology, which underpins most of the programmes available in English prisons, assumes oral language competence at a level beyond that of many prisoners;
- the reports presented for parole hearings are written for a professional audience with little concession to those who lack oral language competence; so prisoners can have difficulty representing themselves at a parole hearing because they lack the oral language competence to respond constructively to the reports.

Non-verbal communication

However, in my experience, non-verbal communication is far more significant in the day to day lives of prisoners and, other than for alexithymic prisoners, is often the way in which prisoners are able to negotiate and explore feelings for which they do not have words.

It is also the most commonly used form of communication among experienced prison officers as well as being one of the ways in which prisoners assess other prisoners (Shaw, 2006). Ironically, orally competent prisoners who are unable to interpret non-verbal communication often come off worse in day to day prison interactions even through they may shine in offending behaviour programmes because of their oral language competence.

However, story-telling is not necessarily a purely oral/auditory phenomenon. It might be if you are listening to a story on the radio or on a tape or CD but, if you are in a group listening to a member of the group telling their story, you do not just get their story, you get all the non-verbal communication which goes along with their telling the story and, unless it is so gripping that everyone in the room is focused on the one speaker, you get all the non-verbal communication which the group is giving in response to the story.

The power of the story in a Sycamore Tree or other project is not just the story but all the non-verbal information that comes along with the story. 'Philip', whom Forsyth mentions, had difficulty not because of oral language competence but because he did not understand the non-verbal communication.

A prisoner with poor oral language competence may not be able to understand all the words which a fellow member of the group uses; but most will recognise and be able to relate to the emotions and the non-verbal communication which the speaker expresses.

Contextual information

Young children learn their first words and phrases along with a context and will often repeat these words and phrases correctly in that context - to the joy, and occasionally the horror, of their proud parents. But, at first, they have no idea of how to use those words outside that context and it may be several years before they become sufficiently language competent to be able to use words learnt in one context in another.

Young children and people with mental illnesses often become very sensitive to contextual information because that helps them to negotiate the world more effectively than oral language. We should not be surprised that, for many prisoners who lack oral language competence, contextual information plays a much greater role in their understanding of the world.

For these prisoners, the problems come when they are expected to use oral language competence to tell their story. This is not just a problem for prisoners; Eklund (2016), studying scientists' beliefs about faith, found that scientists whose first language was not English who could converse extremely well in English when discussing physics or biology had difficulties discussing thoughts, feelings and emotions unrelated to their scientific studies. 'Igor', whose first language was not English, probably had exactly the same problem as some of the most gifted scientists on the planet when it came to discussing their own thoughts, feelings and emotions in a language in which they were unaccustomed to talk about these matters.

Developing skills

While most of us gain oral language competence in childhood, this depends, like our development of social and emotional skills, on our interactions with our parents or carers (Ladd, 2005). Those who only learn language skills from their peers never become as competent as those who learn them from their parents or other adults in their families.

Eklund, E. H. (2016, 17 November). Do scientists believe in God? Results from an eight-nation study. http://www.elainehowardecklund.com/videos/.

Forsyth, A. (2017). A reflection on restorative justice, oral language competence and psychological disability. Justice Reflections 45(299), 1-5.

Furman, W., D. F. Rahe, and W. W. Hartup (1979). Rehabilitation of socially withdrawn preschool children through mixed-age and same-age socialization. Child Development 50, 915-922.

Grainger, R. (2013). Educating Anglicans: investigating groupwork in the Church of England. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic.

Hofstede, G. (1998). Masculinity/femininity as a dimension of culture. In G. Hofstede (Ed.), Masculinity and femininity: the taboo dimension of national cultures, Chapter 1, pp. 3-28. London: SAGE.

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Tannen, D. (1986). That's not what I meant. New York: Morrow.

Winnicott, C. (1970). Foreword. In E. Pruden (Ed.), Groups: Annual Review of the Residential Child Care Association, pp. 1-2. Boston Spa: RCCA Publications.

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not say what they mean; rather they intersperse their speech with non-verbal clues as to what they mean. Many misunderstandings arise because people hear the words but do not pick up the non-verbal clues or because they come from different backgrounds where the non-verbal clues are different or mean different things.

Arguably a significant number of offences, particular serious ones in a domestic context, arise not because of deficiencies in oral language competence but because of difficulties in listening to others. Improving prisoners' oral language competence is not the solution as Euripides so dramatically shows in his play, Medea, written nearly two and half thousand years ago. Both Medea and Jason are orally extremely competent but Jason certainly isn't listening to what Medea is saying and the play ends in much the same way as many domestic disagreements end today.

Conclusion

Oral language competence may be overvalued in relatively 'masculine' cultures such as the UK (Hofstede, 1998) and those living in similar 'masculine' cultures may need to do more in prison to encourage the development of oral language competence as part of supporting a prisoner's rehabilitation but, in enabling a prisoner to understand and come to terms with their offending and reduce the risk of their re-offending, non verbal ways of expressing thoughts and feelings and a focus on listening to others and understanding their points of view is far more important in the end than oral language competence.

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So prisoners who had a less satisfactory upbringing are likely to lack both oral language development and social and emotional skill development; one or other can adversely affect their ability to engage positively in programmes that involve oral language competence.

However, these aspects can interact in very different ways depending on the prisoner and their experiences.

For example, a severely dyslexic prisoner learned to read (albeit very slowly) because a series of prison staff formed positive relationships with him, encouraging him to use the skills he had and praising him for his achievements. He has now learned enough to be able to manage the demands of the Internet in relation to the expectations involved in applying for work and to sending and receiving emails.

However, an assessment of his oral competence would show that, on the one hand, he is very orally competent in the manipulation of words - with a ready wit based on linguistic jokes which are often very subtle and clever - and, on the other, his traditional working class upbringing has left him orally incompetent at exploring feelings, other than in jokes and witticisms that he will only share with someone he knows who can use them to interpret and respond to the underlying emotions.

So he has found a means of using his oral language competence to explore feelings and emotions but not in a way which would be acceptable, even if it was possible, in a group of people who do not really know him.

Another prisoner with a more deprived background has willingly participated in groups and thrown himself into understanding prison life to the extent that, socially and emotionally, he is more astute than many intellectually better endowed prisoners. However, he has never been seriously encouraged to develop his oral (or written) language skills and so has great difficulty understanding or responding in appropriate oral ways to 'professional' prison staff. But he is very astute at picking up the non-verbal signals they emit and he knows when they are up to no good as far as he is concerned. So he responds non-verbally to them in ways which he cannot explain orally and misunderstandings abound!

However, we can take heart from two facts: relationships with adults other than our parents who encourage our oral language skills can have a positive effect on us and group experiences can be more effective at healing deficiencies caused by earlier experiences than later individual relationships (Furman et al., 1979; Dunn and McGuire, 1992).

Using groups

We need to do three things which are very difficult in the task-focused world in which most of us operate:

- accept that a group can have a beneficial effect on a prisoner even if it does not achieve its primary purpose; even those who lack oral language competence can benefit, perhaps in ways unrelated to the purpose of the group, from the sharing of the non-verbal communication in a group;
- differentiate those groups which require oral language competence to contribute from those which can achieve their aims without any need for oral language competence;
- ensure that those who lack oral language competence have access to an open-ended group in which they can observe more competent use of oral language to explore thoughts and feelings.

There has been a long history of groups which do not require oral language competence in the treatment of disturbed children (Winnicott, 1970; Bettelheim, 1974). One feature of these groups has been that children with less developed skills in any area can see both the adults and more mature children using skills, which may be less developed in themselves, successfully in the group. Since the most effecting teaching involves modelling with a verbal explanation (Argyle, 1994), groups which model desired behaviour while discussing why it is desirable are likely to be the most effective in changing behaviour.

However, such groups have been open ended. The children and young people join them when they enter the programme and leave when they leave the programme. They do not run for a fixed period. Since many prisoners have had unsatisfactory upbringings, a series of short term programmes may do no more than mimic the short term relationships which prisoners have experienced as they have been pushed from pillar to post by their families or from prison to prison by the criminal justice system.

Like children and young people they would benefit from a long term group in which the staff and other prisoners remained relatively stable over a period so that they can see similar positive patterns of behaviour modelled and explained more than once. This is not to devalue short term programmes but to recognise that short term programmes are only effective in the context

of a significant longer term change for the participants; if nothing else in a person's life has changed for the better and continues to change for the better after the short term programme has ended, the short term programme will, at best, have a short term effect (Bronfenbrenner, 1974a,b).

Since the benefits of any short term group will be lost if it is not supported by a longer term change in a person's situation, one way in which Christians can make such a change is to provide a long term group in which a person is accepted, valued and not asked to do anything to demonstrate their eligibility for the group. Whether this is provided through a choir, a prayer group, a bible study group or a discussion group that is open-ended and which prisoners can attend without restriction throughout their sentence or whether it is provided by a group from the local church or the Prison Fellowship coming in each week is probably immaterial for the prisoner.

Such a group needs to be structured in such a way that, on the one hand, oral language competence is not needed to participate and, on the other, there are models of oral language competence sufficient for prisoners to be able to develop their skills over time. I certainly encountered chaplains and external groups which provided this type of group - but not in all the prisons in which I resided.

Non verbal expressions of feeling

One of the most effective ways I have found of stimulating discussion about feelings has been to use art as an introduction, asking people to describe their experiences not in words but in images or diagrams. These can be far more powerful ways of communicating thoughts and feelings around relationships than words, both because others in the group will see things in these artefacts which the author has not done and because the author can use them as a starting point for exploring feelings which they find hard to put into words. Grainger (2013) provides a comprehensive account of the variety of groups, and examples of creative groups, that might be used in a Christian context.

Listening

It is now nearly forty years since Dale Spender (1980) drew attention to the over-emphasis on 'fluency' in speaking rather than on listening and over thirty since Deborah Tannen (1986) pointed out that people normally do