



## **A CHALLENGING CASE FOR THE SPEECH -LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST**

*by Helen L. Kaye, M.Ed., CCC/SLP*

Ruthie came to see me four years ago. At that time she was 4 years 3 months and was having difficulty conversing in both her native tongue, Swedish, and also in English.

Her mother explained that Ruthie was born in Sweden, but came to Raleigh with her family when she was two years old. She was the youngest of three children; her two older brothers were perfectly bilingual. The family spoke only Swedish in the home. They planned to return to Sweden in the future, so it was critical that the Ruthie be fluent in her native tongue. But Ruthie would also be attending kindergarten here in Wake County in the coming year, so it was also important that she understand and speak English.

Up until this point Ruthie had been exposed to English only in preschool, which she was attending three mornings a week. The preschool teacher said that Ruthie did not play with the other children and felt that she was retarded; she had therefore been placed in a class with three year olds instead of with her age peers.

Ruthie had a history of chronic ear infections from birth. She had been treated with antibiotics but she continued to have repeated bouts of otitis media. She had drainage tubes inserted in her ears at age 2 1/2 and another set at age 3 1/2. When the tubes worked their way out, she would repeat the pattern of chronic ear infections. The mother noted that Ruthie was late to talk and did not say any words until after her third birthday.

Ruthie's mother told me that she had a degree in English literature and taught English in her native Sweden before she married. She also explained that she had an early history similar to Ruthie's; she too had been late to speak and later coped with learning disabilities through her early school years. She therefore wanted to spare Ruthie the problems that she had experienced.

During the initial evaluation it was readily apparent that Ruthie did not understand much of what was said to her unless it was paired with gestures. Her comprehension was better when her mother translated what I said into Swedish. Even then her scores on a test of vocabulary comprehension were at a level of that of a two year old. When asked to name common objects she used Swedish words, many of which the mother said were incorrect. The only things she could name correctly in English were "shoe" and "gum".

Ruthie was seen here for intensive speech and language therapy over the next three years. By the time she left us to return to Sweden she was seven years old and doing well in a regular first

grade class with some support services from the ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher. She had gone through six sets of drainage tubes for her chronic ear infections. She had also been diagnosed with nearsightedness and been fitted with glasses. Like her mother, she did have some trouble initially learning how to read, but emphasis here on phonics helped her to learn to decipher words. After a slow start, she became fluent in both English and Swedish. When they left to return to Sweden the mother promised that Ruthie would continue her studies at home in both languages.