

NCSAViewpoint

The 'Dumbing Down' of Language

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The idea of language and its importance to literacy and concept development is often not discussed in the parameters of deafness and deaf education. Language is the basis for various kinds of development, whether it be social, mental, educational or conceptual.

A child with good verbal skills and a solid foundation of vocabulary will have a solid foundation for learning to read. This child will be more apt to develop higher level thinking skills and to understand advanced abstract concepts in later years.

Many researchers believe that limited vocabulary also results in stunted social growth and mental development. With deaf children, this is sometimes evidenced by poor social skills. Analysis of why this happens has been researched ad nauseum. As a parent of a deaf adult and as a professional, my understanding of the issues involved need no research. Two decades of observation and involvement with deafness, deaf education and the deaf community resulted in the conclusion of some basic facts.

Hearing people, especially parents who live with deaf children, often 'dumb down' their language to make themselves more easily understood.

Consider the following example. Instead of asking a child what kind of cereal he or she wants for breakfast by listing the options available, the person will just say, "Do you want cereal?"

Sometimes the person will point to the cabinet where the cereal is stored. If signing is used, the hearing person is usually not fluent enough to fingerspell the names of the cereals.

This is but one example. This "dumbing down" of language is not intentional. It happens without the hearing person knowing it. After all, many people believe that limited communication is the natural outcome of deafness. Decades of poor academic performance, low levels of achievement, and poor reading skills among deaf children has resulted in a lackadaisical attitude among deaf educators toward the possibility of achievement.

Unfortunately, the effects of these attitudes are long lasting and, in effect, these attitudes prevent innovation and the use of new techniques to overcome the problems.

By keeping the language used with the deaf child simple, exposure to language and therefore, vocabulary growth, is unknowingly limited. It is the use of that very language, the richness and complexity of spoken language and its nuances, that is the basis for reading and literacy.

If the foundation of language is weak by virtue of its simplified, then the building can reach only so high as the child grows up. The stronger and more solid the foundation, the more the child can achieve both academically and intellectually.

Hearing children become literate because they have a strong language base and an internal understanding of the syntax of spoken language long before they ever see the written word.

It is common knowledge in deaf education that the average prelingually profoundly deaf child will graduate high school in America with a fourth grade reading level. The issue is that too many individuals honestly believe that nothing can be done to change this statistic, despite proof to the contrary.

In order for prelingually profoundly deaf children to read at a level competitive with hearing peers, the deaf child must have access to spoken language through vision alone. In the absence of normal language acquisition, the profoundly deaf child must be able to develop, through vision alone, an internalized understanding of the structure of spoken language.

Naturally, the deaf child should develop listening skills through auditory training and the use of hearing aids, just as speech articulation skills are taught. The idea is not to replace those skills, but rather to augment and supplement them in such a way that language can develop at a 'normal' pace.

If the deaf child cannot internalize spoken language, then he cannot make the jump from the literal reading taught in the first and second grades to the inferential reading skills taught in the fifth and sixth grades. Thus the deaf child becomes 'stuck' at the third grade level.

Hearing people mistakenly think that using sign is equivalent to using English. It is not. Sign is its own language, beautiful, majestic and graceful, using space and time to convey a concept or an image in a person's mind.

Sign is not spoken and has no written form and thus has its own syntax. It is incompatible with spoken English. Hearing people attach English words to signs so they can better understand the unspoken message. But hearing people must understand that signing is not using English, even if they sign in English word order.

The importance of signs in the life of a deaf person cannot be underestimated. It is important for deaf children to learn signs. Signs are the language of the deaf. Thus, a majority of profoundly deaf adults sign fluently, even those raised orally or with Cued Speech. It is important to note that the Cued Speech group of young adults also lipread with ease and have a natural tendency to swing back and forth between the hearing and the deaf world.

The deaf must be able to learn to read and write and be literate members of society. Being deaf does not mean being dumb. Hearing people underestimate the ability of deaf children if they expect no more than a fourth grade reading level from deaf children graduating high school.

Educators and parents have a responsibility and an obligation to graduate deaf children who can read and have the tools needed to attend the college of their choice and compete in today's job market. Anything less is an insult to the deaf.

The at-large Deaf Culture community should expect more from its educators. They should expect educators to teach them to read so they can compete in the hearing world we live in. They should expect enough of an education so they can be liberated from the newspaper pressrooms of yesterday's generation.

In order to achieve this, hearing parents and teachers must stop 'dumbing down' the language they use with deaf children. They need to use synonyms, adjectives and idiomatic expressions more freely. For example, once the child learns a word, switch to a synonym. This will increase vocabulary development. When the child learns couch, then it should become a sofa. Sad should be unhappy, disappointed, frustrated, angry or upset.

Different people say things in different ways. Do you turn off the light, turn out the light, shut the light or close the light? Do you sit on the chair or in the chair?

Use of expressions used by the deaf child's peers enhances his understanding and use of language. Use of descriptive words and other adjectives are important as well. Teeth are pearly white. Instead of saying "He is wearing a nice shirt" enhance the sentence with adjectives. "He is wearing a long-sleeve plaid shirt."

In 1966, when Dr. R. Orin Cornett realized that it was access to spoken language that prevented the deaf child from internalizing spoken language, he invented Cued Speech. Cued Speech was designed as an educational tool to overcome the obstacle to literacy.

In the past three decades, Cued Speech use has slowly grown. Today, its use is constant and solid, supported by a growing body of research. Cued Speech is used in most of the states and in approximately 20 countries. It has been translated for use in 52 languages.

It is the only educational tool available that is proven to overcome the literacy problem in deaf education. Through a closed system of hand cues, which represent the phonemes of spoken language, Cued Speech provides the deaf child with access to spoken language through vision alone.

It is important to recognize that Cued Speech is not a language, but rather an educational tool that can be used in many types of programs.

Since it is so simple to learn and can be taught in under 20 hours, it is more easily mastered by hearing parents of deaf children. These hearing parents are the ones that over 90 percent of deaf children go home to at the end of the day.

Hearing parents often express an overwhelming feeling of liberty with language after they begin using Cued Speech. They feel they can say anything and not be limited by the signs they know or what can be lipread.

Cued Speech allows the deaf child to internalize the syntax of spoken language prior to learning to read. Moreover, when the hearing people around the deaf child feel that what they express will be understood, they are more apt to use language richer in vocabulary and idiomatic expression.

The end result is the increased use of natural language by the hearing person (who cues) when conversing with the deaf child. This results in the development of natural language in deaf children exposed to Cued Speech.

Case in point. Instead of a mother asking if the deaf child wants cereal for breakfast, she says "Do you want Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies or Froot Loops?"

Or this. A mother commands her child to brush his teeth before bedtime. When the child resists, they become embroiled in a confrontation. A mother who feels free to communicate and use language will engage the child with an explanation of the importance of brushing to prevent cavities and keep the teeth clean and pearly white.

Once these types of verbal exchanges between the parent and child become routine and habitual, language will develop more naturally.

The proof of the success of Cued Speech is in the pudding. Studies show that prelingually profoundly deaf children who have used Cued Speech for three years or more, read at the same level as their hearing peers in public schools.

In addition, this internalized understanding of spoken language translates into a natural use of the English phonologic code and its syntax. The excellently written and grammatically correct written work of adult deaf cuers is evidence of this point.

Moreover, deaf children who are exposed to Cued Speech see pronunciation, and differences in dialect used in different parts of the country. Speech therapists report that it is much easier to correct pronunciation and teach sounds with children familiar with CS, because they have an internal understanding, a mental image, of where the sounds go.

Studies also show that CS users have superior skill at lipreading when the cues are removed, primarily due to their exposure to what language is supposed to look like on the lips. As adults, they function as essentially oral adults in a hearing atmosphere.

Hearing parents of deaf children who begin to use Cued Speech speak overwhelmingly about the increase in their overall quality of life. They talk about the ease of communication and the freedom to discipline their deaf children once they are confident of being understood.

"After all," said one parent, "How can you discipline a child who doesn't understand what you are saying?"

Other parents who use Cued Speech point to the fact that their children are more apt to be placed in regular education classes, supported by the use of a Cued Speech Transliterator, since those children have language skills equivalent to their hearing peers and can keep up with the classwork.

In fact, with few exceptions, most Cued Speech children are placed in regular education classes.

More importantly, Cued Speech opens up the avenues of communication between the hearing members of the family and the deaf child. In the early part of this century, a sore point among adult deaf people was poor communication between the hearing and deaf members of the same family.

Many deaf people believed that if hearing people learned signing, the communication problem among deaf and hearing family members would be overcome. Unfortunately, the reality is that hearing parents have a poor performance record with learning signs. And even if they were more adept at learning signs, this would not resolve the literacy problem that pervades deaf education and haunts the deaf community.

The literacy issue has its roots in hearing people's perception that signing is another way to express themselves in English. It is not. It is imperative that we recognize that sign is a different language altogether - and that it is a language with no written form.

Since Cued Speech is a closed system, one can learn it in a limited amount of time and be able to say anything, even onomatopoeia. Parents who use Cued Speech report their children learn other languages with ease. Reports of multi-lingual deaf children are not unusual among Cued Speech users.

Educators and parents need to stop 'dumbing down' language for deaf children and raise their expectations. There is no reason deaf children can't learn to read. It just needs to be accessible.

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