

Using Cued English & BSL to teach phonics to profoundly deaf pupils.

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Historical Context

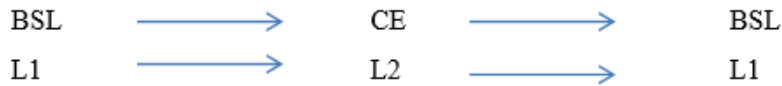
Cued Speech (CS) was originally implemented at the Academy in 1979 in what was then called the Partially-Hearing Department. Essentially, CS augmented the oral regime of the time and many teachers were enthused by its impact on the language development of these children. However, in 1985 Signed Supported English (SSE) became the mode of communication and CS died out almost completely within the next ten years. The population of students was also changing as the partially-hearing students were mainstreamed more and more. The English levels of the students were not improving and statements, such as, "...virtually no child with deficient phonological skills develops reading ability with ease" (Stanovich, West & Cunningham, 1991; 220) highlighted the issues that deaf children faced in trying to become literate because of their limited phonological development (Gray, 1995; Sterne, 1997). In 2006, the same year as the Rose Report was published, the school was going through a transformation to a Sign Bilingual communication policy. SSE, by that time, was known to deliver poor English grammar as well as decontextualized sign (Knight & Swanwick, 2002). With new understandings about the need for deaf children to develop phonological awareness (Knight & Swanwick, 2002; Kyle & Harris, 2006), we decided to look again at CS to see if it could provide this skill for our students. CS gives deaf children visual access to English at language level enabling them to turn English into 'inner speech' which would lead to 'written speech'. The name Cued 'Speech' does sometimes lead to the misunderstanding that it is a tool to 'make deaf children speak' rather than give them understanding of English; we wanted it to help us develop phonological awareness and face to face interaction in English so we renamed our methodology as Cued English (CE) within the school.

The Sandwich

How could CE be used to meet our goal of a fully bilingual environment and deliver complete access to English? While sign bilingualism supports the use of BSL as the main language of instruction to deliver a broad curriculum and thus develop positive deaf identities in the students, a major goal is still the development of literacy. To do this, there needs to be a bridge between the students' preferred language (L1), BSL, and the target language, in this case written English (L2) (Mayer; 2012). We decided to use CE with BSL using a sandwich technique based on Dodson's (1967) model for learning another foreign language.

Dodson (1967) proposed the sandwich procedure for teaching foreign language dialogues. Dodson argued that it gave the most direct form of access to meaning possible by using oral mother-tongue equivalents at sentence level to convey the meaning of unknown words or structures in the L2. Interference from the mother tongue would be reduced because the teacher would say each dialogue sentence twice, with the mother tongue version (ensuring the conveyance of meaning) sandwiched between.

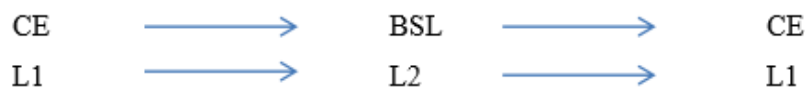
Figure 1. BSL users who have had little or no English (either orally or through Cued English).



The emphasis of this model is to use the strengths of L1 (BSL) to introduce L2 (English text) sequentially.

As the students become more skilled with understanding English text, the use of BSL can diminish and the focus on English could increase. It is important to take a flexible approach for each child based on their language progress in both L1 and L2. The next sandwich model is used when the comprehension of English text has become stronger but BSL has continued use to ensure comprehension.

Figure 2. BSL users who also show good comprehension of English text.



When conversations are being held using BSL and CE with students who are competent users of both languages, the last bit of the sandwich is often dropped or the conversation would become too laboured. The interlocutor is aware, however, when the student may need support or repetition.

Print based literacy development requires the development of face to face language, English. The conversational form of language is so important that it has been called the engine of literacy development. Poor language and reading development in deaf children is linked to their failure to acquire conversational forms of language (Eleweke & Rodda, 2000). The above examples of sandwiching can also help deaf students develop face to face English from their strengths in face to face BSL. Using this 'bridge', then, not only supports literacy directly by giving students direct access to the written word, but also indirectly in that the skills of the conversational form of English can be developed face to face.

Outcomes

Code-related constructs:

Phonemic Awareness – students were able to use the cues for the 44 sounds of speech to develop a strong recognition of each phoneme as pure (visual) sound. They were able to progress from no phonemic awareness, or very low level (one or two phonemes recognised) to being able to recognise from Cues or spelling choices– all 44 phonemes.

“Letters and Sounds” – linking phonemes to spelling choices is supported by use of adapted THRASS (Teaching Handwriting And Spelling Skills) synthetic phonics resources. Each

student can now give a range of spelling choices for each phoneme and give the appropriate phoneme from given spelling choices.

Language-related constructs:

Language is unique among precursor abilities in its pervasiveness for both early and later reading competencies and for the duration of its effect on reading comprehension and for its effect on reading comprehension as code breaking turns into meaning making (Dickinson, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2010)

Focus initially was on using the system of Cued English to develop phonemic awareness but without the context at language level this can only be of limited benefit. Using the sandwiching techniques Cued English, at language level, is now showing real impact on the students learning. Students are encouraged to receive a message in Cued English (this is often written out as well) then they discuss their ideas on everything from the spelling choices to the meaning of words. They will then work out for themselves how to represent the meaning of the message in BSL (checking no use of inappropriate signs that misrepresent meaning e.g. 'in' signed as 'inside' when meaning 'in the sky'). They then cue the whole sentence from reading it often showing excellent self-correction skills as they adjust their visual representation to the correct phoneme un-helped by the spelling choices (tree/z/ rather than tree/s/). They may choose to 'bridge' between the two languages using a blend of signs and cued words (we have called this language switching SignCueing), they follow the English word order and cue every word unless it is too complex to cue, these words they then represent with a sign. It is fortunate that the high frequency words (e.g. as, in, on etc.) in English are simple to cue and so do not ever get 'missed out' or misrepresented as they may with sign-supported English.

An example of a SignCued sentence by a student (C – CE / S – Signed):

See (C) the (C) sun (C) in (C) the (C) sky (S) and (C) the (C) blossom (S) on (C) the (C) trees (S).

Giving the students the means to understand and discuss the differences between the two languages and practise representing the same message in each, has enabled them to improve not only their L2 English skills but also their L1 BSL skills too.

It is interesting to note that no English lip-patterns are used by students when they are conveying a message in BSL but when they use any cued words they spontaneously use appropriate English lip-patterns.

The ease of cueing high frequency words – in, on, the, is, it, at etc has been beneficial to staff who are still developing their skills in BSL. They are able to visually represent a spoken sentence fully by blending the two systems until their skills reach a level that they are able to use clear unvoiced BSL and voiced Cued English as appropriate.

Challenges

Obviously a drawback of this technique is the length of time involved in teaching two languages but there may be benefits in interlanguage transfer (Knors & Marschark, 2012).

Language interference, or language switching, may also be used by bilingual children. This interference may simply be as a result of knowledge and skills not yet possessed in L2 that is possessed in L1. The use of L1 with L2 reduces the problem of ignorance and frustration.

Some staff have problems with phonemic awareness, for example one member of staff cued /boɪs/ for boys instead of /boɪz/. Learning to cue the words as they sound, rather than as they are written, is difficult for some. As students, especially those who are still learning cueing, may have difficulty with accents, some staff change their pronunciation to provide continuity in the class e.g. King /kɪŋ/ could have been pronounced by some accents as /kɪŋg/ so there has been an agreed pronunciation at the start. As the students get used to the system, an exploration of accents provides interesting conversations and is not avoided.

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