

Bilingualism - two different models

Anne Worsfold, Executive Director, Cued Speech Association UK

Few can argue with the aims of sign bilingualism. What better than to have a deaf young person leaving the education system fully fluent in BSL and English? But how can this be achieved?

In most bilingual situations, for example in a hearing family where both English and French are spoken, we would expect both languages to be presented naturally in their complete form - and in a mode which is fully accessible to the child. But can deaf children have full access to both BSL and English?

The problems

Deaf children's access to BSL is not a problem for 10% of children who have BSL-using parents - but what about the remaining 90%? If their parents learn and use BSL - a big 'if' - then this should produce children with age-appropriate use of BSL. However, in practice the family is required to be the primary deliverers of a language they have yet to learn. This is not an empowering situation for parents. Although the families' capacity to communicate in BSL may improve over time, the crucial time that a young child needs access to a complete, grammatical language is in its first few years and this is usually before the family is competent in BSL. Visiting CSWs and BSL-using ToDs have an important role to play but it is hard to compensate for impoverished language within the home. Consequently many BSL-using children will arrive at school with delayed language. Despite expert and dedicated teaching, problems of grammar and vocabulary may remain. Even if the deaf child acquires full, grammatically correct, vocabulary-rich BSL they still may not be able to communicate with their parents... and... they have yet to learn English. Hearing families are perfectly able to model English (or the home spoken language), but how accessible is it to a deaf child?

One solution to these problems is to modify the aims of bilingualism and concentrate on ensuring that children learn primarily written English. But is this full bilingualism? Additionally, BSL is not a direct or easy route to literacy in English. Do children brought up this way have average, or even functional, written English skills? The evidence, and the increasing use of 'modified' language would suggest that they do not.

The sound-based system of Cued Speech can be learnt in 20 hours, so twin problems of
a) complete and early access to the home language in a hearing family and
b) full and easy access to sound-based language leading to age-appropriate literacy
can be overcome by its use in the home.

But how can Cued Speech fit into a bilingual model?

Different models of bilingualism

Models in France and in Minnesota, USA both use Cued Speech with sign languages but are otherwise quite different.

Français Complet Signé Codé (FCSC) There are over 3,000 families using Cued Speech in France. Some families use Français Complet Signé Codé (FCSC) which promotes the use of cued French words and signs in one sentence. It is mainly used with very young children in the home. The prepositions, articles etc are cued and the key words are signed. The rationale is that children can benefit from being able to access sound-based words, with all the attendant advantages, but can also benefit from being able to communicate in sign. Also, parents who have not yet learnt a particular sign can use the cued word. Children are expected to move from FCSC to using English and French Sign Language (FSL) separately as they mature.

Understandably, this model has its critics - but it is widely used and it seems to work well. An English parent whose deaf child is being brought up in France with cued French and FSL at school and cued English, sometimes in a FCSC format, at home wrote: 'Pearl is tri-lingual and adapts her language to the person she is with. When signing with other deaf children she has the skills of a natural signer - spatial awareness, expression, fluidity, intensity etc. At home she prefers English, clarified by Cued Speech. She is doing very well at school both in French and LSF. We have had subtitled English TV at home for a few months now and we are amazed at her progress. She has actually come out with things like 'bog off!' (yes, the BBC is not what it used to be). We still continue using FCSC in English with Pearl though using fewer signs - depending on the context really. It works for us and I feel it's a pity more people don't adopt this method.'

Bilingualism in Minnesota USA - keeping the languages of English and ASL separate A program in Rosemount, Minnesota, USA aims for full bilingualism but takes quite a different route. Assistant Director Kitri Larson Kylo writes: 'We recognise the parents' right to be a critical decision-maker regarding the language of instruction to be used with their child in the school setting. What we are trying to achieve in our program is unambiguous access to, and immersion in, the languages of both American Sign Language (ASL) and English.

The Intermediate School District 917 Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Learners has included cued English (using the system of Cued Speech to convey the English language) as a language of instruction in its bilingual program for approximately ten years. Prior to this time cueing was used with individual students rather than on a program-wide basis. We have 35-40 students (fluctuates) in the early childhood, elementary and secondary levels in our centre-based regional program.

It is deemed as critical to our program to have staff who are deaf themselves to serve as both language and role models for our learners. We currently have three teachers and two assistants who are deaf. All have superior skills in ASL. As ASL language models, they are not expected to become fluent cuers, however one also has superior skills in cued English and several others have learned to cue, but are less fluent. Other teachers and assistants who are hearing serve as the English language models, using cued English paired with spoken English. Those teachers also have advanced ASL skills. It is a powerful role model for the learners that a teacher who is deaf is also able to serve as an English language model, which she does a good majority of the instructional day.

We strive in our program to keep the languages of English and ASL separate. Each language may be used to support the learning of the other through a technique we call 'sandwiching', meaning an utterance or phrase presented through cueing may be followed by the same sentence signed for clarification, and then followed by cueing the target sentence again. We tend not to see signing and cueing mixed up in the same sentence, although it does occasionally occur when a child new to learning a language will slip a cued word in to a signed sentence, or vice versa.

We are a public school program, and while some children enter our program at an early age, some enter at what we regard as 'late' ages. Support at home also varies; some parents cue or sign, but some parents do neither. We also have children who come from other countries where they did not have previous access to any, or good, amplification, language access and education.

Our learners have a range of preferred languages and communication modes both at school and at home. Some students are able to easily code-switch between spoken English, cued English and ASL; other students are most comfortable communicating via spoken English, and others prefer sign language. We have both deaf and hard of hearing students and we have found that, while many of our hard of hearing students can communicate to various degrees via spoken and/or cued English, they have benefited greatly from learning ASL both to communicate with each other and in many other facets of their lives.

We assess the reading, English language and vocabulary skills of our learners annually using standardized tests normed on hearing learners. These include the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - III (PPVT-III), the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test - 4th edition, and for language, the Test for Auditory Comprehension of Language - 3rd edition (TACL-3), or the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals - 4th edition (CELF - 4). For various reasons, mainly the lack of standardized tests, the students' ASL skills are assessed using informal assessment procedures.

In terms of results, we are finding that, on average, our students make at least one year of gain in their reading and language skills per each year of instruction. Some students make significantly larger gains of up to three years of gain in one year. We have other students whose language and reading development is impacted by other learning and environmental factors who make less than a year's gain per year of instruction. However, with learners who do not have other learning challenges, we are finding these children make at least one year of gain per one year of instruction, even when the parents do not cue at home. When the parents cue at home, and even for some of our other learners who have good home support via signing, we have seen several years of gain per one year of instruction.'

More information about the Minnesota program is available from:
[Cued Speech Association UK](#) and also on [our website](#).

March 2006