What are conversation skills?

Conversations are essentially social interactions where ideas are shared between two or more people. They appear effortless, are generally spontaneous and unplanned (Pridham, 2013) but are governed by unwritten rules that are largely undefined and often only recognised when the exchange is inappropriate (Twachtman-Cullen & Twachtman-Bassett, 2014). In conversations, the most important language domain is pragmatics, or how language is used in social contexts (Landa, 2000). An exhaustive list of the individual skills needed for a fluent conversation does not currently exist as the purpose of a conversation determines the skills needed. The ability to initiate an exchange, introduce, maintain and develop a topic, repair conversational breakdown, take turns and interrupt are all skills a fluent conversation partner should be able to demonstrate seamlessly.

Skills related to initiating, shifting and maintaining topics are particularly nuanced. A speaker constantly makes judgements to determine whether what they are intending to say is relevant and subtle cues from a conversation partner need to be recognised and interpreted to ensure conversations remain cohesive. Asking questions or commenting on a conversation partner’s topic indicates interest but asking too many questions or making too many comments may become intrusive.

Participants in a conversation also need to determine the amount of “common ground” with each other and be able to recognise misunderstandings and repair breakdowns when they occur. Other skills include the appropriate use of inflection or tone which may serve to change what is said from a comment to a question or communicate expression and emotion.

Why are conversation skills important?

In childhood, impaired conversational abilities may limit the opportunities for play, leading to fewer friendships in adolescence when social interactions become more complex. In adulthood, language deficits and social awkwardness may have an impact on the ability to form and maintain intimate relationships. Many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) want to be engaged in a romantic relationship (Strunz et al., 2017) but adults with autism are less likely to be married or in a long-term relationship than their typically developing cohort (Howlin & Moss, 2012). Neurotypical partners of individuals with autism often report difficulties in gaining an emotional connection during conversations (Wilson et al., 2017). Conversational abilities may also have an impact on the ability to secure and maintain employment. During the interview process, applicants need to process questions,
provide responses and engage in reciprocal interactions with the prospective employer. Once employment is obtained, ongoing social interactions with coworkers contribute to the perception of value by colleagues and the employer. Research into the work experience of individuals with ASD indicate that social engagement and interactions with colleagues in the workplace is an area of difficulty (Baldwin et al., 2014). Although they were competent at their job, isolation and the inability to engage socially meant they were “unsuccessful” at work (Müller et al., 2003).

Are the right skills being targeted?

The conversational competence of people with ASD has been documented and examined in a considerable number of studies. These studies predominantly report on the atypical features of individuals with ASD and may compare them to either typically developing peers or groups with other disabilities. Differences between people with ASD and others were not as large as expected and the main difference was in areas related to maintaining a topic such as providing on-topic responses, and providing novel information that prolonged a conversation. Since language samples included in the studies were mainly taken in contrived contexts it is difficult to determine if these differences present an impediment to social interactions in everyday exchanges.

Responses to an online survey (Sng et al., 2020) into the perceptions of conversation partners of people with ASD showed that the behaviours that were rated as most problematic, such as difficulties expressing emotions and providing relevant contextual information, were not the ones commonly addressed by interventions. Interventions usually focus on what clinicians or practitioners see as deficits; however, the survey results indicate that from the perspective of conversation partners, some conversational deficits such as inappropriate or abrupt initiations, lack of eye-contact and reversal of pronouns do not appear to pose a barrier to social communication.

What kinds of interventions are used to teach conversation skills and do they work?

Conversation skills have been taught through a number of approaches. Broadly, these are peer-mediated interventions (PMI), social skills programs and pragmatic language interventions. PMIs engage age appropriate peers, rather than adults, in order to provide opportunities to practise social interactions in a natural context. Peers are taught how to support conversations and encourage their conversation partners with ASD to initiate and engage in an interaction. These interventions have been successful in increasing the number of conversation exchanges and showed evidence of generalisation to novel peers (Bambara et al., 2018).

Conversation skills may be taught as part of a social skills program where skills are broken down into individual components for teaching purposes. Discrete skills that have been successfully taught include initiating and ending a conversation (Tse et al., 2007). Other researchers have reported success in teaching conversation skills more generally with social skills programs but a review by Rao et al. (2008) concluded that the skills taught were not consistently defined, making comparisons difficult. Conclusive evidence of the efficacy of the programs, therefore, was not possible.

Pragmatic language interventions are based on the principles of applied behaviour analysis (ABA) where conversation skills are again broken down into teachable units, modelled and
practiced. Fundamental to the principles of ABA, feedback and positive reinforcement are also provided. Examples include the use of video modelling where students watch and imitate specific conversation behaviours modelled by themselves or another person and the use of verbal or text prompts and reinforcement to encourage students to extend a conversation by asking follow-up questions. Compared to video modelling interventions, scripts are particularly effective in teaching conversation skills (Sng et al., 2014) and audio-based scripts are more effective than text-based scripts. Although it is good practice to systematically fade text-based scripts (e.g., cue cards or embedded text cues in the environment), there is research indicating that the rapid extinction of text-based scripts does not have adverse effects (Yamamoto & Isawa, 2020). Audio-based scripts are particularly useful for non-readers and may also provide a model for the correct use of expression.

Summary of findings

In terms of research, the operational definitions of the components of conversation are poorly defined. Research is often “stand-alone” and researchers do not appear to build on one another’s work. This makes evaluation of the efficacy of interventions difficult. From a conversation partner’s perspective, commonly researched conversation skills such as abrupt initiations and poor eye-contact are not reported to be problematic in natural contexts.

Advice for teachers

Video modeling and scripts (audio and text based) have been successfully used to teach components of conversation skills to students with autism. It would be prudent to consult likely conversation partners before making decisions about the types of conversation skills taught. The skills included in social skills programs are usually determined by clinicians and researchers but the skills taught may not be those valued by peers or families. Teachers may consider teaching skills that conversation partners report as impediments to natural social interactions, such as the expression of emotions, providing sufficient context and telling cohesive narratives. Further, it is suggested that conversation skills are taught in natural contexts as conversations are inherently spontaneous and unplanned thus teaching opportunities are present throughout the day.

References


