

Cued Speech – advantages for literacy

Cued Speech has never been in widespread use with deaf children in the UK although it is commonly used in some other countries and there is now a wide body of international research which demonstrates its effectiveness. Possibly the name gives the false impression that the system is designed to develop speech instead of giving access, through clarifying the speech of others, to the English language and consequently to reading. The name Cued Speech (CS) describes the system of 8 handshapes and 4 positions which clarify the lip-patterns of speech and it is quick and comparatively easy to learn. CS can be used in many different ways, from giving whole-language access to simply disambiguating phonics, and its use can change over time, usually lessening as a child's language develops. The children's outcomes will vary according to the amount of CS-use.

The aim of this article was originally to give an overview of international research and best practice which demonstrate the beneficial effects of CS on literacy, drawing mainly from the book '**Cued Speech and Cued Language for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children**' (2010). This edited volume (which has forty two international contributors, including 25 professors or assistant or associate professors) draws on twenty years of international research to inform the four chapters which are devoted to the effects of CS use on the development of reading. The chapters include theory and research around reading in the narrow sense (de-coding), in a broader context (comprehension), phonological awareness, short-term memory, and rhyming ability.

Distilling these four chapters (115 pages!) into a two page article has proved impossible and I urge all teachers to get hold of the above book and, at the very least, read the first section, the literacy section, and a chapter entitled 'Experiences and perceptions of cueing deaf adults in the US', a survey which gives insights into the achievements and opinions of 32 deaf adults brought up with CS – including the fact that 31 of them reported finding the English language subjects 'easy' in elementary school.

Since American research (Wandel 1989) found no significant difference in reading achievement between the matched groups of hearing and CS-using profoundly deaf pupils research has mainly looked at the mechanics of how CS-using deaf children learn to read – which is what this article will now concentrate on.

Cued Language and the Alphabetic principle - Children who have been brought up with CS bring to school a very different skill set to most deaf children. They consistently see the 'spoken' language which surrounds them in a clear, unambiguous, visual form i.e. cued language, a full visual mode of spoken language in which all the phonological contrasts are clearly marked. As Laybaert, Colin and LaSasso say in Chapter 11 (255-256) of the above book: 'The advantages [of this] are threefold:

1. 'Once children have learnt the correspondences between graphemes and the manual cues from Cued Speech, they can be autonomous readers (Jorm and Share, 1983) in the sense that they can get the meaning of words they have never encountered in print before (for evidence see Alegria, Aurouer, & Hage 1997).
2. 'Children exposed to Cued Speech will be able to use grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences for reading printed words and phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences for word spelling (for evidence, see Leybaert, 2000; Leybaert & Charlier, 1996; Leybaert & Lechat, 2001)

3. 'The use of correspondences between graphemes and corresponding visual 'phonemes' (i.e., manual cues and mouthshapes) makes possible the development of phonological awareness (Charlier & Leybaert, 2000).'

Rhyming - Children who perform well on rhyming tasks do markedly better in early reading than those with poor rhyming ability. Dr Cornett devised CS in order to 'insure that the deaf child comes to think in the phonemic equivalent of spoken English'. If he was successful then a deaf child brought up with CS should be able to develop rhyming skills before learning to read, as do hearing children, and their rhyming judgments should not be affected by spelling or by lip-reading similarity. Research (Charlier & Leybaert 2000) showed that in French-speaking children this was indeed the case with CS-users achieving a high level of accuracy in rhyme judgment about pairs of pictures which was not influenced by spelling and was within the range of hearing children. In contrast deaf children from oral or signing backgrounds relied on spelling and lip-reading and therefore made many more errors. American research (Crain, 2003) found similar results with emerging readers of English whose rhyming abilities were comparable to their hearing peers.

CS is, however, primarily a tool to give visual access to whole language and – just like speech – it gives access to words, phrases and sentences through the smaller units of phonemes as they occur in natural language contexts. Through CS the child can 'naturally and simultaneously acquire the phonological structure of the language necessary for phonic-based decoding, and the vocabulary, syntax and figurative language necessary for fluent independent reading'.

I leave the final words to a parent: 'After only the first week of training we could say to our son anything at all that we wished in the English language (just as we would be able to type it) and he could fully access this, regardless of the fact that he couldn't hear a single sound of it.'

'It seemed unbelievable and miraculous to us that we could cue to him nonsense words, silly sounds, nursery rhymes, read stories to him, chat to him, to say to him whatever we pleased in English with every bit of syntax, grammar and vocabulary fully, simply and easily represented as though speaking normally. The discovery of CS and what it could do for our son and for us as a family was truly and profoundly life-changing, and continues to be thirteen years down the line.'

'He took very easily to reading and writing – more easily than many of his hearing peers – perhaps helped by already having a visual phonic 'map' in his head from his early exposure to CS.... by age 6 he had a reading age of 10; he achieved Level 4/5s in his English SATs in Year 6; and now, at 14, he has a reading age of 16+.'

The book referred to above, which is edited by Carol J. LaSasso, Kelly Lamar Crain & Jacqueline Leybaert, can be bought from Amazon.

Anne Worsfold is the Director of the charity Cued Speech Association UK - www.cuedspeech.co.uk - which provides information about, and training in, CS. They have a bursary fund for parents.

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