

The role of communication partners in conversations with people with learning difficulties

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Abstract

This study looks at what happens in informal conversations between three people with learning difficulties (intellectual impairment) and a range of non-disabled partners. It takes a participatory approach using data collected by the participants with learning difficulties who chose their communication partners; these partners included family and staff who were paid to support them. The study uses descriptive statistics to highlight areas where there was apparent asymmetry in the conversations. Conversation Analysis combined with features taken from Systemic Functional Linguistics is then used to look in detail at some of these aspects. Important features identified include turn design, repair, and the use of evaluative language and the contribution of non-verbal aspects in particular eye gaze, gesture and the use of artefacts. The study highlights possible strategies for assessing and supporting more effective and equitable interaction for those with learning difficulties and communication impairment and identifies features that should be considered when training professionals working in the field of learning difficulties.

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