

Teachers Assistants and Support

By Nicholas Orpin

First Published in the BAToD Magazine in December 2010.

“I am enthusiastic and optimistic about deaf children’s education and what they can achieve”. I’ve just written those lines in an email to a mum I am teaching so she can start cueing English with her son. Even though he is 4 years behind in literacy and next year, when he leaves school he isn’t expected to make the minimum age-appropriate level in reading, his school maintains that he’s ‘doing ok’.

So, why be enthusiastic and optimistic? Well, firstly it’s because his mum refuses to believe that this is acceptable. She knows he’s bright and she knows that his potential is way, way above that. And secondly because my experience tells me that she has good reason to think that too.

I first came into contact with ToDs in France when we were an English speaking family over there and our then 2 year-old daughter was diagnosed with profound deafness and found them to be positive and realistic. But then again they needed to be! In France all speech therapy is in French, so we had to question if it was it right to carry on in English at home and maybe confuse her with that, or because English was *our* language and both our families were in England; should we risk cutting them off instead? It was an anxious time when all the solutions felt complex, which must be frustrating for the professionals who were advising us too. It really felt like we would have to give up on the experience and opportunity of being bi-lingual because of her deafness. I think that there was something in that which really *annoyed* me and made me want to question it.

The ToDs (and SLTs) were naturally focused on French; their point was that in the outside world deaf kids will have to rely on their hearing aids or cochlear implants and lip reading and to get what they want they will have to articulate to the best of their ability and to be fully literate. Deaf identity was also thought to be important and so when she got a place at primary school in a dedicated class, there were signing teachers on the teaching staff too for French sign language fluency and as positive role models.

The school was right; there is plenty of opportunity for struggling with lip reading out in the big bad world. The role of school was focussed on giving full access to a normal education through French, sound by sound – so the same as for hearing children then – but to do it visually. As people we are hard-wired for language and from birth the brain is expecting cues (albeit auditive ones) to kick start the whole process. So instead of an inaccessible sound cue, it is possible to complement it with an accessible visual prompt. These prompts or cues clarify the gaps for the sounds the pre-language deaf child can’t hear, which is why it’s called Cued Speech in English. In French it’s (deep breath) *lalanguefrançaiseparléecomplétée* or LPC for short!

Luckily it’s pretty straightforward to learn; Dr Orin Cornett, the American who came up with the system, got all 44 sounds of English represented by only 8 hand shapes moving through 4 places near your mouth as you move your lips in the normal way. We learnt the basics in a parents’ support group in around 20 hours but had to adapt those sounds/cues from French to English if we wanted to carry on speaking English at home. We then got a place on the annual Cued Speech summer school and learnt the extra English cues and never really

looked back. To help her know if we had switched from one language to another we started cueing English right-handed and French left-handed so she knew which shapes on the lips to read.

The effect on her language development was brilliant. It meant she was learning French like her hearing brother and could see what a horrendous French accent I had and all my mistakes too! "Dad, it's LA table, not LE!!" I think that is what cueing language gave me; it allowed me to be the same dad to both children; not a good one necessarily, but the same one.

At school her results were age appropriate across the board and she progressed through the school system normally. Children are forced to stay down a year if they don't make the grade. She could have been 13 in a class of 11 year-olds. Because she had full language, her transition to literacy was boosted. At home her language developed too, she took part in family life in English and made the transition to literacy in English too. Even though she read English books that were below her age group we didn't overly worry or force it to go faster but rather encouraged the pleasure of reading. This I believe is common for most bilingual children and we took into account that she was now properly tri-lingual with French sign language.

At the end of August 2010 we uprooted from France and moved back to England. The children are now at school together and it's going well. Pearl benefits from the services of a hearing impaired resource and for the moment has full access to the teacher's lesson through CS and is mostly in the top set despite never having had a formal English lesson before. Meanwhile I have become the Cued Speech Association UK's newly appointed Development & Fundraising Officer.

Since our arrival in the UK and my taking up my new position, I see that that I have still so much to learn. It makes me angry, but also motivates me in my work when I read that many deaf school leavers have inadequate reading levels, that huge numbers grow up in families who never fully communicate with them and a third of deaf adults rely on benefits. There is plenty of research, real case studies and information on CS available, but I'm amazed how little of the up to date information is getting through to the people who need it most.

Families and professionals would do well know what CS is, how it can reach the goals of inclusion in family life through that family's own language (ideal for the UK's multicultural system too) and how it facilitates full access to education and age appropriate literacy for profoundly deaf children. If anyone has any suggestions/questions on how it might help any children in their care then please get in touch and we could try and work on it together.

It's strange because we are now going through the process that we went through over a decade ago as new-to-all-this parents. I am discovering what a statement is, what MLx means, the difference between a TA and a CSW. That SLT isn't an illness and ToD and BATOD are acronyms and not actual words Todd and bat odd. And yet when I ask for advice on language development from a parent's charity, I got a book on 'Communicating with Deaf Babies' and I read, 'Of course, children [do] need to have some knowledge of the language in order to recognise what is being cued, so although it can give visual access to spoken language for deaf children, it is not actually a method of promoting language and communication development on its own', I am appalled. For me, the 'not' should be between

'do' and 'need'. I saw some research findings that show that hand cues are interpreted as *phonological* gestures and induce activity in the language-related circuits of the brain!

I would like to see British ToDs getting CS training as part of their professional qualification, as their French counterparts do, so they can experience it and support and advise families appropriately. It is a tool for the deaf to access English that is being denied them. There is plenty that parents fear after the diagnosis of deafness in their child but of course there is much to praise and be thankful for too. On a personal level I can't express how much it has meant to me to have met some brilliant ToDs and TAs along the way. That's why I am enthusiastic and positive about what deaf students can achieve when they get full visual access to English.