

Listen, Hear!

by Geoff Plant

The Barrier Game

Introduction

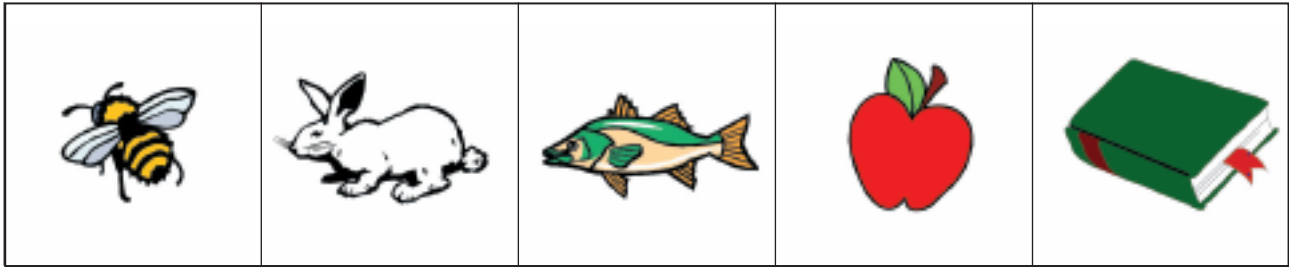
At the end of 1979, my wife and I were visiting Denmark. It was meant to be a vacation, but there were several facilities investigating various aspects of hearing loss that I wanted to visit. One of these was The Total Communication (TC) Laboratory, where some very interesting research was being conducted into Danish Sign Language. I don't remember many of the specifics of that particular visit now, but I do remember that it was at the TC Laboratory that I first saw the Barrier Game being used. I saw videos of pairs of children using Sign Language while seated on either side of a low screen. Each child had the same set of pictures with one of them responsible for providing instructions that would enable the other to place a series of pictures in a designated order. The moment I saw the technique being used, I realized that it had many applications for my work with deaf children and adults, and I couldn't wait to try it out with some of my clients.

The Technique

When I first started to use the Barrier Game, I was surprised by how easily I could adapt it to meet the needs of individual clients. I had decided that postcards would be a suitable material for this approach, and I had two of each – one for me, and one for the client. I would select several matching pairs of cards, and give one of each, in turn, to the client. I would place them in a line, from left to right, in front of the client, and we would spend some time talking about each of them. I quickly became aware that the technique was a valuable source of conversational training. The client had a reference – a card – and we were able to discuss it in some detail. The card provided the context for a conversation, and, as a result, the client usually found the task fairly easy. I found that cards I collected on trips to various places served as excellent starting points for conversation, and I acquired the habit of buying postcards wherever I went. The result is a huge collection that I use on a very regular basis.

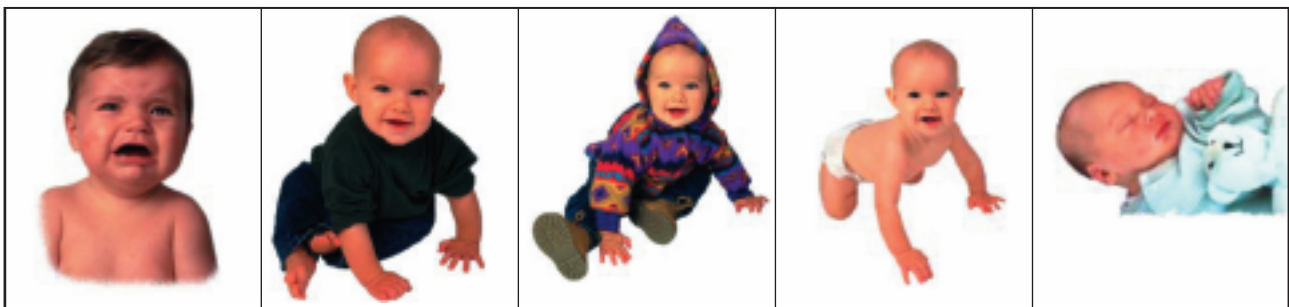
After I had given the client her/his set of around four or five cards, and we had finished discussing them, I would say, "I've got the same set of cards as you, but mine are in a different order. I'm going to tell you what my first card is, and I want you to move yours to that position." I would then say, "Number one is the _____," and get the client to move that card to the correct position. At first, I used a low wooden barrier against which I could prop the cards, but over time, realized it wasn't really necessary. Now I just hold my set of cards in my hand, and rearrange the order as often as I need. I sometimes write the numbers 1 – 5 on the table for the client, but again, it's usually not necessary. If the client gets the first item correct, I move on and give her/him the order in which s/he should place the remaining cards.

This is a fairly simple starting point, and over time I can make it progressively more and more difficult. For example, if the client is able to complete the task outlined above easily, I might present two or three cards at a time. Remembering the items, and the order in which they occurred can be far more challenging for many clients.



For example, using the set of pictures above, I might start by instructing the client that, “Number 1 is the bee,” “Number 2 is the rabbit,” etc. If s/he can perform the task, I’ll make it harder by saying, “Number 1 is the apple, and number 2 is the fish,” “Number 3 is the book, and number 4 is the bee,” etc. Then I can make it even more difficult by *describing* rather than naming the item. For example, “Number 1 is something that you read,” “Number 2 is something that lives in the water,” “Number 3 is something that hops,” etc. Again, I can make the task more difficult by presenting more than one item at a time.

Making it Harder



Here’s another set that’s a little more difficult. In each picture there’s a baby, so I have to describe the picture in some detail to allow the client to work out which one is the target. For example, I might say, “Number one is a baby. The baby is happy. The baby is crawling.” “Number two is a baby. This baby is not happy. He is crying.” “Number three is a baby. I don’t know if this baby is happy or sad, because he is asleep.” “Number four is a happy baby. He is sitting on the floor. This baby is wearing a T-shirt.” “I think you know which baby is number five!”

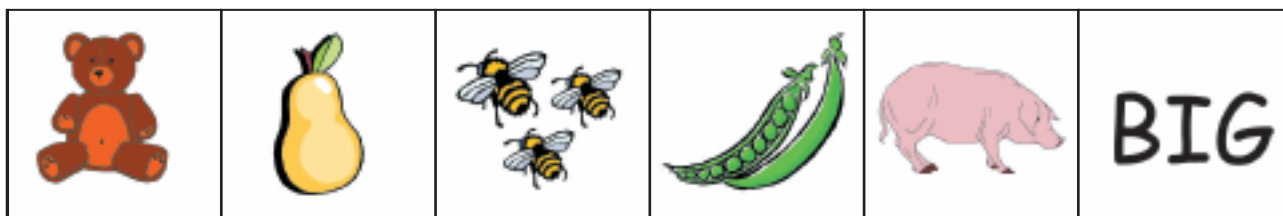


This next set could be quite easy, or very difficult, depending upon the type of information provided for the client. If I just name the animals – lion, elephant, giraffe, camel, and gorilla – many clients will find the task easy to complete, but if I describe them, it could be very difficult.

“Number one is an animal (*they are all animals*). It’s a large animal (*they are all large*). It comes from Africa (*they all come from Africa*). It doesn’t eat meat (*this applies to three or four of the animals pictured*). It has a long trunk that it uses to pick up things. That’s right, it’s the elephant.”

“Number two is also a large animal from Africa. This one doesn’t eat meat either. It lives in the desert. It’s sometimes called ‘the ship of the desert.’ It has a large hump on its back. It’s the camel.”

I can also use cards that present several examples of a listening contrast with which a client is having difficulty. Here's an example contrasting the initial consonants [p] and [b]. It might be easy for the client to tell the difference *between* the three pairs – bear/pear, bees/peas, pig/big – but s/he may be unable to differentiate between the items in each pair. For example, if I present the word “peas” as the stimulus, the client may know that it's either “peas” or “bees,” but have difficulty identifying which of the two was presented.



Written Materials

With adults, and as children get older and acquire reading skills, written words can be used more and more as the contrast items. Some deaf people have difficulty perceiving the difference between [s] and [sh], but there's only a limited set of contrasts that can be presented pictorially. Using written words opens up a much larger set of potential items. I've provided some examples below. Again, the client may be able to hear which pair has been produced, but have some trouble knowing which of the two was the stimulus. If the client has difficulty hearing the contrast, s/he can use the items

SAID	SHED	SIGH	SHY	SO	SHOW	SIP	SHIP	SEE	SHE
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to practice appropriate repair strategies. For example, the client could ask, “Did that word begin with “s” for snake, or “sh” for sheep?” The use of repair strategies can be quite intimidating for many people who are deaf, so it's best to practice them in clinical sessions, before starting to use them in everyday situations.

Using Toys as the Stimulus Items

I have a large box of soft toys that I often use for training with younger children. Many of them are Beanie Babies®, but there are also characters from Winnie the Pooh, and other cheaper toys I've found, on special, in stores. I sometimes line up a selection of these toys on the table, and then have the child listen to, and follow my instructions. One set that I often use with younger children consists of a sheep, a baby, a ghost, a cow, and a bee. I use these items in a song I wrote about in an earlier issue of “Listen, Hear!”¹

I see a sheep, BAA, BAA, BAA!
 I see a ghost, BOO, BOO, BOO!
 I see a bee, BEE, BEE, BEE!

I see a baby, WAH, WAH, WAH!
 I see a cow, MOO, MOO, MOO!
 Who is the best? ME, ME, ME!

It's very simple, but provides good practice in the production of the point vowels [a], [u], and [i]. I use the toys as props while I'm teaching the song, and I can also use them for listening practice.

¹ Plant, G. 2002. Using rhythm and rhyme with children. “Listen, Hear!” No. 1/2002

For example, I can ask the children to “Show me BOO, BOO, BOO,” or “Where is WAH, WAH, WAH?” etc. I can also put them in the Barrier Game format. “Number one is the one that goes BOO, BOO, BOO,” “Number two is the BEE, BEE, BEE.”

Using the Barrier Game for Speech Production Training

Up till now, I’ve concentrated on the use of the Barrier Game for speech perception training, but the technique can also be used to help improve the speech production skills of children, teenagers, and young adults. When I’m using the technique with these groups, I often “switch” roles and have the client be the speaker, while I become the listener. This can be a very useful demonstration to a client that her/his speech can be understood, albeit in a relatively restricted context.

I often use the set of toys mentioned above, and have the child produce the sounds in different orders for me. I then move the toy to the desired place in the row. If the child’s speech skills are limited, I can ask her/him “Which one is number one?” “Which one is next?” etc., so that s/he can concentrate on just producing the appropriate sound.

I can also deliberately choose items which target speech items that create difficulty for an individual child. For example, the items shown above, contrasting [s] and [sh], could be a useful means of determining whether a child can *produce* these two speech sounds so that I can hear a reliable difference.

I’m also very conscious of the importance of the six most frequently occurring consonants in American English – [t], [r], [n], [s], [d], [l] – and can make up some cards that contrast these in meaningful words. There are some examples given below. You’ll notice that the second two sets only differ by the presence or absence of a final [z]. At first, I use only one set of words,

TIP	RIP	NIP	SIP	DIP	LIP
TOE	ROW	NO	SO	DOE	LOW
TOES	ROSE	NOSE	SEWS	DOZE	LOWS

but as the child becomes more proficient at the task, I can use two, or even three sets. The child should be encouraged to present the items for identification using a simple carrier phrase such as, “Number one is **sip**,” “Number two is **lip**,” etc., or “Move **dip** to number three,” “Move **nip** to number four,” etc.

The items used can also be at the phrase and sentence level. For example, I might make up a set of cards contrasting common expressions such as, “Hello,” “What’s your name?” “How are you?” “What’s the time?” “Where have you been?” “Are you OK?” etc., and ask the child to tell me the order I should set them out on the table.

Conclusion

The Barrier Game is a very useful technique, and I’m sure there are many other variations, but I’ve run out of space. As always, I would welcome any feedback, suggestions, etc. Please write to me at hearf@aol.com.