

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

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## **A Reading Program for 13 Year-old Boy**

**Michelle Pandian, M.S.**

# A READING PROGRAM FOR 13 YEAR-OLD DEAF BOY

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## **Developing a Reading Program for a Deaf Person**

This article is about setting up a reading program for a 13 year old deaf boy. The name is not provided here. But the case presented here is a true case. Lessons derived from handling this case and the processes and ideas that led to the program are shared here for the benefit of deaf education teachers and parents. As the sign language specific to the Indian contexts is still in the evolving stage with the hope of reaching the Indian population as soon as possible, my examples presented here take the help of ASL.

## **Aspects to be Considered**

For a young deaf student reading below grade level with characteristics such as this boy - profound hearing loss, exposure to ASL from birth, and intelligible speech - several aspects must be considered when setting up a reading program to fit his needs. These include the materials used for reading, classroom communication methods, the instructional emphasis, and strategies used for teaching reading in the classroom. Each of these categories, when combined, will provide appropriate support for the student to increase his reading comprehension and achievement level.

## **Lack of Connections**

Research done on deaf college students has shown that many of them finished high school not realizing the direct connection between learning English and being able to communicate through reading and writing (Meath-Lang, Caccamise, and Albertini, 1982).

There is a fundamental lack of connection between what is taught in the English classroom and what the deaf student needs to have for communicative competence. At the core of this problem is the fact that learning English and learning to be a skilled reader have not been presented in the context of what the deaf reader can see directly relates to his or her life.

## **First Step- Provide Materials That Interest Them**

For the student in question here, the first step to providing him with an appropriate program to develop his reading skills is to provide him with reading material that #1 interests and motivates him, and #2 is real-life material he will be dealing with on a daily basis. Although it is certainly important to expose readers of all hearing levels to classics like Shakespeare, it is more important to expose deaf readers to reading material to which they can relate.

## **Challenge Them!**

Barbara Strassman (1997), in her article on metacognition and reading, notes that because of their notoriously low reading levels, deaf readers are often provided with only low-level reading material (140). If a reader is never challenged by the reading experience, how will their skills be tested and expanded? Language learning should be presented as a fun and exciting experience. Jane Arnold (1998) uses Language Journals with her class for this purpose and others (71).

Students are continually challenged to find interesting uses of language and comment about them in their journals – this alerts the students to the use of written language to communicate and helps them analyze it in a real-world perspective. We must also ensure that this young man is provided reading material that he is interested in and that is slightly challenging for him so as to encourage him to develop stronger and more skilled reading habits. Authentic reading materials such as real, contemporary newspaper articles or magazine articles as well as popular novels should be used to motivate and help the student see the connection with learning better decoding skills and the ability to participate fully in the reading community (Reading Strategies, ((no author name given)) 191). When readers can see the purpose for which they are learning and studying certain materials, then they have more intrinsic motivation to internalize the process – it gives them a reason and clarifies the need to achieve.

## **Follow Total Communication in Face-to-Face Communication: Meet the Needs of Individual Students in Various Ways**

For face-to-face classroom communication with this student, I recommend following the Total Communication philosophy, which includes meeting the individual student's needs in a variety of ways. First, this student is from a Deaf family, which exposed him to ASL from birth. His first language is ASL, and English is a second language to him. This could account for the lag in his reading level. As educators, we need to capitalize on this student's ASL background by providing face-to-face communication in ASL. As ASL has its own grammar and structure, it will provide a basis for the student to learn English as an L2. According to Wilbur (2000), this will help develop his "cognition, socialization, and an age appropriate knowledge base, as well as providing a basis for learning English and English literacy" (98).

## **Continued Phonemic Training**

A second part of the Total Communication package I recommend for this student involves continued phonemic training. As he currently has intelligible speech, he is probably using some of his residual hearing to help decode the speech signal and reproduce it as well. This characteristic can be extremely helpful in advancing the student's reading level. Research quoted by Mussleman (2000) and by Schimmel, Edwards, and Prickett (1999) shows a direct positive correlation between deaf students' reading achievement levels and the use of phonemic coding and decoding practices.

## **Teaching of Dolch Words and Bridging Techniques**

The Fairview system for reading encourages this type of training for all students, since there is so much research that supports this fact. Another part of the Fairview system incorporates explicit teaching of Dolch words and Bridging techniques to help deaf readers translate multiple meaning words into conceptually correct ASL signs. I recommend this technique for this student to help him make sense of higher level reading material that often contains idioms, multiple meaning words, and figurative language, which can be confusing when translated word-for-word (Schimmel, Edwards, and Prickett, 1999). These can be incorporated into the TC package by providing the student more access to printed English.

## **English as a Second Language for Deaf Students**

This is something that educated mothers in major metropolitan areas in India have begun to do. There should be adequate support for this for the children coming from poorer and less educated families. Hopefully NGOs and State Government agencies will work together in this area.

The instructional emphasis for this student should be on English as a Second Language (ESL) strategies, as ASL (or Indian Sign Language when it begins to be widely used and interpreted) is his first language and English really is his second language. Much research has been done that examines deaf students reading and writing abilities and has found that the errors deaf students make are very similar to mistakes made by ESL students (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Marianne Celce-Murcia (1991) suggests a holistic approach to teaching English as a second language that includes focused grammatical lessons with the goal of students becoming more fluent in both the spoken and written second language – areas where this student can succeed.

Since ESL students learn language in similar ways as deaf students learn English, she recommends that teachers start with a focus on semantic “grammar-meaning correspondences,” which again emphasize the importance of conceptually correct presentation of text in ASL.

## **Use of Visual Cues**

Using numerous and appropriate visual cues and the learners’ own past and current life experiences Celce-Murcia (1991) suggests students can wrestle with items like past tense and present tense verbs (regular and irregular), possessives, and plurals (regular and irregular) in a discourse analysis – that is they reflect on grammar patterns and rules using stories or communication instances familiar to themselves. This will help the student build confidence and comfort working with reading material.

## **A Whole Language Approach**

A whole language approach combined with explicit teaching of reading strategies would be appropriate for helping this student develop English literacy. Whole language approaches include several principles that will be beneficial to this young man (Instructional Systems ((no author's name given)), 122-124).

### **Some Points That Need to be Focused Upon**

**First**, the focus of written language exposure is on the student's construction of meaning – the student will be able to decode the text and build meaning internally through a conceptual understanding based in ASL.

**Second**, “language and literacy are perceived as social learning events” (122). In other words, language does not develop on its own with a solitary person. Writing and reading are processes that involve others – authors, readers, audiences, etc. Cooperative learning and small group work help students to build meaning from texts as they work through more difficult passages together. This is the type of learning environment from which this student would benefit.

**Third**, whole language theory focuses on the use of authentic material. As was suggested earlier, language is used in many ways in real life, and students should have exposure to real-life language experiences in the classroom if they are to value literacy skills (122).

**A fourth principle** of the whole language system focuses on demonstrating reading as a process in the classroom. Many deaf students think that skilled readers “get it right” the first time and don't realize those skilled readers have internalized different processes that lead to successful reading comprehension.

### **Teach Strategies Explicitly**

Although the whole language system suggests teaching these reading strategies implicitly, I disagree. Deaf and hearing students alike need reading strategies taught explicitly and practiced in the classroom.

Methods of accessing background knowledge, identifying the main idea, and using the typical structure of literature to facilitate comprehension are not automatic processes in children. The classroom teachers for this student must model the processes for him and practice each strategy many times before he will gain automaticity with them.

According to the author of *Reading Practices with Deaf Learners*, strategies used by experts for reading comprehension during reading and after reading also need to be modeled by the teacher (Reading Strategies, 189). Students need guided practice in using skills such as morphographic analysis (Gaustad, Kelly, Payne, and Lylak, 2002), concept

mapping, semantic feature analysis, KWL, and general decoding strategies (Reading Strategies, 195-211).

Students that are explicitly taught how to interact with the text before, during and after reading, and encouraged to use these practices independently, are more likely to achieve successful self-monitoring for comprehension (Strassman, 1997; Reading Strategies, 236; Yore, 2000). They are also more likely to use repair strategies effectively. It is for these reasons and those I suggested before that I recommend using a whole language approach with explicit strategy instruction, ESL language instruction, and authentic reading materials presented in a Total Communication package to facilitate this student's reading comprehension success.

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Chapter 7 – Reading Strategies

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