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Bilingual-Bicultural Approach in Deaf Education: Does Sign Language facilitate the Literacy Development of Deaf Children?

Two perspectives

For centuries, deafness was considered a pathological condition. Deaf people were considered mentally and educationally deficient due to their inability to hear and in need of special education and social services to minimize and correct those deficiencies. However, following the groundbreaking work of William Stokoe (1960) and many others, there has been a growing trend away from a pathological definition of deafness. Deafness has divided educators into two opposite camps.

There is said to be a 200-year controversy between proponents of oralism and proponents of manualism: “The development of fluent language (including reading & writing) & good communication skills in deaf individuals has been for the past 200 years the main concern in services and education for individuals with hearing loss” (Rodda, Eleweke & Chapman, 1999, p.45).

In the long history of deaf education the use of different strategies have been advocated for better literacy and communication skills development in hearing impaired individuals. These strategies have been suggested by the proponents of manual, oral, and Total Communication methods of educating deaf individuals. These strategies or approaches as well as their proponents have been in continuous dispute for recognition of the best universal method of education of hearing impaired people. One can see two perspectives in regards to language acquisition and literacy proficiency emerging from this dispute - *hearing and cultural perspective*.

Hearing perspective is focused on “deficiency” of not hearing individuals and how the physical condition of being hearing impaired affects all aspects of their life. Hearing perspective suggests that normal hearing is critical for

the development of literacy. Therefore deaf individuals do not match the assumptions of this perspective.

Cultural perspective presents an opposite view. Because deaf people use sign languages, they should be considered as a distinct cultural and linguistic group in the society for who English (or any other spoken language) must be regarded as a second language (ESL). Therefore “deaf people should be dealt with as a socially, linguistically, and culturally different & distinct group” (Rodda, Eleweke & Chapman, 1999, p.46).

Over the last 50 years, education in general has been undergoing a very significant paradigmatic shift. It has been a shift away from an assumption that education must be monolingual and children must be taught monolingually, toward an assumption that children's first languages must be respected and supported in order for them to acquire a second language with more confidence (Andersson, 1994; Paul, 2000).

Mason (1995) writing about cultural perspective in educating the Deaf in this new situation created by the mentioned paradigmatic shift stated the following:

This perspective holds that language acquisition is a natural and spontaneous sociocultural process. This means that humans acquire and use language as part of their holistic world. Currently, over 70% of all people in the world know/speak two or more languages. (p.23)

In the late 1980's discussion of bilingual-bicultural education for children who are Deaf brought new theories. Recent trends in the education of deaf people have been focusing on bilingual-bicultural (DBi-Bi) approaches to facilitate the development of literacy skills in Deaf students. A capital D is used by bilingual-bicultural programs to identify deafness as a cultural, rather than a medical, issue. Unfortunately, even the most highly educated deaf people in Ukraine have a primitive understanding of bicultural-bilingual approach because of lack of information.

What does it mean to be bilingual-bicultural?

By adulthood, many deaf learners have had years of failure and frustration with learning to read and write in English. “Remedial approaches, which have focused on pattern practice, vocabulary lessons, and teaching explicit rules, break language into parts and do not allow English to be used in the natural way that it is acquired by hearing individuals” (Graney, 1997). The bilingual-bicultural approach recognizes that ASL and English are two distinct languages in the same way that, for example, French & German are distinct languages. ASL is a complete language with its own grammar, syntax, and rules for interaction (Andersson, 1994; Erting, Johnson, & Liddel, 1989; Mason, 1995; Stokoe, 1960). Proponents of the DBi-Bi approach believe that Deaf children are not deficient. Instead of being auditory learners, they are visual learners. “Deaf children do not need remedial teaching strategies because the bilingual-bicultural program provides a unique visual learning environment in which their linguistic, cultural & social needs are met” (Baker & Baker, 1997).

A first language for a child with a hearing loss: Whose choice is it in the multicultural society?

Most deaf children are born into a unique linguistic situation. Their hearing loss prevents them from acquiring the naturally occurring spoken language of their homes. Since they cannot hear that language to some degree, they are unable to fully participate in the interactions with family members, which are so crucial to language development. Consequently, they do not develop a strong linguistic base with which to express them and to make sense of the world. Generally, “[...] this group of deaf children enters school linguistically, cognitively and experientially well behind their hearing peers who have had the benefit of acquiring native language competence within their home environments” (Andersson, 1994).

In order to achieve a level of readiness for their social and scholastic challenges, children who are deaf or hard of hearing—like all children—must be surrounded very early in life by language that is fully accessible to them as a model for acquiring solid competency in their first language.

It is widely accepted to be the right of Deaf (D) children to acquire a first language naturally and "on schedule." The objective for most Deaf children

is that the language which is not acquired naturally will be learned as a second language as the child becomes cognitively/developmentally ready.”(Mashie, 1995, p.24).

In order to provide this access to the language, some very important decisions about linguistic input to the young deaf or hard of hearing child must be made early by hearing parents of deaf children if they are to ensure their child's timely development. In the United States, decisions about first language input for the deaf child often weigh very heavily on parents, who may feel they have to make a choice between spoken and signed language as primary input for their child's development of early language.

It is suggested by Schimmer (1994) that rather than being presented with options that are mutually exclusive, parents should be shown a model that is ideally infused with all the options - signed, written, and spoken language - at developmentally appropriate times. In this model, the importance of letting deaf children "be children"—which includes acquiring their first language in a natural, timely manner—helps to guide choices about the focus of language input and early placement.

The fear that deaf children may never talk unless they are exposed exclusively to speech during an early, critical period has had a pervasive effect on practices in raising deaf children. Yet, only recently have the concerns of Deaf people and a handful of Deaf and hearing professionals been recognized - serious concerns over the consequences of not exposing Deaf children to Sign Language during the critical period for language acquisition. Mashie stated (1995):

While it is hard to imagine a setting in our world that includes no exposure to spoken language, many deaf and hard of hearing children in the United States today still grow up in environments that provide no exposure to signed language. (p.13)

Although, the choice of first language for a deaf child belongs to the parents, every deaf child, whatever the level of his/her hearing loss, should have the right to grow bilingual. The child has to accomplish a number of

things with language: communicate with parents & family members as soon as possible, develop cognitive abilities in infancy, acquire world knowledge, communicate fully with the surrounding world, acculturate into two worlds. According to Grosjen (2001):

A sign-language-oral language bilingualism is the only way that the deaf child will meet his/her needs, that is, communicate early with parents, develop cognitive abilities, acquire knowledge of the world, communicate fully with the surrounding world, and acculturate into the world of the hearing and of the Deaf. (p.117)

The situation with the sign language in Ukraine is complicated. On the first sight, SL does exist and is used by all members of deaf community. In fact, the sign language was at Soviet times slowly ousted from the educational process. Its use was strictly prohibited during educational process, and only after classes SEU (Signing Exact Ukrainian) was allowed for communication between teachers and students (with simultaneous use of speech). However, that was not the decision of educators, but there was a political implication with such regulations. The process of rejection of SL in the Soviet Union started after Stalin's "Marxism & Questions of Linguistics" was published in 1950. For many years there was simply no research on sign language based on proper experimental data. The name of Vygotsky who was the first person to understand that the bilingualism of deaf people is an objective reality and education cannot close its eyes to the fact that, by driving sign language out from the permitted means of communication between deaf children, a huge part of their social life and activity is destroyed.

That's why, when I was asked at home why I supported Dbi-bi approach, my answer was:"Because this is a right of Deaf people for proper communication. This is their right for have own language. This is their life and they should have a right to have a choice."

What are the benefits of a bilingual-bicultural option?

There are several benefits of bilingual-bicultural education. Early access to comprehensive language fosters early cognitive development, which, in

turn, promotes increased literacy & greater academic achievement. Students who attend bilingual-bicultural programs develop functional skills in two languages. While bilingual-bicultural programs have respect for both ASL and English, these programs advocate for ASL to be the first language of children who are deaf. The emphasis on early language acquisition and establishing a first language (ASL) provides a base upon which English is subsequently taught. "Research has shown that effective language has to be fast and clear. ASL is an efficient language for visual learning and is easier for Deaf children to acquire as a first language than any form of English" (Andersson, 1994). Finnegan (1992) stated that "students in bilingual-bicultural programs have increased self-esteem and confidence due to the healthy view of Deaf children, acceptance of who they are as human beings, and increased confidence to function in bilingual-bicultural environments".

The relationship of American Sign Language and English literacy in bilingual-bicultural learning environment.

Based on a longitudinal study Paul (2000) concluded:

If ASL is the first language used, then all instructional activities and materials need to be presented and conducted via the use of ASL. However, no formal instruction in English literacy should be planned until after proficiency in ASL has been demonstrated at a reasonable level. Students should be exposed to print incidentally, similar to first-learners.

Deaf and hard of hearing children are not a homogeneous group. They all have different abilities to develop spoken (English) skills. Obviously these abilities depend upon physical (biological) potential and motivation. Amount of residual hearing, benefit of amplification & consistency of hearing aids use, language competency and intelligence, family and (hearing) peers support are those factors which relate to potential and motivation. Each of these factors plays a complex, interrelated role in the overall development of spoken English skills. No one factor determines the extent to which a deaf or hard of hearing child will develop intelligible spoken English skills. However, factors related to the degree of access the child has to the spoken English model are the most important. Children with limited access to the auditory part of speech and who are unable to use their hearing to monitor their own speech production have a truly challenging task

ahead of them. While there are exceptions, those children with less auditory access to English tend to be less likely to develop functional spoken English skills.

Another critical factor in speech development is language competency. For a deaf or hard of hearing child who has a solid base in ASL, spoken English development becomes an easier task. Support for this contention can be found in latest studies of Sharon Graney's (1999) and Strong & Prinz, (1997).

Several other researchers and educators have come to similar conclusion after several studies. Erting & Pfau (1997) discovered the following:

Storybook sharing in ASL appears to be a naturally occurring early bridge between the language of delivery (ASL) and the language of the book (English print). [...] It appears that after a solid base in ASL has been established, children either begin to notice the print and to ask questions themselves, or they are receptive to guidance from the teacher. (p.2)

A hearing impaired child's knowledge of written English can be a valuable tool for developing competence in spoken English. As a deaf or hard of hearing child begins to read, he or she is able to make the connection between the printed and the spoken word:

Written English also provides a way for deaf and hard of hearing children to gain complete access to the structure of the language, providing a clearer model of English syntax than they are likely to get from the spoken signal. Knowing the structure of English is particularly important in speechreading, which involves filling in many gaps by predicting or guessing what cannot be heard or perceived on the lips. Therefore, the early literacy skills that develop when written stories are translated into ASL can also help to reinforce speech skills. (Graney, 1999)

It is important to remember that SL and spoken language, as two distinct languages, be presented separately (Stokoe, 1960). This makes it possible to expose all children to both languages at an early age and enables those who can develop spoken language skills to begin to do so. Keeping the languages separate also helps the teacher or therapist determine exactly how much

information the child is receiving through auditory means. “Children with a solid language base can be taught aspects of spoken English more easily than children without a language base. This may be partly why deaf children of deaf parents often demonstrate a significant linguistic advantage in spoken English over deaf children of hearing parents” (Erting, Johnson, & Liddel, 1989).

Even not knowing all this information, *in our situation* one could notice that, students who are able to produce spoken Ukrainian without signing are better communicators than students who attempt to speak and sign at the same time. Keeping the languages separate enables deaf children to function like other bilingual children; they make appropriate decisions regarding the mode of communication in a given situation. Also, speech sessions that focus on spoken Ukrainian rather than simultaneous communication, allow the child to practice speech in a more realistic communication environment (Zaitseva, 1996). The teacher can more accurately judge the child's speech production without signed cues, and the child begins to see when his or her speech is being understood and when it is not. This enables the child to realistically assess his or her own abilities and contribute to competence by helping students know when they need to develop alternative strategies. Thus exposing children to both Sign Language and spoken language on a separate and equal basis insures application of sound pedagogical and linguistic principles (Mayer & Akanatsu, 1996).

It is important to understand that, despite what parents may want for their children, not every child will develop speech skills. Some will develop only basic functional skills. Others will be able to engage in a predictable, everyday conversation, but be unable to express or understand complex ideas spoken in Ukrainian. Still others will have a fairly full range of oral language knowledge and skills, but will need to work hard to fully comprehend the subtle nuances of each of each communication event. Spoken Ukrainian simply may not play the same role in the lives of some deaf and hard of hearing speakers that it does for hearing persons so some important decisions must therefore be made about how much time & energy a child will be asked to devote toward mastering this skill during the course of his or her education.

The development of a deaf child in respect to academic achievements and socialization was in Soviet times second to speech. Individual abilities for speech development of deaf children as mentioned above have never been taken into consideration.

“Deficiency”, self-esteem, and identity of children and adults with hearing loss in Ukraine.

For many deaf and hard of hearing children, it is often not deafness itself that causes most of their problems. Rather, it is the impact on their identity caused by parental and professional reaction to their deafness (Baker & Baker, 1997; Grosjen, 1992; Grosjen, 2001; Swanwick, 1994). The typical hearing person handicaps the development of the deaf or hard of hearing child, leading to a confused identity and poor self-concept. In general child development studies, there is no question at all about the direct relationship between healthy identity development and good academic functioning. The less worthy a child feels about oneself, the more likely the child will do poorly in school.

We need to re-explore the topic of the deficit model vs. difference model to put this column into perspective. The deficit model of deafness assumes the problem lies within the deaf child and that the child must be "rehabilitated" in order to reduce the effects of deafness (Veselova, 2001), while rendering the child powerless. Powerlessness is a killer of self-esteem. In the case of deaf children, their language and physical health were considered "defective," and they were packed off to residential schools in order to isolate them and try to approximate them to the hearing people. In contrast, the difference model, while acknowledging the existence of deafness, considers it secondary to everything else and allows the child to exercise some control. It assumes the problem lies outside of the child in his/her immediate social environment and that the environment must be modified in order to accommodate the child without "fixing" the child.

As Paul (2000) stated, "‘Fixing’ sends a powerful subliminal message to the child in the sense that there is something ‘wrong’ with him”. As the result the child is constantly reminded of it by professionals and parents, creating a cumulative negative effect on his self-concept. Clinical

audiologists (ENT doctors) and professionals on elementary education who naturally become first family counsellors on deafness, are telling often that if a deaf child can't do well as a mainstreamed student, he/she will end up in a school for the deaf, while at the same time, the counsellor would make grotesque motions with his/her hands, as if signing is some kind of a contagious disease. Gradually children become ashamed to be seen in the public with other deaf children and to use their hands to communicate. Even those children who study in Ukrainian boarding schools behave this way.

It is very common now that there are people who influence parents into believing that Ukrainian Sign Language and Deaf community are not good for their deaf or hard of hearing children and they would be better off in trying to avoid them as much as possible. They encourage the parents to opt for either the oral approach or commercial preschool oral programs. When parents and professionals are "confronted" by Sign Language or Deaf community, they tend to lash out against them without fully understanding or appreciating that their own children, like most deaf persons and many hard of hearing persons, would likely become Sign Language users and part of Deaf culture one day (Daniels, 1993). They also do not realize that their opposition could harm or impair these children's identity development.

Schools: mainstreaming or special education?

Ukraine has preserved special education system. Most children with hearing loss attend special residential schools. Children here are able to communicate in a language readily understood by each other Deaf children are able to partake in social clubs, sports and importantly enough, to be around deaf role models. It is important for deaf children to be encouraged to further their education and to learn that deafness does not mean you cannot grow up to be successful and happy (success of course being at each persons own perspective on what success and happiness means to them individually). These schools should get a new role and provide a vital link in the transmission of Deaf Culture and sign language.

This is not to say that mainstream education that is becoming more and more popular from year to year is iniquitous for deaf children, but we must keep in mind that "socialization is essential to a child's growth and without a

common language socialization is limited” (Кобель [Kobel], 2004). It is far better and easier to prepare them for a life as strong confident, “Deaf” persons who can succeed in a hearing world rather than as weak imitations of hearing persons, who for the most part, have a good chance of becoming misfits in a hearing world.

Conclusions

Mastering language of the hearing majority is a lifelong struggle for many deaf people. Deaf people develop literacy differently than do their hearing peers. The instructional approaches which (a) are student-centered, (b) require meaningful use of both sign and spoken language, (c) incorporate and build on the language and cultural backgrounds and actual home and workplace issues facing deaf adults, and (d) use creative visual means to teach reading and writing - promise to make the educational process more meaningful, positive, and successful for deaf learners.

I am the first to propose the use of Ukrainian Sign Language (USL) as a first language for deaf children. My certainty is based on experience of Canada, USA, Sweden, Germany, Britain and some other countries. From its inception and development until the shift to neo-oralism after WWII, deaf education in Ukraine as a part of former Soviet Union, encouraged sign language to be widely used in educational process based on pedagogical and linguistic views of Vygotsky, used competent deaf adults as models, and appears to have achieved satisfactory results in teaching Ukrainian/Russian.

My certainty is also based on the growing understanding in Ukrainian Deaf and educational community of the necessity of changes. At the 2001 Conference on Deaf Education in Ukraine numerous scholars, both deaf and hearing, have called for the institution of programs broadly labelled abroad as bilingual education (Збірник матеріалів I Всеукраїнської конференції з історії навчання глухих, 2001: Adamiuk, p.108; Shestakov, p.50; Leshchenko, p.121).

My certainty is also based on the results of the visit of Dr.Bondar to Canada. As he stated after the visit:

Thanks to the visit to the University of Alberta my eyes have been “really opened” to the problem of the Ukrainian Sign Language, its role and place in the life of our society and in the educational process. Our Institute of Special Education will launch a special program on the linguistic research of the sign language and call a conference in the nearest future (V. Bondar, personal communication, e-mail: February, 2004).

Explicating ideas of proponents of Bilingual-Bicultural Approach in deaf education I would suggest USL to be the input language of instruction for deaf children. Ukrainian should be taught according to the principles of teaching Ukrainian as a second language (UScL) after achieving competency in the first language. And that the ultimate goal of the system is well-educated, bilingual children.

Both languages can serve the child socially, though SL is certainly the language of interaction in the deaf community. Yet spoken language remains the language of the dominant community and will serve the deaf child educationally and economically.