Collaboration Between Researchers, Speech and Language Therapists and SLT Students in Slovenia

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Abstract: Collaboration between different partners like researchers, speech and language therapists, students, and teachers is self-evidently considered to be a good-thing, and the ways in which all partners involved can benefit, this should be discussed. Given the time and resources such dialogues require, it is worth asking why dialogue is important. We all know that the benefits are many. Despite this, there are also serious obstacles to collaboration, we have to think about. Speech and language professionals, researchers, scientists, and students are all important people in the educational system, but how can their different perspectives be represented equally? And what choice and opportunities are available in a country like Slovenia?

Stressing the importance of making connections between theory, research, and practice can seem almost self-evident; we can just say axiomatic. This paper is positioned to provide some information and background context for the researcher and practitioner gap. We will discuss what we have done in our country in the field of initial education of speech and language therapy, how we started to collaborate with academics (researchers and theorists from other scientific disciplines), speech and language therapists, and students. If we consider the academic, practitioner, and student views from a variety of disciplines, we might gain some insight into the reasons for such a gap and learn how others have dealt with it; or we can find our own way to collaborate effectively. Similar disconnections between researchers and practitioners are evident in many different disciplines. For example, in 2005, Ferguson wrote, “a wide gap still exists” between research and practice. He also noted that “sharing knowledge between researcher and practice in a structural manner is highly challenging but can be rewarded, inspiring and interesting for all parties involved.”

Within the last decade, as with medicine, there has been an increased interest in the ways in which an individual comes to have the appropriate knowledge and skills to function as a qualified speech and language therapist. As a professional subject, speech and language therapy has developed substantially by drawing on other academic areas to bring together the complete discipline. Psychology, biomedical sciences, linguistics, and neurology have formed the basis of the epistemology from which clinical application has been derived, but this has been a complex route to the unified subject of speech and language therapy. During this process, the profession has been teaching its students to learn academic and profession material in a higher education context. Academic aspects of the
degree can be taught from within the institution; higher education can only serve the needs of these students if the professional experience modules are met outside. Professional education is a notably different process from that of higher education theoretical degree, and although the institution can provide teaching in professional methods, the application has to be found within the actual work context. This is what makes teaching a qualified course in speech and language therapy so complex.

Providing education that covers both theoretical understanding and practical experience clearly needs differing educational contexts and it was recognized that there is a major distinction to be made between explicit and tacit knowledge (Brumfitt, 2004). Explicit knowledge is about the objective, public, theory-driven knowledge that students bring to the clinical/placement setting, whereas tacit knowledge is knowing about the professional role, based on experience. To understand the complete process of professional activity we have to help our students. We know that lecturing does not provide the means for students to have a deep understanding of the work-based context. As a response to this, other approaches to teaching have been developed, which are reflected in the educational techniques used today. All speech and language therapy qualified courses now include a mix of lecture-based teaching, workshops, tutorials, and seminars on the university site; along with the learning and teaching acquired in the clinical placement.

Some writers have emphasize what they see as the artificial gap between knowledge, skills, and attitude and theory and practice. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (Baxter, 2004) also integrate theory and practice into a distinction between "knowing how” and "knowing that.” The ‘knowing that’ can refer to facts and rules, but the ‘knowing how’ is acquired from practice. Issues dealing with a researcher-practitioner gap are neither unique to one area nor are they a recent phenomenon. These issues are prevalent in fields such as education, healthcare, computer science, nursing, political science, psychology, sociology, and social work. Hirschorn and Geelan (2008) outlined four approaches to closing research-practice gap which are devided into four categories: (1) fix the practitioners, (2) fix the researchers, (3) fix the research, and (4) create research translation roles (pp. 10-11). Fixing the practitioner means finding ways to “improve access to and use of research by practitioners” (p.10). Fixing the researcher means holding them accountable for providing more direct information to teachers by publishing in teacher journals and presenting to teachers at conferences. This does not mean that all academic research must be practitioner oriented, but when it is, the researcher should be responsible for ensuring delivery to teachers in an understandable way. Fixing the research means pursuing different types of research, moving away from “generalized, decontextualized knowledge” to “descriptions of and prescriptions for practice” (p.11). Educational research has increasingly made use of different qualitative methods by way of “deemphasizing the quantitatively defined standards of validity and reliability and replacing them with standards of verisimilitude (plausibility to practitioners) and utility (usefulness to practitioners)” (p.11).
Collaborative Background of Development of Slovenian Speech and Language Therapy Education

In Slovenia, there is only one institution where the initial training - education for speech and language therapists takes its place and this is the Faculty of Education, which is a part of University of Ljubljana. In this paper I will try to briefly sumerise and discuss some aspects of recent developments of speech and language education. Speech and language therapy education in Slovenia has been changed recently with the Bologna process. It is important to understand that there is a specific situation about education for speech and language therapists, because the academic study programme used to be implemented within the area of Special education and rehabilitation at the Faculty of Education and it is the only academic study programme for speech and language therapy.

The markedly complex and contextual background and various conceptual elements deepen and expand the problem of reforming the study program and have to be understood from the general educational system in Slovenia. In 2010 with the Bologna process, we became an independent study program, but until then we were a part of special education and rehabilitation study program. At the moment we have three generations of speech and language students. And it is for the first time in history to have so many students in speech and language therapy education.

Speech and language therapists in Slovenia (like in Europe) may work or practice in different sectors and settings, according to the socio-economic circumstances in their own country. Kogovšek, Ozbič, Košir, Novšak Brce (2014) stressed that speech and language therapists have a range of generic and subject specific competencies, which prepare them for work in a variety of settings. They work in the education sector (special units, mainstream schools which integrate children with disabilities, kindergartens), in the health sector (particularly in: hospitals, therapeutic and rehabilitation centers, special centers for children with disabilities, nursing homes, special medical-educational institutions,...), in social welfare institutions and in the area of prevention. Different Ministries (Ministry of Health; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport; Ministry of Labour, Family, Social affair and Equal opportunities) finance the different institutions where speech and language or teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing are working. Different legislation allow that speech and language therapist can work as individual therapists, as mobile teachers (giving individual support), health workers, counseling workers, and as teachers for the deaf and hard of hearing. Because of all these facts, we have created the curricula that will cover both areas: deafness and speech and language therapy. With this we have analyzed certain and very important conceptual starting points of reforming the academic study program of speech and language therapy education according to Bologna Declaration. Specific conceptual elements enable the understanding of the development of new and independent and autonomous speech and language therapy study programs.

With the new form of speech and language program we tried to provide continuity and upgrade of professional speech and language subjects and modules. We have also tried to include all communication disorders and tried to create single units for clinical practice. We have also discussed about this with our speech and language experts – practitioners. The speech and language therapy study program enables the student in the time of his/her studies to obtain a set of essential competencies required to perform his/her work in...
different institutions in different areas, in accordance with the socio-economic characteristics of the country in which he/she works. The student’s work can be performed in the field of education (different continuum of programs and institutions), health care, social security and prevention (Kogovšek, Košir, 2005).

The graduate is also involved in teaching as well as in the rehabilitation process of speech and language disorders at all ages. Such work involves direct contact with children, pupils, students who have difficulties in speech and language communication and listening, as well as their parents, carers, teachers and significant others in their lives. By raising awareness and influencing society in which we live, as well as concrete assistance to deaf, hard of hearing individuals and individuals with difficulties in speech and language communication enable their optimal functioning in the process of education and the environment where they live.

Therefore, it is very important how and in what manner the children in classes of education and how to train future professionals to work with them and in what way it is organized teaching and learning in institutions of education. It is necessary to provide appropriate assistance and support to all this aspect concerned.

Given the importance of communication in the modern world, any disruption in communication makes it difficult, if not impossible human active participation in society. Studying speech and language therapy in Slovenia trained professionals to work with the prevention, detection, diagnosis and treatment of the problems of human communication, thereby understanding the processes and functions associated with the perception and production of speech and language (verbal and/or non-verbal) regardless of the form of expression in writing or orally, kinetic (sign language translation).

**Conclusion**

New study courses and curricula are being developed according to international guidelines and standards for the education of speech and language therapists; referring explicitly to the work of the International Association of speech and language therapy all over the world (Kogovšek, Košir, 2005). International and inter-institutional cooperation is being encouraged and increased. As it was mentioned before we are still working on our curricula and trying to change it in accordance to the evaluation of the programme. That is why we constantly cooperate with our practitioners, academics, and students about the quality of studying as we try to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Our faculty also participated as a leading partner for Slovenia in the project NetQues (Network for Tuning Standards and Quality of Education Programmes in Speech and Language Therapy/Logopaedics across Europe (NetQues), a multilateral academic and professional network). The NetQues project was undertaken with support from the European Union. This project has been co-funded by the European Commission’s ERASMUS Lifelong Learning Programme through the Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency. The three-year long NetQues project (2010-2013) was initiated and coordinated by Comité Permanent de Liaison des Orthophonistes-Logopèdes de l’Union Européenne – CPLOL, the EU umbrella organization of speech and language therapy professional associations. The project has brought together University/Higher education and professional associations from across all EU countries, in a multilateral academic and