



Research Project:

A joint model of online SLT intervention and peer support to enhance communication effectiveness and participation in people with progressive ataxia

Principal researchers: Prof Anja Lowit & Mrs Catherine McGee, Strathclyde University & NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (UK)

Scientific Summary

People with progressive ataxia often suffer from communication difficulties caused by their motor problems. Currently, few of them are offered regular speech therapy to address these difficulties, a situation that has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown. A further effect of lockdown was that people with ataxia had less opportunities for social interaction, and some members of Ataxia UK reported that their communication effectiveness reduced during this time.

In a previous study with 20 people with progressive ataxia (Lowit et al 2020), the researchers demonstrated that a block of 16 sessions of speech and language therapy (SLT) input in the form of Lee Silverman Voice Treatment (LSVT) provided online via Skype over a period of 8 weeks significantly enhanced some aspects of speech performance in the majority of participants and showed a positive impact on their communication participation. However, whilst there were some benefits to their intervention, they also identified some issues that require to be addressed in future work. They now propose to build on this experience and fine-tune the intervention whilst at the same time addressing the immediate needs identified by Ataxia UK members during the COVID lockdown. The new treatment model will build on the successful components of their previous intervention and will improve the existing paradigm in various ways.

The aim of this study is to investigate, with a pilot sample, whether regular practice of therapist guided speech exercises within a virtual peer group environment can improve communication effectiveness and participation in speakers with progressive ataxia.

The study will recruit 10 people with progressive ataxia and associated mild to moderate dysarthria. Participants will be assessed twice before (2 week no treatment interval) and twice after the end of the intervention (immediate and 6-week post-treatment). Assessment tasks will consist of a prolonged vowel, a short-read paragraph and some spontaneous speech. Participants will also be interviewed briefly before the intervention to identify their concerns, and after the intervention to gather their opinions about the approach and speech outcomes.

The treatment regime will follow the principles of LSVT and be supplemented with an articulation approach. Each participant will receive 4 individual sessions with an SLT (spread over 2 weeks). Subsequently they will meet as a group online via Zoom for approx. 1-hour Mondays to Fridays to work through speech exercises. An SLT will join the group each week to check on progress and guide activities for the week. The SLT will also be available to support individuals should they run into any difficulties during the week. A volunteer will be available to support participants with technical issues during the peer support sessions. The participants will be split into 2 groups of 5 people each in order to keep the group size manageable and allow everyone to contribute during the session.

To evaluate this study, the researchers will measure whether participants' speech and related factors improved, what they thought about practising in groups and how tiring this was, whether they managed to join all the sessions, and whether they provided sufficient support from the SLT with this model.

Lay Summary

People with progressive ataxia often suffer from communication difficulties. Currently, few of them are offered regular speech therapy to address these difficulties, and this has been made worse during the COVID-19 lockdown. The lockdown also meant that people with ataxia had less opportunities for social

Ataxia UK, 12 Broadbent Close, London N6 5JW

Office 020 7582 1444 Helpline 0800 995 6037 office@ataxia.org.uk www.ataxia.org.uk

Co-chairs: Richard Brown MBE and William Littleboy Chief Executive: Sue Millman

Patrons: Kim Wilde Dom Joly Paul Coia Prof Bob Williamson Jamie Raven James Moore

Ataxia UK is a Charity registered in Scotland (SC040607) & England & Wales (1102391); & Limited Company (4974832)

interaction, and that can make speaking worse than usual. In addition, staying isolated is not good for people's mental health and wellbeing. The aim of this project is to investigate whether a small number of speech therapy sessions combined with group meetings of people with ataxia to practise speaking together can be effective in improving people's speech.

The researchers will base the therapy on a previous study they completed that showed benefits for participants for their voice as well as their confidence in communicating (Lowit et al. 2020) after individual therapy sessions, but add a group element to the treatment.

For this study, the researchers aim to recruit 10 participants. They will offer 4 individual sessions with a speech and language therapist (SLT), to establish some good speaking behaviours that will serve as the basis for the exercises. After that, participants will meet online via Zoom for approx. 1 hour from Monday to Friday to work through speech exercises together. An SLT will join the group each Monday to check on progress and guide activities for the week. The SLT will also be available to meet with individuals if they run into any difficulties during the week. In addition, a volunteer will be available to support participants with technical issues during the group sessions.

The participants will be split into 2 groups of 5 people each to keep the group size manageable and allow everyone to contribute during the session. To evaluate this study, the researchers will measure whether participants' speech and related factors improved, what they thought about practising in groups and how tiring this was, whether they managed to join all the sessions, and whether they provided sufficient support from the SLT with this model.

Recruitment for this study is completed.

For more support or information please contact: Ataxia UK, 12 Broadbent Close, London, N6 5JW

Website: www.ataxia.org.uk.

Helpline: 0800 995 6037 Tel: +44 (0)20 7582 1444

Email: helpline@ataxia.org.uk.