

Communication and language

Communication is the key to our lives; we communicate through body language, eye gaze, facial expression, touch, voice, signsyet the tragedy for many deaf children in the past is that they were given little chance to develop their communication skills and even less opportunity to access fluent language to help them develop literate thought. Cochlear implants have improved the situation for many of deaf children and Teachers of the Deaf continue to work very hard to ensure that deaf children do have the support to fulfil their potential. But my conversations over the last ten years have left me with the disturbing feeling that some parents and some teachers are content for deaf children to simply acquire a certain level of skill in communication only, rather than full language.

Take the following example:

A hearing parent or teacher may say to a hearing child:

“Go and put your coat on, it is raining buckets outside so we need to give ourselves plenty of time to get there.”

They may sign and say to a deaf child:

“Coat now. Rain. Time, go.”

Has the general message been communicated to the deaf child? Yes. Will they go and put their coat on? Probably. Have they received a fair and full representation of **either** BSL or English? No!

Using true un-voiced BSL would have given a full account of the message; but so often in an attempt to give ‘total communication’ the two languages are mixed together and both are corrupted.

We all know that access to language early in life is vital: all children have an un-repeatable window of opportunity when they are primed for language development. This occurs in baby and toddler-hood and not at school age. It is also known that vocabulary at age 5 is highly predictive of educational success and earnings at age 30 (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2007). Some deaf children do hear enough (through aids or implanted devices) to understand and use full spoken language; many others do not and their needs can be well met by some form of visual input.

Despite budget constraints leading to lack of time, TODs work hard to maximise the chances that deaf children can access good quality visual language input in the very earliest years. Training for parents in BSL has vastly improved over the years but only a minority of parents achieve good, language-level BSL, and even less achieve this in the early years when deaf children need it most. This is not surprising – how can parents learn a whole new language in such a short time when they have all the additional pressures that come from caring for young babies or toddlers. Whilst we know that BSL is a full, complete language; signs, in the hands of hearing parents of young deaf children, often are not.

‘Communication’ **is** vital – it’s not surprising that parents feel huge relief to have even the most basic communication skills for everyday situations; they want to enable their child to make their needs known and build a rapport with them. No wonder TODs are happy to see this rapport developing but as the professionals they are always mindful of the true *language* needs of that deaf child. They must find ways for that child’s full potential to be unlocked through a fuller development of fluent language and they need to find ways to support the families and school to enable this to happen.

How then to give access to full, complete spoken language to children who can't hear it? Hearing parents need an easy-to-learn way to make their own language fully and visually accessible to their deaf child. Cued Speech will give this. It uses just eight handshapes in four positions near the mouth together with the lip-patterns of speech – you cue as you speak. Crucially it can be learnt in just 20 hours or less and although initially learners cue very slowly, fluency quickly increases with use.

There is a large body of research which shows its effectiveness. Professor Kelly Crain of the University of South Florida, referred to just some of the research when he wrote:

'Deaf children of hearing parents who cue their native spoken language have been found to develop that language according to the same milestones as hearing peers (Kipila, 1985; Anthony, Moseley, & Williams-Scott, 1991; Metzger, 1994). Hearing parents can learn to cue at a rate and accuracy level sufficient to deliver linguistically complex information to their deaf children within 2-3 months of learning the system (Torres, Moreno-Torres, & Santana, 2006). Deaf children exposed to multiple languages by fluent models of those languages can develop both languages and become bilingual in a fashion similar to hearing children (Earl, 2006).'

Cued Speech is a lip-reading tool that enables communication and using it will give a deaf child access to **complete language**. They can visually and naturally absorb the spoken language of the home that their hearing family are already using and as Cued Speech has been adapted for 68 languages and dialects there really is no limit! Having this (visual) phonetic understanding of language serves the deaf child brilliantly when they later encounter the written form of the language as they learn to read and write.

Professor Kelly Crain wrote in his summary of research:

'Cueing provides children with access to complete language, including such function words as prepositions, often missed by deaf children from other communication backgrounds (Santana, R., Torres, S., & Garcia, J. (2003). Indeed, deaf children whose parents and teachers cue (and/or who work with skilled transliterators) have been found to develop the written forms of spoken languages in ways similar to hearing children of hearing parents (Cornett, 1990; Leybaert & Alegria, 1993; Leybaert, Alegria, & Foncke, 1983; Perier, Charlier, Hage, & Alegria, 1988).'

The Cued Speech system can be used in different ways: for example to give access to whole language, to support phonics teaching or to scaffold learning English through listening. Increasingly Cued Speech is used with BSL or American or French sign languages to give access to both a sign language and a 'spoken' language.

When Cued Speech is used bilingually it differs from the more commonly accepted Sign Bilingualism:

- Sign Bilingualism - usually aims to give access to sign language as a first language and to spoken language such as English in its written form only. Connie Mayer and Gordon Wells describe how very difficult it is for deaf children to become fully literate through a sign language in their paper 'Can the Linguistic Interdependence Theory Support A Bilingual-Bicultural Model of Literacy Education for Deaf Students?'. They write: '... proponents of bilingual-bicultural models of literacy education for deaf students claim that, if ASL is well established as the LI, then literacy in English (L2) can be achieved by means of reading and writing without exposure to English through either speech or English-based sign. In our opinion, this claim is based on a false analogy....'
- Bilingualism with Cued Speech - either the 'spoken' or the signed language can be the first language. Access to a signed language for these children is primarily through native or professional users modelling the language for the child – at least in the early years when

parents' signing skills are limited. Deaf children born into a BSL using Deaf family will usually have BSL as their first language and should the parents wish it, a hearing family member or professional can model spoken language through Cued Speech for the child. In hearing families, the spoken language of the home, through Cued Speech, would be the first or main language. This will enable deaf children to develop a native-like understanding of sound-based 'spoken' language just as hearing children do and they can learn to read using the same techniques.

Because the use of Cued Speech within sign bilingual education is a relatively new and innovative approach, the Cued Speech Association UK is in the process of drafting a document looking at the use of Cued Speech bilingually, called 'Complete Bilingualism - how full access to both BSL and English could be achieved'. The authors, Cate Calder and myself, welcome comments. If you would like a copy of this draft document do get in touch (details below).

The good news is that with Cued Speech, parents and children can learn to not only communicate but use full language in a completely accessible way. Deaf children do not need family members to cue for them their whole lives, if it is used consistently and early most deaf children will reach the stage where they only need Cued Speech occasionally for new vocabulary, to clarify pronunciation.

Since the system of Cued Speech can be learnt in a matter of days access to fluent language need not be delayed. It takes determination for hearing parents and professionals to lift their hands and cue for a deaf child but doing so can mean the difference between them developing language or not - and the payback, in terms of full language, is huge. With Cued Speech in the mix deaf children really can 'have it all'.

It has never been easier to learn. The Cued Speech Association will provide a tutor for a family or professional group, e-learning can be accessed free and the Cued Speech Association now offers supporting tuition through 'Skype' sessions as well as face-to-face tuition.

If you want to:

- discuss different uses of Cued Speech
- find out about training for yourself or families
- request our draft document: 'Complete Bilingualism - How full access to both BSL and English could be achieved'

contact: AnneWorsfold@cuedspeech.co.uk

For further reading:

'Research Supporting the use of Cued Speech and Cued Language', Compiled by Kelly Lamar Crain, Ph.D. The University of South Florida. 16-page summary free to download from <http://www.cuedspeech.org.uk/index.php?page=111>

'Cued Speech and Cued Language for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children', Edited by: Carol J. LaSasso, Kelly Lamar Crain, Jacqueline Leybaert. A scholarly but accessible 500-page book published in 2010 by Plural Publishing ISBN-13: 978-1-59756-334-5

'Can the Linguistic Interdependence Theory Support A Bilingual-Bicultural Model of Literacy Education for Deaf Students?' Connie Mayer, Metropolitan Toronto School for the Deaf, Gordon Wells Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
<http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/1/2/93.full.pdf>

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