ABSTRACT

This study, which focused on interactional and contingency aspects of the imitative process, examined the contributions of six normally developing and four moderately retarded children to imitative interactions with their mothers. The subjects were part of a group of 20 mother-child dyads who participated in an 18-month longitudinal study. Children were Caucasian, first or second born, from families of lower middle socioeconomic status, approximately 2 to 3 years of age and of similar language ability. Data on mother-child interactions were collected during home observations lasting 20 minutes. For each dyad, two samples containing at least 50 intelligible utterances were selected from the mean length of utterance (MLU) interval of 1.01 to 1.25. Children's verbal imitations were described in terms of their frequency, content, relative independence from mother behavior, and pragmatic functions. The linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of children's overall speech samples were described. Mother prompts for imitation were described in terms of frequency, content, explicitness, and relation to child's preceding verbal behavior. Mothers' responses to children's imitations were also described. Several linguistic measures were calculated to describe the children's language. These included MLU in morphemes, intelligibility, longest utterance, diversity of imitated utterances, and the number of novel spontaneous words occurring in the first 50 utterances of each sample. The linguistic diversity of mothers' prompts and mothers' MLUs was also calculated. Study results showed that normal children exhibited a slightly more diverse set of imitative responses but no differences in linguistic complexity of imitated speech were observed between the normal and handicapped samples. Generally, the handicapped children were less skilled, and differences between their mothers' behavior and the behavior of mothers of normal children were correlated to their skill level rather than simply to their developmental classification. (RH)
Imitation by Normal and Developmentally Delayed Children in Mother-Child Transactions

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Running Head: IMITATION IN TRANSACTIONS

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During the last 15 years, a considerable number of studies have sought to explore the function of imitation in language learning. These studies have generally been of two types: studies in which the role of imitation was examined by eliciting imitative responses from children and analyzing subsequent learning of the imitated content (Stewart, 1976; Connell, 1982; Corrigan, 1982) and studies describing naturally occurring imitation as observed during interactions between children and adults (c.f. Bloom, Hood & Lightbown, 1974; Stine & Bohannon, 1983).

For the most part, imitation has been examined from a perspective that assumes that imitation is strictly a child-based phenomenon. Imitation in general has been studied as an independent behavior rather than as a part of a behavioral transaction between mother and child. While children's imitations have often been described as selective, little attention has been given to the range of models or the consequences provided by the interacting adults. It is surprising that differences in children's frequency of imitation and selection of forms to imitate have not been examined in terms of the adult's contribution to the interaction given the general acceptance of a model of mutual influence in parent-child linguistic interactions (McDonald & Pien, 1982; Olsen-Fulero, 1982). Even studies reporting individual differences in the frequency of children's
imitations have failed to account for these differences in terms of the interacting adult's contribution to the interactions (c.f. Bloom, Hood & Lightbown, 1974; Ramer, 1976; Folger & Chapman, 1978).

Studies contrasting imitation by normal and atypical children offer a unique context for examining mother and child contributions to patterns of imitation. The few studies comparing naturally occurring patterns of imitation in normal and handicapped children have reported that handicapped children are as imitative as, or more imitative than, normally developing children at similar language levels (Rondal, 1980; Rosenberg, 1982). In other studies, mothers of handicapped children have been described as more directive in interactions with their children and more likely to prompt imitations than mothers of similarly skilled normally developing children (Maurer & Sherrod, 1984; Rondal, 1978). These independent findings suggest that both mother and child behavior may differ when the child is handicapped. Given this apparent difference, a systematic description of mother and child contributions to imitative interactions in dyads with normal and handicapped children may provide some insight into the ways in which partners influence each other's communicative behavior and influence imitation in conversational interactions.
The purpose of the current study was to examine mother and child contributions to imitative interactions in dyads containing normal and developmentally delayed children at a similar linguistic level. In general, we were interested in the interactional and contingency aspects of the imitative process more than we were interested in the strictly linguistic aspects. The coding scheme we selected was one in which mother behavior and child behavior were described pragmatically and in relationship to each other's behaviors. The description had three components. Children's verbal imitations were described in terms of their frequency, their content, their relationship to mother behavior (i.e. their relative independence from mother behavior) and their pragmatic functions. In addition, the linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of the children's overall speech samples were described. Mother prompts for imitation were described in terms of their frequency, content, explicitness, and relationship to the child's preceding verbal behavior. Mother responses to child imitations were also described.

Based on our previous comparative studies of normal and handicapped children interacting with their mothers, (Kaiser & Blair, in press) we anticipated that there would be differences in child behavior even within a small set of linguistically matched subjects and that these differences would be reflected in differences in mother's behavior.
Specifically, our previous studies had shown that handicapped children had smaller spontaneous vocabularies, and that their language was less linguistically diverse, pragmatically more limited, and less spontaneous than normal children's language during early stage I. If mothers were responsive to these differences, we predicted that mothers of handicapped children would provide models that were less diverse and more explicit than those provided by mothers of normally developing children.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this study were 10 children and their mothers. Four children were identified as moderately retarded; six children were normally developing. Assignment of children to normal and retarded categories was based on (1) comprehensive behavioral assessments administered, and (2) Bayley scores at the beginning of the current study. All subjects were caucasian, first or second born, and their families were lower middle SES. Subjects were part of a group of 20 mother-child dyads who participated in an 18 month longitudinal study. Subjects are described in Table 1. These were the same subjects and samples used in our preceding study and thus, considerable analyses of children's spontaneous speech were already available to us. In addition to the characteristics described in Table 1, it is important to note that:
1) Normal children were more verbal than handicapped children 
(N=108 H =73 / sample)
2) Normal children had larger spontaneous vocabularies than 
Handicapped children 
(14.25 vs 8.45 novel words/to utterances)
3) Normal children's upper bound was significantly longer 
than Handicapped children
4) The groups did not differ in terms of MLU
One important difference in mother behavior should also be 
noted: Mothers of normally developing children asked 
questions significantly more often than they prompted 
imitation as a means of getting a single word response.

Insert Table 1

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Procedures. Data on mother-child interactions were 
collected during home observations lasting 20 minutes. 
Mothers were instructed to interact with their children as 
they might during any time they played with them.

Selection of samples. Samples for the current study 
were selected from those collected in the longitudinal study. 
For each dyad, two samples containing at least 50 
intelligible utterances were selected from the MLU interval 
1.01 - 1.25. This very small interval was chosen so that
normal and handicapped children subjects might be matched as closely as possible.

Coding. Three levels of data coding were completed. 1) Verbatim transcriptions of mother and child verbalizations were prepared from the video tapes. 2) Each utterance was then coded using the pragmatic categories shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

3) Imitative episodes were selected from the coded transcripts, and mother prompts, child imitations, and mother responses to child imitation within these episodes were coded using the scheme summarized in Table 3. In addition to coded categories, several linguistic measures were calculated to describe the children's language. These included: mean length of utterance in morphemes (MLU), intelligibility, upper bound (longest utterance), diversity of imitated utterances, and the number of novel spontaneous words occurring in the first 50 utterances of each sample. The linguistic diversity of mothers' prompts and mothers' MLUs were also calculated.
Reliability. A total of 14 reliability checks were conducted for the 20 samples. Reliability for all categories of mother and child behavior reported in this paper exceeded 80%.

Results

The results are presented in three sections: 1) mothers' prompts for imitations, 2) children's imitations, 3) mothers' responses to child imitations.

Mother prompts. First, mothers of normal and handicapped children gave a similar number of opportunities to imitate when both implicit and explicit opportunities were counted. Mother prompts were coded in terms of their diversity (the number of different utterances that were modeled during a session) and the explicitness of the models provided. Explicit directives were specific mother requests for imitation (e.g. "say, zebra"). Mother statements that labeled objects or attributes of objects in the child's visual field were scored as "Encoding" and were considered as implicit prompts. These statements were typically brief and had the intent of drawing the child's attention to the object and its label. No child response was specifically prompted (and hence, child responses to encoding were scored as spontaneous imitations). The presentation of a discrete label-object pairing was presumed to represent an opportunity for the child to imitate that was different than
the opportunities available in the mother's ongoing flow of speech.

The results in Figure 1 indicate that mothers of handicapped children provided more explicit prompts for imitation than mothers of normally developing children. Thirty-two percent of mother prompts to normal children were explicit prompts for imitation while 66% of mother prompts to handicapped children were explicit (t(8) = p < .05). (When % was calculated based on all mother attempts to elicit verbal behavior). The mothers in two groups did not differ significantly in terms of diversity of prompts, although 71% of normal mother prompts were diverse while only 57% of handicapped children mother prompts were.

Child imitations.

Overall, normal and handicapped children differed significantly in the proportion of their total intelligible speech that was imitative. Sixty-five percent of handicapped children's speech was imitative while only 33% of normal children's speech was imitation (t(8) = 2.498 p < .05).
Normal and handicapped children differed in the relative spontaneity of their imitations. Eighty percent of normal children's imitations were spontaneous; 20% were explicitly prompted. For handicapped children, 47% of imitations were spontaneous, while 53% were explicitly prompted. The differences in spontaneous and prompted imitation across the two groups of children were significant ($t(8) = 2.68 \ p < .05$; $t(8) = 2.69 \ p < .05$).

Normal children averaged three times as many spontaneous imitations as they did prompted imitations (MN=24.58 spontaneous; MN=8.75 explicitly prompted). Handicapped children had nearly equal numbers of spontaneous and prompted imitations (MN= 22.13 spontaneous; 24.75 prompted).

Handicapped children were more likely to imitate mother utterances exactly than were normal children as shown by the proportions of iconic (exact) and partial imitations in Figure 4. Almost all handicapped children's imitations were immediate (89%) whereas, normal children were evidencing more delayed imitation (23% vs 11%).

Although handicapped children averaged a greater number of imitations than the normal children (46.9 vs 33.3 imitations per 20 minute session), the difference was not
Imitation in Transactions

statistically significant. Handicapped children were somewhat more responsive to mother explicit prompts than the normal children (48% responsiveness for handicapped; 36% for normal subjects), but again the difference was not significant. Normal and handicapped children were equally responsive to implicit prompts for imitation. Figure 4 shows the children's pragmatic use of imitated utterances.

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Insert Figure 4 here
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Normal children showed somewhat greater diversity in their pragmatic use of imitation. While the majority of handicapped children's imitations were coded only as answers, (responses to mother prompts) normal children showed a somewhat more balanced pattern. Sixty-seven percent of normal children's imitations had an identifiable pragmatic function other than just responding; 42% of handicapped children's imitations had an identifiable function. Small percentages of normal children's imitations were coded as request/commands and questions seeking clarifications, suggesting that a broader range of pragmatic functions was beginning to appear for the normal children.

Mother responses to imitations. Mothers of normal and handicapped children responded very similarly to their
children's imitations as shown in Figure 5. Mothers in both
groups responded to about 89% of their children's imitations.

Mother responses continued the child's topic during more than
75% of the imitative episode for the two groups.
Approximately 13% of mother responses were expansions, an
average of 25% were repetitions, and more than 63% were other
comments.

Discussion

Although normal and handicapped children imitate with
similar frequencies, their imitations differ in several ways,
suggesting that imitation may function differently for them.
First, imitations make up a significantly larger proportion
of handicapped children's total verbalizations. Handicapped
children appear to rely more on imitation in conversations
with their mothers. Second, normal children imitate more
spontaneously than handicapped children. Normal children
appear to be more proactive in their use of imitation. That
is, they select forms to imitate from the ongoing
conversational input of their mothers. Normal children most
often imitate at their own choosing as indicated by the
proportion of their imitations that are responses to implicit
prompts. Handicapped children most frequently imitate when
specifically directed to do so. Third, normal children concurrently express a slightly greater range of pragmatic functions via imitation than do handicapped children; further suggesting that they use the imitative response in a slightly different way. Normal children occasionally used imitative forms to ask questions, to seek clarifications and to make requests while almost all of the handicapped children's imitations functioned as answers or acknowledgements.

In general, children's use of imitation followed the same pattern discernable in their overall speech samples. Our previous study with the same sample of children had shown normal children had larger vocabularies than handicapped children, their upperbounds were slightly longer, and they spoke more frequently and more intelligibly. They displayed slightly greater flexibility in their pragmatic use of language, showing a somewhat more evenly distributed pattern of usage across functional categories (Kaiser and Blair, in press). In the current study, normal children exhibited a slightly more diverse set of imitative responses but no differences in linguistic complexity of imitated speech were observed between the normal and handicapped samples. The present study suggests directions for exploring the transactional influences of mothers and children in the imitative process. Differences in mother choice of modeling tactic (implicit versus explicit) may be a response to
characteristics of the child's language (vocabulary size). Mothers appear to become less directive in soliciting imitation and provide a greater range of models as the child's linguistic skills increase. Longitudinal analyses of changes in mother prompts and child responses are need to fully explore these mutual influences.

Although the current study involved contrast groups of normal and handicapped children and their mothers, the sample size and the level of individual variability within groups limits the generalizations that can be made to either population. The present data are best viewed in terms of representing 10 children with a range of language skills within early Stage I language development. Generally, the handicapped children were less skilled, and differences between their mothers' behavior and the behavior of mothers of normal children were correlated to their skill level rather than simply to their developmental classification. Mothers in the two groups showed generally similar patterns of prompting and consequating imitations with the exceptions in explicitness and diversity noted above. These results suggest that it is the complexity of the child's linguistic behavior that keys the pattern of interaction and of imitative prompting and responding that is observed within dyads. In this light, mother behaviors appear logically related to their children's skills and although mothers of
handicapped children (who in this sample were generally less skilled than the normal group) provided a more directive interaction style, this difference should not necessarily be considered as a deficit in mother strategy or a less desirable interaction pattern.
REFERENCES


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Table II  
Summary of Mother-Child Code Categories

**MOTHER BEHAVIORS**

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<th>Answers</th>
<th>CHILD BEHAVIORS</th>
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<td>SF Elicits a specific form</td>
<td>AY Answers with yes or no</td>
<td>Nonverbal Behaviors</td>
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<td>SFM Elicits a specific form with model</td>
<td>AEN Answers by encoding</td>
<td>C Compliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-Q Information/opinion seeking - question</td>
<td>AAI Answers with additional information</td>
<td>NC Noncompliance</td>
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<td>CE Elicits a clarification or elaboration</td>
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**Elicits acknowledgment**

| RTY Receptive testing - yes/no | VOC Vocative |
| IQ-Y Information/opinion seeking | RDG Reading |
| ENQ Encoding as question | OTH Other |
| RQ Response question | XXX Unintelligible |
| AIQ Adds information as question |

**Elicits Nonverbal Behavior**

| 1 Instruction |
| RTNV Receptive testing - nonverbal |

**Feedback for verbal behaviors**

| PTV Positive feedback (praise) for verbalization |
| CFV Corrective feedback for verbalization |
| TV+ Acknowledgement of verbalization - positively-stated |
| TV- Acknowledgement of verbalization - negatively-stated |

**Feedback for nonverbal behaviors**

| PTV Positive feedback (praise) for nonverbal behavior |
| ANV+ Acknowledgement of nonverbal behavior - positively-stated |
| ANV- Acknowledgement of nonverbal behavior - negatively-stated |

**Comments**

- Encoding
- Adds Information
Table III

**Imitation Code**

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Characteristics of Mother Prompts for Child Imitations

Characteristics of Child Imitations

Characteristics of Mother Responses to Child Imitations