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## Letter to the Editor

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## TO THE EDITOR

We have all been exposed, now, for a considerable length of time to the "new controversy" in the field of education for deaf children, that of whether to use American Sign Language or so-called Total Communication (signing in English) in the classroom with deaf children. Unfortunately, the controversy appears to be dichotomous—one has to choose which side one will be on. The two sides seem to be English and American Sign Language. Personally, I am of the opinion that there is really no reason for there to be an argument. Aside from the smoke screen which has been thrown up (that the "natural" language of deaf children is ASL), there doesn't seem to be a reasonable basis for an argument "for" ASL or "for" English. If it is true that there should be no argument, then the argument that English should be taught as a second language also falls by the wayside. This is not to say that ASL should be denied deaf children. Quite the opposite is true.

Except that language somehow evolved, and there is no historical certitude with regard to how that happened, there simply is no such thing as a "natural" language for anyone. If there were a natural language it seems logical to assume that there would then be but one language, a universal language. We can see how absurd such an argument is when we deal with spoken languages. We know for a fact that a language is learned. It may not be formally taught, but it is learned through the meaningful environmental experiences we have during our early years.

Why do I speak English? Because, as a baby and during my preschool years, the oral language environment was English and it was a meaningful environment because I had normal hearing and at least a modicum of intellectual capability. Why does anyone speak any language as the native language? For the same reason. In other words, the native language I have is simply due to an accident of birth and not to any innate characteristic(s) I may possess. It is a "native" language as opposed to a "natural" language. It is "natural" that I speak my "native" language because of environmental circumstances and not because of an innateness of the language I speak.

◊ Is the child who is born deaf in any different circumstance from me with regard to potential for learning a language? Basically, the answer is that the deaf child is not. However, the modality in which the language is expressed must be one which the deaf child may take advantage of—one which makes language accessible to the child. In other words, the modality must be a visual modality.

Some deaf children are able to learn their language through speechreading, so relatively few adjustments tend to be necessary for those children. The vast majority of children who are born deaf, however, appear to be unable to learn the language present in the environment through oral means, so a major adjustment is necessary. The major adjustment is commonly agreed to be a shift from an oral to a manual modality. This is where the controversy of ASL versus English seems to commence. ◊ A

There is one thing which always strikes home to me when people talk about communication and language when talking about the problems with which deaf children are confronted. The vast majority of people who work with deaf children and who sign will say that they use sign language. Every student I have ever had in college who had learned some manual communication (and some who seemed to have acquired a relatively high degree of skill) have told me, when I asked, that they had learned sign language at some place or other. Not one single student ever told me that they could converse with a deaf person in ASL. The students could sign, but they could not speak (sign) in American Sign Language. It always required several explanations and discussions before the students even began to understand that ASL is a separate and distinct language from English and that what they were doing was borrowing from the lexis of ASL to express themselves in English. This inability to understand the distinction is, to my mind, one of the major stumbling blocks we have in attempting to deal with the problem of language development in an objective manner which will, ultimately,

be to the benefit of deaf children. This distinction has resulted in two schools of thought about teaching deaf children.

o Most hearing (as opposed to deaf) teachers would probably argue that deaf children must learn English in order to take advantage of educational opportunities and that they (the hearing teachers), therefore, "use Total Communication" in their classrooms. Unfortunately the children seldom get exposed to English in a modality from which they may reasonably profit. That is, the teachers might orally produce complete English utterances, but their manual renditions are, for the most part, extremely incomplete. Thus, the children may be in an environment which professes to be an English one, but it is an environment in which English is inaccessible by reason of inadequate manual rendition.

On the other hand, we have an advocacy group which claims that ASL is the "natural language" of deaf children, and instruction should be carried out using this language. If this were true, all deaf children throughout the world would be born with a complete language system fully developed, that system being, of course, ASL. It just isn't so. It isn't so for the children in other lands and it isn't so for the deaf children born in this country. They all still have to go through the process of learning the language, whatever it may be.

Which language should be the language for deaf children? Are the ASL advocates right in making the claim that ASL should be the 'first language' of deaf children? Or are the hearing educators right in claiming that English is the most important element in a deaf child's education? Maybe they are both right.

There is much to be said for ASL on a cultural basis. It seems to be a language which is highly efficient and comfortable for deaf persons to use in their daily intercourse. There is a beauty to the language which cannot be captured by an oral language. There is poetry which is unique to the language. It provides a common bond for persons who cannot rely on an oral means of communication for interaction with others. It also may enhance the self image of deaf children and adults.

There is also much to be said for English. Education in many subject matter areas depends upon the ability to understand and use English. There are fields in which it is not possible to achieve without the ability to manage English. One simply cannot read and enjoy or learn from the (English) printed word unless one can manage English to a sufficient degree. Never mind the fact that it is also the most common language in our nation and the language of commerce. Competence in English may also help instill a feeling of confidence.

So, then, which is the "right language" to instill in deaf children? Which language should we choose? Properly, in my view, the choice should be for both.

To iterate a point mentioned above, the language environment should be one which is meaningful to the person who must extract meaning from it. It follows that the environment should not have two competing languages. Therefore, it seems obvious that **ONLY ONE** language should be used in **AN ENVIRONMENT** in which language learning is expected to occur, and **IN A MODALITY WHICH MAKES THE LANGUAGE ACCESSIBLE TO THE CHILD.**

It is my argument that a school can be organized in such a fashion that both English and ASL become possible for deaf children. The school could be organized around "language environments." Thus, in an environment where English is the language to be used and developed, everybody must use the language in the appropriate modality(ies). In an environment where ASL is the language to be used and developed, everybody must use ASL. Since ASL has no oral modality component, this obviates the need to render it orally. The requirement of which I speak, of course, applies to the adults in those environments.

There are a few problems which are bound to crop up in both environments. The problem in the English environment would be, and is, the fact that virtually nobody signs/spells everything they speak orally. In fact,

many people only render manually 50 to 75% of what they render orally. Some render even less. This being the case, 25 to 50% of the English in the environment is most likely inaccessible to the deaf children in the environment. It is virtually impossible to acquire language competence when up to half of the language stimuli are not received by the child expected to learn the language.

o The problem in the ASL environment would be the dearth of available models. Very few hearing people ever acquire even a modicum of competence in expressing ASL and even less competence in understanding ASL. The problem for such an environment, then, would appear to be simply one of the lack of available adult models.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that a school is organized around the notion I remarked upon earlier; the school building environment will be an English one and outside the school building, the environment will be an ASL environment. Let us further assume that everybody in the ASL environment has both expressive and receptive competence in ASL and that everyone in the English environment has competence in English, knows how to sign, and is committed to signing everything that is spoken. There still may very well be a severe problem based upon the fact that a common lexis will be used for both languages just as is currently the practice.

When we sign in English syntax, we actually borrow the signs we used from ASL. In other words, we use the lexis of ASL to sign English. Maybe, just maybe, this is one reason we are still experiencing relative failure in our schools with regard to the children's level of English competence. Maybe the children are in a constant state of confusion because they are actually being exposed to two different syntaxes and grammars, but only one lexis. Consequently, because there is no basis for differentiation, it is hardly likely that most deaf children will acquire English competence.

It should be our responsibility as professionals concerned with the educational success of deaf children to determine whether what I have said is true and, if so, to determine the means to overcome the problem. I have been concerned about the matter for a long, long time. I am not a linguist, far from it, but I have wondered why deaf children don't do better in gaining competence in English and so I have tried to arrive at an explanation on a logical basis. As a result, after I first arrived at the conclusion that we really cannot teach English competence in the classroom as we have been trying to do for so many years, I thought that the problem was that teachers and others in the school environment were simply not signing/spelling everything they speak.

As part of the basis for this reasoning was the news that a number of programs were being successful in instilling English competence in the children who were in the program. However, in those successful programs, it also seemed to be true that everybody signed/spelled in strict accordance with the requirements set up for the system being used, which was one of the Manual English systems. This meant, apparently, that ASL was not a significant factor. One language; one syntax; one grammar; one lexis. This seemed to be the difference.

The difference, then, between such programs where ASL is not a significant factor and programs where it is, is that the successful programs deal with English only (ASL is not a significant factor) whereas the other programs are attempting to focus on English while ASL is a significant factor and the lexis is common to the two languages.

The problem, if a common lexis is the problem, could be resolved if a different, clearly different, lexis were used in the English environment. In the auditory world, there are clear differences between languages. It is relatively easy to recognize one language as distinct from another on the basis of their sounds. We cannot parallel this feature in manual languages. The only viable alternative would seem to be to restrict the use of signs (with some fingerspelling) to ASL while limiting English to the use of fingerspelling, at least during the formative years, say up to the age of about 10 or 12 or 14.

This would require several radical departures, not the least being a change of attitude on the part of the adults in the English-only environment! Arguments against using fingerspelling as the mode for English expression, at least by the adults, tend to focus on adult concerns and not upon child concerns. For example, a common argument is that fingerspelling is too taxing visually. It may very well be too taxing for an adult who has not had the early year experience of a fingerspelling environment. But, is the same thing true about young children? I think you would have to agree that children are marvelously adaptable and flexible. So much so, that they would probably be able to adapt, generally, to a situation which we adults might find intolerable.

There are other arguments which are brought up in an effort to discourage or discredit the use of fingerspelling. The fact seems to be, if we dig below the surface, that most hearing adults prefer signing because, as a TV commercial I have seen for "sign language" teaching videotapes claims, "It's fun!" As teachers, as professionals who are in a business which is supposed to be responsive to and benefit deaf children, "fun" is not an appropriate criterion for consideration of modality. Whether it is easier for us to sign is not a pertinent issue. Whether what we do will benefit deaf children in our society is pertinent.

I have, as may be expected, personal experience with the use of fingerspelling as the mode of communication in a school environment. I taught at the Rochester (NY) School for the Deaf for three years. My first year, I didn't even know what signing/sign language was. I did learn the rudiments of signing (Miss Benson was my teacher at Gallaudet) the second year I was in the field, but the next two years I was teaching at the Rochester School again and only fingerspelled. I can tell you from personal experience that it is nearly impossible for me to read fingerspelling, but I think I know the reason and the way to overcome the problem, but that is not relevant here.

What is relevant, I think, is that we have the wherewithal to do the best job for the deaf children placed in the charge of a school for deaf children. What we may lack is the willingness to do what needs to be done.

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**Note:**

It has come to our attention that some copies of the July, 1991 issue are missing pages 20 through 27. If you have one of these copies please return it to the editor and we will be happy to replace it. Sorry for the inconvenience.