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Getting it right? A new approach to Deaf Education: Is bilingual /
bicultural education a valid alternative?

ABSTRACT

National surveys in a number of countries have indicated the poor literacy levels of Deaf school leavers over the 1960ís , 70ís and 80ís. Added to this is the reported dissatisfaction of generations of Deaf people with their school experiences.

Deaf people are becoming increasingly vocal about their past educational experiences and are demanding that educational programs take into account their status as a linguistic and cultural minority. In the past education for the Deaf has focussed primarily on a deficit model of deafness and has advocated Oral methods of teaching. Even with the introduction of Total Communication practices the emphasis has still been on the Deaf person as an essentially deficient learner, with the educational problems being internalised in the Deaf person rather than there being any questioning of educational practices.

The Royal N.S.W. Institute for Deaf and Blind Children has in place a bilingual / bicultural program for the Deaf and hearing children, primarily of Deaf families. The school age program is now in its second year of operation with a proposed expansion to a third class in 1995. In this program children are instructed in Auslan the language of the Australian Deaf community and it is anticipated that they will acquire literacy through the read and written forms of English. The program also places value on Deaf culture and affirms many positive aspects of Deafness to challenge the notion of deafness as deficit.

Introduction

In the past, authorities entrusted with the education of the Deaf, lacking the evidence that sign language is a minority language, have understandably dismissed their minority language status and have attempted to serve them in the same way as other classes of handicapped children by educating them in the language of the majority culture. National surveys have shown that the average deaf high school student has the academic achievement of regular students half his or her age. Studies conducted in the 1960s in the U.S. and Canada demonstrate that the vast majority of persons, born deaf, do not acquire functional language competence even after many years of schooling (Furth 1966). These studies showed that between the ages of 10 and 16 the deaf, on average, did not advance even one full grade in reading ability. A comparison of 1974 and 1983 academic achievement scores of deaf students has shown that this disadvantage has not changed. (Schildroth and Karchmer cited in Lane: 1988). Evidence for this view is cited by

Holdcomb, Coryell and Rosenfield (1992) in their discussion of the 1988 report to the President. The U.S. Commission on Education of the Deaf reported that the status of education of the Deaf was unacceptable and characterised by inappropriate priorities and inadequate resources. According to Mc Loughlin (1982) only one third of the hearing impaired population in the United States have high school diplomas as compared with 75% of all black students who complete high school. Mc Loughlin (1982) further claims that data on enrolments of Deaf students in colleges and universities are virtually non-existent. This indicates that the Deaf are still behind other minorities when it comes to education. Deaf students in the 1850s according to Shapiro (1993) showed literacy rates equal to their hearing peers but became increasingly illiterate as Oralism prevailed as the main educational method of instruction.

History

The council of Milan, in 1880, a worldwide meeting of educators of the deaf, proclaimed Oralism as the only method to be used in deaf education (Stewart, 1985). This oral communication philosophy continued its prominence up to the 1950s and 60s and argued that deaf children must learn to communicate through listening, speech and lip reading and sign language went underground in that it lacked any official sanction or acknowledgment as a medium for instruction (Sacks: 1990) Until recent times, deaf children who did not learn to speak well were regarded by hearing people as failures of the education system (Lane, 1980 cited in Stewart et al 1988). According to Shapiro (1993) in 1869, 41 % of instructors were themselves Deaf. This percentage dropped to 25% by the turn of the century and to a tiny 12% by 1960.

This denial of the use of sign language in education persisted until the 1960s and 1970s when teachers switched to Total Communication a combination of speech and Signed English which recognised that Oralism was not the best and only way.

Signed English and Native Sign Languages

While the climate today accepts the use of Signed English in the classroom, it is just that, a manually encoded form of English but still not the Auslan of the deaf community. This betrays the still underlying philosophy that if deaf students cannot master the language of the majority culture orally, the alternative of a manual system or reception and expression of that majority language is a concession that is made but still upholds the correctness of the stance that acquisition and mastery of the standard English is still the ultimate criterion of literacy. Manual communication has become just another method of teaching rather than a language. This still upholds the stance that the majority language is the ideal language.

While comparisons have been drawn between other linguistic minority

groups learning English and Deaf people learning English, one essential difference is that other minority groups are able to learn English through the oral-aural medium whereas the Deaf cannot. Israelite and Ewoldt (1992) in a review of the literature on bilingual / bicultural education for the Deaf cite the Swedish research that indicates the use of Simultaneous Communication (hereafter SC)) often ignores the intonations and rhythm of spoken language when it is used by interpreters or hearing signers. However SC was still shown to be more comprehensible to Deaf students than oral-only communication.

The question arises then, how best can Deaf people learn as much English as possible? (Barnum, 1984)

Various researchers (Meadow: 1972, Markowicz: 1972) have demonstrated that Deaf children of Deaf parents consistently show greater English language skills in reading, writing and also lip reading than Deaf students who do not have a native sign language as a first language. Shapiro (1993) claims that Deaf children of Deaf parents possess a sign vocabulary of some five thousand words, but Deaf children of hearing parents often enter school with fewer than fifty words. This is evidence for the need for all Deaf children to be taught ASL according to Shapiro.

Cummins (1980, cited in Barnum, 1984) argues that opponents of bilingual programs do not see the benefit of instruction in the child's first language. They argue, that if the child is deficient in English, then English should be the language of instruction. Through his research, Cummins (1980, cited in Barnum 1984) established that instruction in a minority language was just as effective and maybe even more effective in promoting literary skills in the desired majority

language as instruction in that majority language. Cummins equated poor academic and cognitive performance with students who feel ambivalent about their language and culture. In contrast bilingual programs that encouraged a sense of pride in language and culture were more successful.

Paul (1994) expresses reservations about the claims of bilingual programs as he claims that the research does not exist that shows how individuals can go from the primary form of a sign language which has no corresponding written form to the secondary form of a spoken language which is of course print.

Language Acquisition and Deaf Children

The deaf children of deaf parents enter school with three to five years with Auslan. They enter a classroom where at best the only form of communication is the monolingual signed English as presented and understood by the teachers. The language production of these children is not judged on its content but on its correctness as compared to the grammatical structures of English. Erting (1978) claims that by discouraging the use of the child's own language, educators are thwarting communication and sending negative messages about that child's identity as a Deaf person. Cummins (1986) gives an example of

the negative messages sent by teachers to minority students. In a study of reading lessons with West Indian Creole speakers of English in Canada, it was found that teachers' constant correction of students' mis-cues led to dependent behaviour on the part of the students who would wait for the teacher to give the correct pronunciation of the word. Similar situations arise where teachers correct the speech of Deaf children to the degree where communication becomes stilted and unnatural and meaning and content are sacrificed for correctness.

Language is Culturally Embedded

While English language acquisition has always been the main focus of Deaf education, the record of English language attainment has not been high. Historically Auslan has not been taught in schools so that the learning of Auslan has largely occurred through Deaf children's interaction with Deaf peers older Deaf students and Deaf adults. Therefore learning Auslan has been a cultural activity for most Deaf children rather than an educational activity. This applies equally to Deaf children of Deaf parent and Deaf children of hearing parents. The motivation to learn Auslan comes from the need to fill a communication need and the child's acquisition of Auslan is rarely monitored as with the learning of English. The limited success of English as the primary language of instruction for Deaf children and the evidence that Auslan is acquired naturally from environmental input has led strength to the argument that Auslan is the natural first language of all Deaf children and English is viewed as a second language.

Research indicates that Deaf students development of English may be hampered by the lack of comprehensible input they receive (Ewoldt 1994, Ahlgren 1982) Artificial sign systems have been shown to be deficient in conveying meaning and lack embedding in the culturally distinctive Deaf community (Stewart ?). Additionally Cummins (1986) advocates the involvement of the minority group in policy making to positively present the minority group and raise its status.

The Swedish experience of bilingualism as it relates to education of Deaf children has emphasised the separateness of both languages namely Swedish Sign language and spoken Swedish. In the teaching of Swedish to Deaf children the Swedish language has been taught through the written form and speech as a basis for learning language has been totally absent (Svartholm 1993). The bilingual program at the Thomas Pattison School at the Royal NSW Institute for Deaf and Blind Children advocates a similar approach where English language learning is approached through literacy where children read in English but instruction is given in Auslan the native language of the Australian Deaf community.

Thus the need for a written language is acknowledged to complement the language spoken by the Deaf community. This emphasis on written language will enable Deaf children to access and participate in the cultural life and traditions of the surrounding society. Following the Swedish experience (Svartholm 1993) it became evident in the Thomas Pattison program that the development of written language must be a priority in the education of Deaf children as their learning of the

language of the surrounding society. While spoken language has always had an importance for educators and indeed for those who have access to it, it should be recognised that for Deaf people it represents an unsatisfactory medium for communication.

At the Thomas Pattison School the use of Auslan and written English gives Deaf children a combination of two visually accessible languages as the foundation for them to become bilingual people. Whole language principles are followed in that meaningful, interactive, face to face communicative situations are created. This however does not preclude the teaching of rules of syntax for written English. Children are told that when writing they must be conscious of word order as in English it differs to Auslan and there are tenses which are indicated by changed endings or spellings of words. The fact that children are aware of these rules of grammar are evident in their reading. This author recently saw a child six years of age sign *istand pasti* for the word *istoodi* written in a sentence of the child's own writing, demonstrating that the child had internalised the concept of past time in this context. Teachers accept children's written approximations of English, however children are encouraged to give thoughtful consideration to their writing. The teacher may say *iThat's how you sign it, but change it in your head to write it in Englishi*.

Children at the Thomas Pattison School are currently in grades K to 2. For them to approach print and for text to be intelligible to them it has to be conveyed in Auslan. Stories are typically told in Auslan, with subsequent retellings also in Auslan until the story becomes familiar to the children. Subsequent re-readings are in Auslan signs but follow the English word order of the book. This alerts the children's attention to the fact that the written text conveys the meaning of the story they have enjoyed. This now becomes the point of introduction of the second language.

Building a Culture of Literacy

Johnson (1994) claims that there are a number of benefits to Deaf children being read to by adults who know and use ASL (Auslan in Australia). He claims that in reading to the children the culture of literacy is introduced - books are interesting and fun, you get information from them but to do so you hold them right way up and read from left to right and front to back. Through this process children also learn that print symbols also have a signed or fingerspelt configuration too so there are links made between the concept system the child has in his/her own language and the picture and print on the page

This model of instruction in the first language as a means to teaching literacy in the second language and thereby creating an individual who is bilingual has support from the literature (Mayberry and Eichen, 1991, Johnson, 1994) which indicates that the cultural and developmental benefits associated with first language learning are evidenced in the achievement advantages that have been reported for Deaf children of Deaf parents who are users of sign language in the home. The first language is seen in this instance as providing the cognitive and linguistic foundation for the next phase of developing

read and written English and spoke too where appropriate.

Early indications from the Thomas Pattison program are that Deaf children even as young as five are beginning to use fingerspelling and to use words that occur environmentally and have not been specifically taught. An example was a five year old child spelling 'Coke' while

watching a television program on recycling of aluminium cans. This would indicate that this child was showing age appropriate vocabulary and world knowledge. Johnson (1994) claims that in the U.S. Deaf children as young as three years of age have been documented as 'engaging' in attempts at fingerspelling.

A concern of educators and some parents in relation to a bilingual / bicultural program has been that the speech development of Deaf children and their phonologic awareness may be neglected in such a program. The reality is that Auslan has facial and articulatory phenomena that contain aspects similar to English phonology. Johnson (1994) reports on research that indicates that Deaf mothers when talking to their babies and using the sign 'mother' accompanied the sign with English like mouth movements. Similarly in adult to adult conversations signs frequently had accompanying mouth movements. While Auslan is not English, it has emerged in the context of a surrounding society that uses English and the impact of English on Auslan cannot be denied in that fingerspelling precisely imitates English words, except they are in the manual mode. Johnson (1994) suggests that the naturally occurring use of ASL mouth movements may provide an intuitive knowledge of the phonological information carried by English words.

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