

PEER SUPPORT: AN INTERVENTION TO FACILITATE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME AND PRIMARY LANGUAGE DEFICITS

Abstract:

Peer support is an intervention tool to give additional support to struggling students. Students with Asperger Syndrome often have deficits in language and socialization. Students pursuing a standard diploma entering secondary school are usually scheduled into a foreign language class with only tier 1 supports in place.

Statement of the Problem

By the time students reach secondary school, if the deficit still poses the language and socialization difficulties that require special education services (eg. speech and language therapy), there is a high likelihood that the students will find second language acquisition a particularly challenging endeavor. Most four-year universities require two years of a foreign language for admission. With primary language deficits and inadequate social skills to seek out assistance, students with Asperger Syndrome are more likely to fail to meet this requirement.

While there is limited research on intervention tools to address this need, peer support has shown to be effective in many areas of students overcoming challenges (Calhoun, Al Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007). In addition, the lack of appropriate socialization skills typical in students with Asperger Syndrome (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2009) make it likely they will not self-advocate for assistance as typical students would.

Teacher intervention, remediation, and other tier 1 supports commonly used to address this problem may not be adequate for these students. Research on whether this

intervention would increase the skill acquisition of these struggling students has been found. However, peer support has been studied and shown great increases in skill acquisition in other struggling students (Grauvel-MacAleese & Wallace, 2010).

Research question

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the effectiveness of a peer support program in foreign language classes on increasing skill acquisition for students with Asperger Syndrome and primary language deficits that also have atypical socialization skills.

Literature review

Peer support was used in one study to facilitate skill acquisition in the domain of reading for English Language Learners (ELLs) (Calhoun, Al Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007). In this study 76 first graders in a dual language program utilized PALS trained to support the ELLs using scripts. Comparison of the 3 teachers who used this peer support system to the 3 in the study who did not, peer assistance showed to be a useful intervention tool.

Ellis, March, and Craven (2009) investigated the success of an Australian peer support model in the area of transition to secondary school. These researchers used survey reports following 930 7th graders over a two-year period to assess this model on aspects of self-concept, life effectiveness, coping, and perception of bullying. Results supported the use of peer support in transition to high school.

Another study used peer support to regulate off-task behaviors in students diagnosed with Attention deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Grauvel-MacAleese & Wallace, 2010). In this study, 3 children, ages six, eight, and ten were matched with same

age peers during homework time. Peers were trained and fitted with vibrating devices to signal them when to re-direct the ADHD student. Results of this study showed immediate positive responses for off-task behaviors during homework time in an after school program.

Methods

Students in their senior year of high school, who have mastered the second language classes required for admission to universities were placed into classes with freshmen students with Asperger Syndrome and primary language deficits after training on peer support techniques. Supporters were chosen for academic success as well as traits of appropriate socialization and willingness to aid struggling students. The students in need of interventions in the foreign language classes were chosen for academic success in other areas and were recommended by their speech and language pathologist as needing and likely to respond positively to socialization for improving academically in the specific subject area.

The supporter assists the teacher by reducing class-wide remediation using one on one or small group re-teaching techniques. The students also meet for thirty minutes two to three times per week during the first half of lunch to socialize on the skills being taught in the class, feelings about the skill acquisition process, and other areas of concern. The grades of the Asperger students are recorded during the second semester every four weeks as a percentage out of 100 to show skill progression in comparison to month-to-month gains during the first semester.

(Expected) Findings

Students who showed difficulty during the first semester of a foreign language class show immediate improvement in socialization with peer mentors and a steady increase in requesting assistance in areas of difficulty arising in the curriculum. This increase in socialization will likely show an improvement in grades through improved skill acquisition through interventions with the peer supporter in and out of the classroom. Regular communication between supporters, teachers, and the researcher will likely aid the intervention through adaptation and specific issues arising during the semester.

It is likely that grades may not increase drastically in the initial phase due to students' response to the change in structure, the deficits inherent to students with Asperger syndrome, and the first semester material that may not have been learned. Once the students are accustomed to the new structure and their mentors, socialization is likely to increase as well as comfort level to express academic concerns between the participants. This should lead to an increase in second language acquisition and improved grades for the supported students after the initiation phase. It is expected that this phase may take a few weeks to translate to noticeable improvement in student grades.

Implications

This study should provide data to support further study into the area of peer support as an intervention tool for students with Asperger Syndrome. This study focuses on the need for evidence based interventions in second language classes for these students, however, the expected success in this challenging area should pose questions about the possible expansion of peer support to aid these students in other areas as well as

students with other disabilities. Future studies would be needed to provide evidence-based structures for training and implementation of the program.

References

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