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# *Point of View: Comments From the Old Parent on Mowry's Response*

By: Anton J. Tomas

After reading Mowry's response (1995) to "More Thoughts about ASL and English from an Old Parent" (Tomas, 1995). I am compelled to respond in turn. Specifically, I wish to answer his charges that my views on the struggle most Deaf have learning English seem fatalistic and that I blame them for their difficulties. Hopefully further explanation will make my position clear. First I would like to point out what I believe is common ground for agreement.

Mowry states that the crux of his discomfort with my opinions is that by focusing on the inability to hear I seem to be ignoring the influence of instructional technique on the learner. He cites research suggesting that deaf people may employ different cognitive strategies for learning than hearing people and thus our usual approaches to teaching the Deaf, which are basically the same as those used to teach the hearing, may be inappropriate (Kinsbourne & Hiscock, 1983; Clark, 1991). He goes on to say that "(i)f we focus on learning how to teach deaf children in ways compatible with their characteristics, they will learn" (p.36) and "(d)eveloping appropriate instructional techniques means improving our understanding of how the lack of hearing shapes cognitive functioning and determining the cognitive strategies deaf individuals use." (p.36) What I hear Mowry saying is that the perspective of cognitive theory may hold an important key to understanding and improving Deaf literacy, which was the crux of my entire discussion

under Directions for Research (Tomas, 1995. See Endnote).

As I previously stated, much is still unknown about how the Deaf acquire literacy skills, but some of the findings we do have suggest that perhaps effective strategies for reading and writing can be taught the Deaf once all the elements involved are made clear (Tomas, 1995, p.46). One of these elements could be the kind of instructional techniques used as Mowry suggests. Another may be the finding that some superior Deaf readers use cognitive strategies similar to hearing readers when processing text (Hanson & Padden, 1987). Rather than presume some Deaf are not capable of learning phonological processing and temporal sequencing skills, let us instead assume they are capable of this if taught in a manner compatible with their cognitive functioning as a result of deafness. Would they not then learn as Mowry suggests? Perhaps "hearing brain" techniques with respect to processing specific information about text important to understanding a spoken language can be taught most Deaf through "deaf brain" techniques once we know more about these strategies.

Cognitive theory with its focus on what actually happens in the mind when we read and write seems especially relevant for guiding research to identify problems the Deaf have learning these skills and suggesting possible solutions, and with the insights obtained thus far, I certainly do not see this challenge as one that need remain the disaster it has been for most Deaf. Nonetheless, we may still be dealing with a situation not entirely subject

to environmental manipulation due to the lack of an intact auditory/articulatory mechanism basic to the normal development of competency in a spoken language for which the eye must now substitute. If the eye is a relatively inefficient processor of spoken language in the absence of an established auditory base, as appears to be the case, then the Deaf may always be at a disadvantage when confronted with the tasks of learning to read and write (McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1994, p. 267). This disadvantage should extend as well to those learning English as a second language through ASL, though a bilingual approach used in an environment consisting of fluent and mature ASL signers is likely to offer advantages unrelated to how English may in fact be processed in the mind when reading. Like hearing children, these deaf youngsters also bring to the task an accumulation of experiences already linked to a language with which to reason and understand what the written word means, though their hearing peers basically lack only decoding skills and do not have to learn another language entirely, especially one that may not be fully accessible through the eye alone. Perhaps the use of both ASL and intervening cognitive strategies would help to make sense of English. Ideally, for some, ASL may be the best way to explain and talk about the various characteristics of a spoken language such as its syntax and alphabetic system whereas specific cognitive strategies may need to be employed to actually understand what is being "said" during the act of reading. Additionally, it would seem that

such strategies for the Deaf may ultimately have to follow along the lines of those used by hearing people since English itself is rooted in the ability to recognize sounds in temporal sequences to derive proper meaning from its printed symbols (McAnally, Rose, Quigley, 1994, p. 265).

In any case, much work lies ahead in evaluating the role of ASL as a vehicle to teach English to the Deaf as well as help them access other parts of a regular education curriculum. At this time the logic and promise of bilingualism is largely speculation but, as Mowry states, it would be premature to suggest ASL has no role to play in deaf education. It is equally presumptuous to claim that it plays a leading role for all deaf children as argued by some (Lane, 1993; Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989).

Aside from their relationship to speech and hearing, reading and writing are also complex tasks involving numerous cognitive actions and it is not unusual to learn complex tasks in different ways according to our particular talents and inclinations (McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1994; Kelly, 1990). Thus, different teaching methods may work best for different learners. Rather than trying to find one solution for everyone, we might do better and appreciably increase any single child's chances for success by identifying which methods seem to work best for similar children. Such an approach may lead to greater success for all because it recognizes that not only may failure occur with any method, but the likelihood of success between methods may remain disappointingly the same if everyone is treated alike. The question can be raised has this been happening in deaf education for the past 180 years and, if so, what has been the impact on literacy. Stated more directly, if all deaf children from any school or

program are typically taught according to one methodology, does this have the cumulative effect of lowering the average literacy level of the Deaf across all schools regardless of which methodology each employs. All methods and philosophies - oral/aural, total communication, and ASL/English - appear to enjoy some research support which would seem to suggest each may be a valid way to achieve literacy for some deaf individuals (McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1994; Lutterman & Ross, 1991). The questions then become which individuals and why.

Deaf literacy is likely a multi-faceted problem that will not go away with the adoption of any single teaching method or philosophy, and this "one size fits all" mentality must give way to a genuine cooperative effort by all who have expertise to share and a stake in the future of deaf children in a hearing world. And we must learn to act in concert in ways that allow for our preferences when we have choices. Deaf kids are as different as hearing kids and these differences extend to the nature of their hearing loss as well as how they are best able to cope with it. Ideally, all options and teaching methods should be available in deaf education to be used when and where needed, and different options should be available to the same child as his needs change during his development. If bilingualism is seen as a desirable goal for some, then this same goal will be reached in different ways by different kids born to different circumstances. My kid happened to have hearing parents and an early oral education. He was also born with a profound hearing loss. Nonetheless, he graduated fourth in his class from high school (English gave him a few problems) and magna cum laude from Gallaudet University four years later. Today he is professionally employed and living in Virginia where he is

active in the Deaf community. Recently he also graduated from George Mason University with an M.S. from the Department of Operations Research and Engineering. Both his employer and the chair of the department are encouraging him to pursue a Ph.D.

My wife and I have learned important lessons raising our son. The hardest was accepting his deafness, for with that acceptance came the realization that he will always be handicapped in the hearing world no matter what we do. But it was not until then that we began to see the real opportunities around us that have helped him succeed despite his handicap, and this has been perhaps the most important lesson. *The possibilities in deafness are far greater than its limitations and its handicap need not be an insurmountable barrier if parents learn to help their child take advantage of them.* Unfortunately, parents can expect little help in this task from educators who often seem less interested in educating parents about deafness than seeking to convert them to the particular teaching philosophy used in their child's school. Little more than lip service is usually given to the importance of the parent role in deaf education and serious attempts to involve parents in the decision making process for their child are sadly lacking in many if not most communities (Lutterman & Ross, 1991). Ultimately, this issue may turn on whether educators are willing to trust parents with this responsibility. Historically they have not. By keeping parents in the dark they continue to justify making these decisions for them, thereby succeeding in perpetuating a belief system of which they are part that passes for education. Where this attitude prevails, they also succeed in continuing to disable parents along with their children by reducing the parent role to that of providing little

more than custodial care for a stranger who now belongs to the schools and never really has the opportunity to become part of the family into which they are born.

We have a choice. We can continue as we have or we can begin to focus our efforts on the family and find ways to make parents full and equal partners in deaf education. If we do not, all our efforts in this field may fall short of their promise.

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