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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that the acquisition of English literacy skills is extremely difficult for many deaf students, that is, students with severe to profound hearing impairments. As a result, there has been a call for the development of bilingual and English-as-a-second-language programs for this population. This research review addresses three of the major issues related to this movement: (1) the nature and development of second language literacy, (2) the notion of a best method, and (3) the "practicality" of teaching English literacy skills to deaf students. The paper emphasizes that literacy in English as a first or second language is an interactive process that requires the development and coordination of both word-identification and comprehension skills. The paper concludes that, if English literacy is to be taught to deaf students, the focus should be on the common elements across theories and research, rather than on the selection of a particular theory or even a particular instructional method. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/DB)

Toward an Understanding of Deafness and Second-Language Literacy

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Deafness and Second-Language Literacy

Abstract

Research has demonstrated that the acquisition of English literacy skills has been extremely difficult for many deaf students, that is, students with severe to profound hearing impairment. As a result, there has been a call for the development of bilingual and English-as-a-second-language programs. This article addresses three of the major issues related to this movement: (1) the nature and development of second-language literacy, (2) the notion of a best method, and (3) the "practicality" of teaching English literacy skills to deaf students. The author concludes with general recommendations for research and practice.

Toward an Understanding of Deafness and Second-Language Literacy

Since the beginning of standardized tests in the 1900s, a number of studies have documented that most 18- to 19-year-old deaf students (i.e., with severe to profound hearing impairment) are reading and writing no better than the average 8- or 9-year-old student with typical hearing (Allen, 1986; Paul & Quigley, 1994). One interpretation of these findings is that most deaf students either have great difficulty with or are not able to learn English as a first language by the time they finish or leave high school. In addition, there has been a call for the development of bilingual and/or second-language programs entailing both American Sign Language and English (Luetke-Stahlman, 1983; Paul & Quigley, 1994; Reagan, 1985; Strong, 1988). With an ASL first-language base, it is assumed that students will learn English as a second language, particularly reading and writing skills. There is also some discussion of whether English literacy is a realistic goal for most deaf students (e.g., see discussion in Paul, 1993; Paul & Quigley, 1994). Whether English is taught as a first or second language, it is not difficult to find camps of scholars espousing differing approaches or holding a view that a particular "theory" of literacy is the best, and research and practice should adhere to this theory.

A number of complex issues have been raised in this brief introduction. This article addresses three of them: (1) the

nature and development of second-language literacy, (2) the notion of a best method, and (3) the "practicality" of teaching English literacy skills to deaf students. The article concludes with general research findings that should be considered in the development of instructional literacy techniques.

Second-Language Literacy

It has been argued that "second language reading .... is a phenomenon unto itself--not just a less accurate version of something else" (Bernhardt, 1991, p. 2). However, it can be shown that theorists/researchers have investigated second-language literacy within the framework of first-language literacy (Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1988; Paul, 1993). The comparison of first- and second-language literacy has revealed that (1) literacy development in English as a second language is similar to the development in English as a first language and (2) literacy development for deaf students is similar to that of hearing students (e.g., Hanson, 1989; King & Quigley, 1985; Paul & Quigley, 1994). This similarity refers to the use of strategies by readers/writers, the type of errors, and the nature of the underlying processes.

Relative to underlying processes, it has been demonstrated that second-language literacy, like first-language literacy, is an interactive, reciprocal phenomenon between readers/writers and the texts that they are trying to "compose" (e.g., Tierney & Pearson, 1983). That is, both readers and writers attempt to

construct or compose a model of meaning. Similar to first-language literacy, the composition or construction of meaning depends on the use of both bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processes refer to the use of word identification skills and top-down, or comprehension, processes entail the application of prior knowledge and inferential skills.

For both first-language and second-language literacy, it should be emphasized that there is a reciprocal relationship between word identification and comprehension. That is, word identification facilitates comprehension and comprehension facilitates word identification (Adams, 1989; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). This should not be construed as an either-or situation---word identification or comprehension; bottom-up or top-down; phonics or whole language. As stated by Adams (1990):

> Research indicates that the most critical factor beneath fluent word reading is the ability to recognize letters, spelling patterns, and whole words, effortlessly, automatically, and visually. Moreover, the goal of all reading instruction--comprehension--depends critically on this ability. (p. 14)

For both first- and second-language readers of English, the most striking research finding is that the interaction between word identification and comprehension seems to depend on the reciprocity between the conversational and written forms of

English. In other words, it has been argued that the foundations for literacy is the strength of the connection between phonology and orthography (e.g., see reviews in Brady & Shankweiler, 1991; Templeton & Bear, 1992). Readers/writers of English as a first or second language need to obtain an understanding of the link between speech phonemes and print graphemes.

The foregoing discussion should not be interpreted to mean that deaf students must "hear" adequately the sound system of English to become proficient readers and writers--although the auditory-articulatory loop does facilitate this process. More important, deaf students, as well as other second-language students, need to develop a cognitive awareness that speech can be segmented into phonemes, which are represented by an alphabetic orthography. One of the big debates in first- and second-language literacy concerns whether this cognitive awareness of the sound system of English must be taught because this awareness is not a natural, unconscious process.

It might be difficult and frustrating for many educators of deaf students to accept the important roles of phonology and morphology in the development of English literacy skills. Indeed, several ASL/English bilingual models are based on the premise that it is possible to bypass these areas--that is, an understanding of the conversational form of English is not necessary for reading and writing the printed form (e.g., see discussion in Paul & Quigley, 1994). With respect to these

bilingual models, deaf students and second-language students can acquire some knowledge of both the conversation and written forms of English by simply reading and writing in English with explanations provided in their first or native language. However, explicit, direct instruction might be necessary because there is little evidence that a high level of literacy can be obtained via exposure to the print of that target language and explanations in the first or native language (see reviews in Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1988; Paul, 1993).

The foregoing seems to imply that literacy is the same for deaf and hearing students, whether they are learning English as a first or second language. As aptly stated by Hanson (1989):

> The finding of phonological processing by deaf readers, particularly deaf readers skilled in ASL, makes a strong case for the importance of phonological sensitivity in the acquisition of skilled reading, whether the reader is hearing or deaf. For deaf readers, the acquisition and use of phonological information is extremely difficult. They would be expected to use alternatives such as visual (orthographic) or sign strategy, if such were effective. Yet, the evidence indicates that the successful deaf readers do not rely on these alternatives. (p. 86)

Notion of Best Method

Thus far, this article has established that literacy in English as a first or second language is an interactive process that requires the development and coordination of both word-identification and comprehension skills. Both groups of skills might need to be taught, and word identification skills should include knowledge of the phonological and morphological systems of English. In addition, deaf students need to have a working knowledge of semantics (particularly word knowledge) and syntax.

This discussion leads to the notion of a best method for teaching reading and writing to deaf students. This notion has two parts, which can be stated as questions: (1) Can theorists/researchers offer specific instructional literacy techniques? and (2) Is there a "best" method? As might be expected, the debate on a best method is as complex as that on the nature of second-language literacy (e.g., Brumfit, 1984; Prabhu, 1990). Relative to deafness, an extensive treatment of this issue can be found elsewhere (e.g., McAnally, Rose, & Quigley, 1994; Paul & Quigley, 1994).

In this writer's opinion, the best response to the first question has been offered by Stanovich in several publications and presentations (e.g., see Stanovich, 1994). As noted by Stanovich, it is not uncommon to hear teachers complain that research has little to offer for a particular student or a group of students in their classes. In fact, teachers seem to suggest

that the gap between research and practice is "real" or cannot be reduced.

Stanovich's response is that theorists/researchers need to respect the diverse roles of the teacher. In addition, the teacher-student interaction is so complex that the recommendation of specific instructional strategies is unrealistic and counterproductive. In essence, researchers should perform two tasks--provide: (1) a basic knowledge about the nature of the reading/writing process, and (2) the epistemological foundations of this knowledge. It should be added that researchers can proffer general instructional guidelines and allow teachers to develop specific instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students.

From another perspective, our difficulties with the notion of best method might be related to the predominant use of only a particular type of research paradigm (e.g., Brumfit, 1984; Prabhu, 1990). To understand this assertion, consider the following three broad interpretations of best method (Prabhu, 1990, p. 161):

1. Different methods are best for different teaching contexts;
2. All methods are partially true or valid; and
3. The notion of good and bad methods is itself misguided.

It has been argued that it is nearly impossible to use objective, experimental, quantitative research to evaluate

effectively the merits of numbers 1 and 2 above. The complex web of interactions within the teacher-learner situation renders the results of experimental research limited or impractical because of the control of factors for "statistical" purposes. In addition, the traditional definition of a method, for example, the use of a phonics approach, is too restrictive because it does not include the reciprocal relations/reactions/feelings between teacher and student during the use of this particular approach. In sum, the notion of a best method is misguided. It seems that researchers should strive for an understanding of the teacher-student phenomenon through the use of qualitative, ethnographic research approaches (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or through the use of "action" research paradigms (e.g., Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). This understanding does not involve the comparison of approaches on a group level; rather, it acknowledges that a method or approach cannot be separated from its users and recipients.

Practicality of Teaching English

With respect to the practicality of teaching English, the focus is on whether English is a realistic goal for many students with severe to profound hearing impairment. Twenty-five years ago, Quigley (1978) remarked:

> The picture is indeed discouraging, especially when one considers the vast resources expended on the problem in the United States since the first formal school was

> established here more than 160 years ago. Surely in that great period of time we should have learned how to teach most deaf children to read the English language. Yet we have not, and since we have not, I believe any individual or group contemplating a major research effort in the area should first ask two questions. These are practical rather than scientific questions, and I offer them seriously and not facetiously. First, can it be done? Can we ever hope to teach most deaf students to read adequately? And second, even if we can, do the results justify the efforts? (p. 24)

This quote can be related to the growing movement of literary critical theories. Literary critical theorists/researchers/educators are not specifically concerned with the improvement of literate skills. The focus is on how literacy should be defined within a particular culture or context (e.g., Olson, 1989; Wagner, 1986). In this view, reading and writing skills are part of the broad view of "literacy." The most common phrase used to describe this broad view is literate thought.

Literate thought is the ability to think critically and reflectively within a variety of modes, for example, speaking, signing, reading, writing, and the use of computers. No specific mode is considered to be more prestigious than another one. Literate thought is dependent on the development of a first

language at as early an age as possible. The influence of this line of thinking in deafness can be seen in the argument that ASL should be the first language for all or most deaf students (e.g., Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989).

Literary critical theorists are concerned with socio-political issues such as accessibility and empowerment (e.g., Gibson, 1986). If a particular entity, for example, English literacy skills, is required for participation in a scientific, technological society such as the United States and if it is not accessible to a segment of the population such as deafness, it is argued that this is an "oppressive" situation for deaf individuals. As a result, alternative measures must be developed to ensure accessibility and empowerment.

In this writer's opinion, these views should be examined critically. Critical theorists/researchers have shown--perhaps, not conclusively--that it is possible to develop a high level of literate thought even though an individual might not be able to read and write at a literate level (e.g., Olson, 1989; Wagner, 1986). Whether literate thought (without text-based literacy) is sufficient for participation in a scientific, technological society such as the United States cannot be answered scientifically. This is a philosophical, specifically, an ethical, issue.

Conclusion

Deaf and second-language readers/writers do not begin the literacy process with the same knowledge or skills as first-language users. Whether English is to be taught as a first or second language, it is possible to present some general guidelines, keeping in mind the caveats stated by Stanovich previously. These general guidelines are based on what could be interpreted as the common assumptions of the major groups of reading-comprehension theories. Without oversimplifying, it can be asserted that (Paul & Jackson, 1993, p. 138-139):

1. All ... theories maintain that knowledge of the language of (print) and the associated culture (i.e., world knowledge) is important prior to beginning (literacy) activities. ... However, without a command of the English language, ASL students, like other poor readers, will rely too heavily on prior-knowledge skills, which can lead to misinterpretations of the text.
2. There is no compelling evidence that first- or second-language learners achieve high levels of literacy through exposure to the written form only of the target language.
3. Two of the three groups of (literacy) theories ... assert that bottom-up (i.e., word identification) skills must be taught. The third group ... assumes

> that readers/writers have an intuitive knowledge of sound-letter correspondences and other ... skills because of their command of the language prior to the literacy task. (words and emphasis added)

This writer is also sympathetic to the views of critical theorists. The question of what language should be developed initially depends on a myriad of factors and should consider, at least, the culture and language of the home environment of the students. Relative to critical theorizing, the following two statements are either simplistic or unrealistic: (1) American Sign Language should be the first language for all deaf students, regardless of the degree of hearing impairment, home environment, or other "practical" factors; and (2) English should be taught as the first or only language to deaf students, even though it might require 15 to 20 years to accomplish.

In sum, if English literacy is to be taught to deaf students, the focus should be on the common elements across theories and research, rather than on the selection of a particular theory or even a particular instructional method. If English literacy is deemed to be too difficult or time-consuming, educators should be willing to develop and advocate the use of either alternative or additional modes. Perhaps, educators of deaf students should consider seriously the notion of literate thought and its requirement of a first language for deaf students at as early an age as possible.

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