True bilingualism?

Cate Calder has worked in the field of deafness, primarily interpreting, for 15 years. She takes a fresh look at how deaf children could become truly bilingual.

The BDA's BSL charter states:

- Give all children the option of a bilingual education in BSL and English

The BDA's Education Policy Statement includes:

(All deaf children) …have the right to acquire and use at least 2 languages: BSL and the language of their families

Clearly the BDA recognises the importance of access to **both** languages BSL and English. But how is this issue being tackled?

When we discuss 'bilingualism' are we really talking about ensuring deaf children have access to and fluency in two complete and quite separate languages, one signed and one spoken? Or, is the focus only really on promoting use of sign language and letting that old problem of English sort itself out somehow?

The Deaf community have fought long and hard for British Sign Language to be recognised for what it is – a whole and complete language in it's own right. But my observation is that the integrity of both BSL and English is being compromised by an educational approach that seems to offer at best only a certain level of 'communication' in both languages but mastery of neither. Let me give an 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 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** language? No.

Let us look at some well researched facts:

- Approximately 96% of deaf children are born into hearing families
- All children have a main 'window of opportunity' when they are most able to absorb and develop language, this is from birth to 4 years of age
- NDCS research found that 81% of hearing parents with a deaf child never learn to fully communicate with that child
- American research found that 86% of hearing parents who learned to sign are no longer using any sign language by the time their child is 6 years old

How does a child, any child learn language? Actually, children do not have to 'learn' language in the formal sense of the word, they simply *absorb* it:

- Through **constant** exposure in everyday face-to-face situations
- From people who are **good models** of that language ie fluent and able to give a complete representation of that language
- By observing the **context** that language is used in eg seeing the sign/word 'cat' used whenever a cat walks in

Deaf children, in a bilingual model, require full, easy access to:

- Good quality BSL
- Good quality English
- The language of the home from an early age

Deaf adults are the keepers of sign language for the next generation of Deaf people and their input is vital if children are to access good quality BSL. But how is access to English to be achieved and how can deaf children in hearing families access **good quality early** language?

It can be done. There is a way to make spoken language fully visual for deaf children. They do not have to 'hear' the sounds of speech, they simply see them. They certainly do not have to try to reproduce those sounds verbally, they can simply 'cue' them (or indeed choose to sign their response).

A hearing family can learn this simple system in 20 hours. It can unlock just about any spoken language for deaf children, including ethnic minority languages. It offers the deaf child a visual representation of the sounds which make up speech. It uses only 8 different hand-shapes in 4 positions at or near the mouth. As the hearing person talks they simply add the visual 'cues' at the same time making every 'sound' perfectly clear.

A magical thing happens as spoken language becomes at least 96% lip-readable for the deaf child. They now do not have the burden of 'learning' this strange language of sound, they, just like every other child can simply absorb that language. This means that a deaf child, just like a hearing child, can have a (visual) memory of the sounds of speech, they can **think** in English! Hearing families can make full use of the 'language window' to ensure deaf children have early access to full and complete language.

Spanish research has shown that deaf babies as young as 6 months old understand cued language and research in Belgium has shown that deaf children from cueing families are able to read and write as well as hearing children. In France it is commonly used bilingually with French Sign Language.

I suggest a new model of 'bilingualism' in which deaf children could understand and use:

- English in all its richness when they are given access to it visually through cueing.
- British Sign Language in all it's richness when they are given access to positive Deaf role-models.

This clear and easy access to both languages could result in 'true bilingualism' for deaf people.

For more details about using cued language with deaf children, contact the Cued Speech Association UK (text): 01803 832784 or info@cuedspeech.co.uk or go to www.cuedspeech.co.uk