Services for Hearing Loss and Distance Delivery: Tips for Educators

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Collaborating, researching best practices, and providing training on how to teach a student with hearing loss is part of my role as an Education Specialist at Special Education Service Agency (SESA). On a scheduled trip to a school in rural Alaska, I experienced an unexpected encounter with a speech and language pathologist (SLP) who was working with a student with hearing loss primarily via tele-intervention services from outside of the state. Routine progress monitoring needed to occur in person, hence her long trip to the village. As a result of our chance meeting, it became clear a solution to provide intervention by the teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing for our students would be important to consider. In hopes of sharing her experience with other school sites, the SLP was asked her to provide strategies or a recommended process for this type of service. Due to our rural nature, this is a frequent question asked to special education teachers, SLPs, and general education teachers in the school district. A few tips and strategies were offered; however, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team needed more information.

Back in the office, a general search using Google Scholar and several other databases produced over 9,000 articles related to key word searches of: tele-intervention, telepractice, along with deaf and hard of hearing. Filtering out the articles related to medical procedures, and identifying those related to teaching students with hearing loss produced a total of 16 articles. From these pilot studies, case studies, and results from programs using this service model it was apparent that future research on the effectiveness of telepractice for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing is needed. However, there were some re-occurring tips that could be shared. Even though strategies identified in this search were targeted for students learning to listen and speak using an assistive listening device (i.e., hearing aid or cochlear implant), some could be adapted for students receiving support services via manual communication (i.e., American Sign Language, Signed Exact English, or Pidgeon Sign Language).

The Need for a Consistent “E-Helper”:
Several articles mentioned the need for a “e-helper” or “facilitator” who would be with the student consistently since the service provider is only visible on the computer monitor. One teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing in rural Alaska had mentioned she struggled with providing telepractice services because there was a different paraprofessional assigned to the student each day. Much of the time was therefore spent helping the paraprofessional understand the routine, rather than being able to be spent in instruction for the student. Without the support of a consistent “e-helper,” intervention effectiveness decreases.

Suggested responsibilities of an “e-helper” include: (McCarthy & Crutchley 2011)

- Ensure that the student arrives and departs from the designated intervention room.
- Check the student’s assistive listening device (i.e., hearing aid or cochlear implant) to see if it is working at the beginning of each session.
- Support the session by sitting with the student since the service provider is only present via the computer monitor.
- Help the service provider schedule sessions and conferences that do not conflict with the school schedule (i.e., assemblies, school-wide testing, etc...)
- Maintain and set up materials that the service provider sends before the session.
- Know how to redirect the student and assist with behavior management during the session.
- After training, the “e-helper” is able to assist in troubleshooting equipment.

**Plan, Plan, and Plan Some More:**
From my experience as a SESA specialist conducting informal interviews with service providers in rural Alaska, and reviewing the current deaf and hard of hearing literature, a reoccurring theme appeared - collaboration. Planning and collaboration is essential both before and after each telepractice session.

**Before:**
- Have the experts train all involved staff on the technology selected for distance delivery.
- Train the “e-helper” or “facilitator” on how to inspect the student’s hearing aid or cochlear implant to see if it is working.
- As the service provider, identify the school year objectives, and share them with the entire team.
- As the service provider, determine the best mode(s) of communication for the school staff and family to participate in telepractice lessons and resulting strategies for implementation in the classroom and at home (i.e., email, cloud based software, mail, phone conference, etc.)
- Send the lesson before the session; typically to the e-helper.
- If an emergency or fire drill is to occur, determine who and where the student will go.
- Decide if you can record the sessions to securely share with staff and family for progress monitoring.
- If the connection is dropped on the video screen, plan alternate activities for the student to do with the e-helper.
- Duplicate materials for both the student and the service provider. One suggestion would be to mail all materials used for the next 3 weeks to the school. (Houston, Behl & Walters n.d.)

**After:**
- As a team, discuss the progress during sessions (e.g., phone conference, emailed progress notes, strategies shared via secured recorded sessions with family or staff).
- Post lessons for the staff to review.

**Digital Teaching Strategies:**
Learning to listen to a person’s voice from the computer’s speaker is a challenge for students with hearing loss. It is even more challenging when the audio and video are not synchronized due to bandwidth issues. Besides increasing access to high speed Internet services in remote areas, here are some low-tech strategies:
- Both student and teacher need a visual signal that represents repeating or rephrasing needs to occur for the listener.
- If signaled, have the “e-helper” repeat the instruction for the student.
- If a lag happens between the audio and video signal, take frequent pauses in your speech.
- If the software allows for messaging, provide visual support for audio that is lagging with the video. This can be used as positive reinforcement when the student is completing the task.
- Incorporate visuals (i.e., flash cards, board games, iPad apps, picture cards) into the lessons either through the built-in-camera or a document camera.

It is necessary to practice of strategies during telepractice to determine what will be beneficial for a student with hearing loss, such as those in rural Alaska. However, telepractice is not for everyone. Collaboration by all the IEP team members is necessary to determine student goals, routine, and progress using this model for any student with hearing loss.
References:


