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Randolph L. Mowry

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Point of View: A response to Tomas's "More thoughts about ASL and English from an old parent"

By: Randolph L. Mowry

In the summer 1995 issue of JADARA, Tomas advanced the idea that deaf people may be inherently unable to learn English well due to their lack of hearing. He stated that the auditory processing involved in English precludes most deaf people from becoming proficient in English. Tomas further stated that "English is why our deaf children are illiterate, not because they can't access ASL," and that using ASL as the way to teach English to deaf children "makes as much sense as trying to explain oranges with apples" (p.45).

Even though it may be true that hearing is the most efficient way to acquire a spoken language, to conclude that lack of hearing dooms most deaf people to spoken language illiteracy is simply too fatalistic. Tomas's statements are basically "blaming the victim." Furthermore, to conclude that ASL has no role in facilitating a deaf person's learning of English seems premature. The remainder of this response will address these two issues.

First I will comment on the use of ASL to facilitate learning English. Currently there are only a few bilingual programs in existence (e.g., Indiana School for the Deaf, the Learning Center in Framingham, Massachusetts). There is not a long history of use of this method or much research to evaluate it (McAnally, Rose & Quigley, 1994). In addition, there are a variety of issues related to bilingual approaches. For example, what level of ASL competency is needed? When should English be introduced? What form should the English take - signed

English, oral, combination? (McAnally, Rose & Quigley, 1994). For what aspects of English learning can ASL effectively be used? What is the role of technology? (Hanson & Padden, 1994). Therefore, understanding if using ASL is effective or not will be based, at least partially, on answering questions such as these and others.

Another critical factor in assessing the role of ASL in English literacy involves the quality of the practitioners. Researchers have documented that in simultaneous communication approaches (which are not bilingual), teachers who speak and sign at the same time do not produce accurate signed English (Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989). If ASL is to be a tool in teaching English to deaf children, then teachers will have to be skilled ASL users (a condition which is not true today). At this early stage in bilingual education with deaf students, we cannot be sure what will work or not. It is safe to assume that none of the existing approaches is truly right; there needs to be evaluation, experimentation and modification before there is some consensus about if and how ASL should be used.

The second issue relates to Tomas's seemingly fatalistic view of deaf people's chances to learn English competently. He seems to believe that only an elite few will become competent. Nonetheless, he hinted at a factor which impacts - a factor which does not necessarily have to be limited to a few deaf people. He noted that profoundly

deaf readers who read on a par with hearing people seem to process written material in a phonological manner (Hanson & Padden, 1987). Possibly we need to figure out how to help other deaf people to learn that technique. It certainly seems to be a fruitful area for practice and research.

But let us presume that each deaf person is not capable of learning phonological processing. Does that mean they cannot become proficient readers and writers of English? I am unwilling to make that conclusion because our knowledge about the effects of early profound hearing loss on the organization and functioning of the brain is not that developed. What little we know suggests that there are differences between the "deaf" and "hearing" brain. Kinsbourne and Hiscock (1983) concluded that the inability to use audition may lead to different laterality patterns. In turn, deaf people probably use different strategies for accomplishing cognitive tasks. For example, Clark (1991) found that deaf people use somewhat different visual information processing strategies than do hearing people (when scanning an array of numbers or ambiguous symbols). How such differences impact on reading skills is not clear. However, if deaf people have different strategies for processing information, and we do not understand how those strategies function, then maybe our approaches to teaching English (or other subjects) are inappropriate.

The crux of my discomfort with Tomas's opinions is that he seemed,

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by focusing on the inability to hear, to ignore the influence of instructional technique on the learner. We simply do not know enough about how the "deaf brain" differs from the "hearing brain." Even more importantly we do not know how those possible differences influence learning, and therefore our teaching methods.

Teaching methods for deaf children are basically derivatives of methods used with hearing children. Given the low academic performance of the majority of deaf children, the effectiveness of those methods are far from demonstrated. Until we have a better picture of how to teach deaf children, I will not blame them for their lack of English skills.

Of course, there is one more significant influence on language learning, whether spoken or signed - exposure to accessible language models during early childhood. In this respect the majority of deaf children differ significantly from hearing children. Most deaf children have hearing parents, most of whom do not learn to communicate effectively with their child through any modality. These children often enter pre-school and school programs without any significant language development. At a relatively late age these children start learning language. This problem with early language exposure has been identified for years, yet we have not found viable solutions. Once again, this situation is not the fault of the deaf person, it is an "environmental" problem.

Lack of hearing may not make learning a spoken language an easy task, but it should not be a disaster either. If we focus on learning how to teach deaf children in ways which are compatible with their characteristics, they will learn. Developing appropriate instructional techniques means improving our understanding of how the lack of hearing shapes cognitive functioning,

and determining the cognitive strategies deaf individuals use - a field that is in its infancy. Ultimately, this issue may turn on whether we still wish to persist in a "deafness-as-inferior" view vs. a "deafness-as-different" view. I prefer the deafness-as-different view.

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Randolph Mowry, Ph.D. is the Director of Programs in Deafness Rehabilitation at New York University, 35 West 4th Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10012-1172.