Developing Communication

HyeKeung Seung is improving the language skills of children with autism

BY VALERIE ORLEANS vorleans@fullerton.edu

children with autism find social interaction a challenge; for the 50 percent of those who are non-verbal, that challenge seems insurmountable.

HyeKeung Seung should know. As associate professor of human communications studies, Seung’s research focuses on helping those children and their parents to communicate. Presently, she is working on language development with children who speak 50 words or less.

“I see these children three times a week,” she said. “I work on teaching them vocal sounds through play.”

Starting with simple sounds — “ma,” “mu” and “me” — Seung tries to teach children that simple consonant and vowel sounds can be translated into words — “ba” for ball, “bu” for bubbles and so on.

It’s very labor intensive,” said Seung, who is assisted by undergraduate students and the children’s parents. “We videotape the sessions to show progress. We also train parents so they can continue the exercises at home.”

So far, parents report that the participating children are vocalizing more or attempting to make sounds.

“Some reports indicate that about 50 percent of autistic children are non-verbal,” Seung explains. “Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that individuals function at different levels.”

Some with autism are brilliant while others are almost incapable. Everyone with autism experiences problems with social skills, and inappropriate behavior — talking loudly in church, at the movies or in other public settings, or speaking in monotones. Some with autism are brilliant while others are almost incapacitated.

Everyone with autism experiences problems with social skills, and inappropriate behavior — talking loudly in church, at the movies or in other public settings, or speaking in monotones. Some with autism are brilliant while others are almost incapacitated.

“Even though we can’t see what others think, a ‘theory of mind’ approach allows us to infer their meaning based on their beliefs, desires and emotions,” Seung said. “Autistic children are socially naive. They often behave inappropriately and are teased by their peers. They don’t perceive the subtleties of communication.”

The researchers trace out language skills by showing the children drawings and asking them to interpret. For example, one set of cards shows children with a sandcastle, children with a ball, and children pushing a ball. The researcher takes the cards away and asks: “What was the boy pushing?”

They are also focusing on the differences between Korean speakers and English speakers.

“We’re trying to see if there are any linguistic differences for children with autism who speak different languages,” she said, adding that she and Lee will present their results at a conference in Korea next year.

A Look at Autism

Autism spectrum disorders are a group of developmental disabilities defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors.

One in 150 children in the U.S. has autism.

The number of people, ages 6 through 21, who receive services for autism increased from 22,664 in 1994 to 193,637 in 2005.

Autism was first diagnosed in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner.

Boys are four times as likely to be diagnosed with autism.

A child who is diagnosed with autism can be gifted or severely challenged.