How to…choose stimulus words for phonological awareness intervention

When choosing stimulus words for phonological awareness activities, it is important that the child can fully benefit from the teaching without being distracted or hampered by additional processing required for complex or inappropriate stimulus words. Carefully chosen words can aid progress; carelessly chosen words can sabotage a well planned activity.
When choosing stimulus words for phonological awareness intervention take into account the following information. You will also find it helpful when choosing stimuli for phonological output and motor speech tasks.

Words:
When choosing words it is important to think about how the child will understand the word, especially as single word stimuli don't have context to aid meaning. A lot of real words for adults are actually non-words for children because they are late-acquired or specialist words. This is often exaggerated for children with speech and language disorders because they may have a limited vocabulary compared to normally developing peers. See some of the age of acquisition resources below to help you choose appropriate words.

Syllables:
Always think about the structure of the syllables and the way the stress falls on them when you say the word in a natural way. Don't over stress weak syllables because this distorts how the word sounds. Be careful that a syllable junction doesn't create a consonant cluster that you didn't expect e.g. 'ice-cream' can turn into 'I scream', 'handbag' into 'hambag'. Beware! Make sure you decide how you are going to split your word at the outset. Is it ca-ter-pi-lar or cat-er-pi-lar or cat - er- pil-ar? If the child says the word in a different way to you e.g. /filəm/ instead of /film/ it is advisable to use their pronunciation so that they aren't confused (it's OK if you are!).

Initial sounds (and final sounds):
Choose the sounds you are going to focus on carefully. Do not pick late developing sounds or sounds that have less phonological significance in English, for instance, choose /m/, /d/, /k/, /s/ not /l/, /r/, /w/, /h/ or /j/. So don't choose 'lemon' but do choose 'sun'. It is usually a good idea to start off with sounds that the child can say easily and as they master the skill you are teaching, move onto sounds they find difficult. This way they can concentrate on acquiring the new skill before applying it in a more difficult context.
Start off with CVC words e.g. sun, mat, mouse, moon, and increase the number of syllables when the child has mastered the skill at this level.

Always choose single consonants and avoid consonant clusters in any position in the word, unless you are specifically working on them or the child is using them accurately in their speech. You can choose voiced/voiceless pairs e.g. /p/, /b/, but be careful when choosing sounds such as /t/, /k/ which can be common substitutions. This can confuse the child and you may not know what sound they are signalling. Unless you want to work on these contrasts as an additional learning goal, in which case including these contrasts in phonological awareness activities may support output changes.

Deletion:
For syllable and sound deletion activities always say the word and the sound out loud in the most naturalistic way possible. If you add extra vowels (especially /ə/) or end up with a syllable that you can't easily say e.g. purple, pasta, apple, choose another word.

There are links on Blackboard in your clinical modules for websites for wordlists and age of acquisition.

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