Iconicity of Symbols

Limitation of the Representational Hierarchy

Language may be represented using aided or unaided symbols.

- **Referent**: refers to the item or concept that the symbol represents.
- **Iconicity**: refers to the association that an individual makes between the symbol and its referent.

Unaided symbols include the use of facial expressions, gestures, and vocalisations.

Aided symbols include the use of objects, photos, single-meaning and multi-meaning pictographs, and alphabet letters or words.

People’s understanding of a symbol depends on various factors including the individual’s age, cognitive skills, language skills, cultural and life experiences as well as the characteristics of the symbol itself, such as its iconicity. It is suggested that symbols representing highly desired items are more easily learnt than those representing less desired items.

**Representational Hierarchy**

The representational hierarchy suggest that the stronger the association between the referent and the symbol (iconicity), the easier it is for the individual to guess or recognize the meaning of the symbol. Hence objects and photos representing items or concepts are easier to learn than pictographs.
Limitations of Representational Hierarchy
The representational hierarchy may lead us to the assumption that objects or photos need to be introduced to AAC learners prior to pictographs. This poses limitations to aided language learning as explained below:

- Using objects or photos can make it difficult for the learner to associate the symbol with more than one referent. For example, it may be difficult to associate a photo of a wooden chair with all other chairs that may be of different material, size, and colour.

- Choosing objects or photos leads to an overemphasis on noun vocabulary in AAC. Action words or verbs are difficult to represent in photos showing people performing the action as the photo itself has such strong association with the person, for example a man or a woman.

- Difficulty representing a wide range of word types, such as verbs, prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions, restricts the vocabulary of the aided language learner and his/her ability to compose sentences (grammatical skills). It also restricts the communication development of the learner as using nouns only often leads to choice-making communication only.

- Core vocabulary, words we use across several settings, such as help, more, there and go, are hard to represent using photos, they are referred to as non-picture producers.

- Photos may sometimes be distracting for children. In addition people with autism may find it difficult to filter out the irrelevant elements of the photo, such as the background. Individuals with cortical visual impairment have difficulty looking at photos due to their complexity: details and colour.
Language is learnt through exposure and modeling in natural meaningful situations. AAC learners are not expected to “guess” the meaning of symbols, hence the iconicity of symbols should not be a determining factor.

The usefulness of the symbol is much more important. Using pictographs allows for the development of communication, grammar, and rich vocabulary. Individuals beginning to use AAC can learn the meaning of pictographs, even those that are abstract, through adequate modeling in meaningful contexts. Current research shows that individuals of various ages and disabilities can learn pictographs via aided language stimulation.

References:

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