

Sign Language: an effective strategy to reduce the gap between English Language Learners
native language and English

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January, 2010

Abstract

Linguistic diversity provides even greater challenges for our educational system. English Language Learners (ELLs) are a diverse population of students who are learning English in school. They come from numerous cultural and economic backgrounds, and live throughout the country. The task of the classroom teacher is to find a way to reach these children. Language minority students and limited English proficient students are one of the fastest growing groups of students in the United States. About 50% of all public school teachers will teach an ESL student sometime in their career (Samway & McKeon, 1999). Allowing students to use their native language facilitates cognitive and academic growth. Research has shown that children who learn using their native language and also English did not delay their acquisition of English language skills (Samway & McKeon, 1999). Sign language provides a bridge between their native language and English as their spoken language.

English is a language that has one or more combinations of sounds for one word. For bilingual learners this makes learning English a very difficult task. Signing Exact English has one word and one sign. S.E.E. differentiates words that are similar such as electric, electricity, electrical (Gustason & Zawolkow, 1993). Words that would be difficult with oral language are simplified by using a new sign for each word. S.E.E. is a form of communication/instruction in which signs are used in exact English word order, with some additional signs for conventions such as the "ing" word ending (Berke, 2009). English is not a conceptually accurate language and signing helps take out some of the mystery behind words. An example would be if a person said, "cut that out". They do not mean it literally but it is hard for a bilingual child to understand the expression. With sign language the expression has to be explained or used in another context for understanding.

Communication is an ongoing dialogue between human beings. It can occur in a variety of ways. Some examples are through sight, body language and symbols (King & Flynn). All of these types of communication have rules that need to be followed for understanding to occur. It is amazing that children acquire oral language and by age 5 have reached a nearly adult level of development (Gustason & Zawolkow, 1993). That is why it is so important to bridge the gap of understanding at as early age as possible. Teaching through example is vital to the teaching-learning process. Once a sound foundation of signs is established, ELL learners feel more confident and a part of the learning environment.

Linking English Language Learners and Prelingually Deaf Learners

The book Language Learning and Deafness (Strong, 1998) discusses the main issues that face second language learners and compares their learning with those who are hearing

impaired. There is an important relationship between learning the English language and learning English as a deaf student or a second language learner. Research has proven that prelingually deaf children and speakers of another language share many of the same problems in learning English. The importance of primary language acquisition whether it is English or sign language, depends on the quality of language input/intake for educational success. There needs to be a connection between the two languages. Language acquisition of any spoken language most often occurs in an environment of restricted intake (Strong, 1998). Strong also refers to S.E.E. as an English based system of manual communication. The student, whether they are deaf or ELL, can use a manual communication for educational functions. For a learner to acquire a new language they must have access to a suitable linguistic environment. The environment has to be one that allows them to process signals and associate percepts with meaning (Strong, 1998). It is important for students to see a relationship between the two languages. Making that relationship tangible with sign language makes it a more meaningful interaction. Red or rojo will be the same sign in either language so the student now has the concrete connection between the two languages (Levine). Once the student becomes more confident in English they will rely less and less on the signing aspect thus creating the bridge between the two languages a success.

Learning and Language

We learn language through language (Freeman & Freeman, 2004). Teachers are often trained how to teach their children to learn through the use of language. Children who are trying to learn without English being their native language often struggle and become confused. Educators must assume that when a student is trying to communicate that what he or she is

trying to say is any less important than what an English-speaking child would be saying. This is where sign language would come into play. Teachers might not know what that child is saying because he or she are unfamiliar with the language but the teacher could recognize the sign and have a grasp of the content that is being spoken. This would help the teacher understand the intended meaning without assuming. Sign language would allow the teacher to check the child's meaning before continuing. There is not a lot of research done on alternative assessments for ELL students (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Sign language could provide an alternative way to assess these students understanding of what is being taught. The student may not be able to correctly verbalize what they want to say but they could sign it. Teachers should encourage children to explore the two languages and establish their own meanings using various techniques such as sign language.

It is important for a teacher to establish a relationship with the ELL student. Some ways that this can occur is by the teacher being prepared. This means having materials in both languages on hand. A welcoming classroom should represent both languages. It is important to make the student feel welcome (Law & Eckes, 2000). Displaying the sign language picture beside the English word and the native language word will give the visual connection between the two words. This is also important when establishing school rules. Picture schedules are a great visual reminder for students of both languages. These can be labeled with sign language pictures so that students from both languages know what they mean. One sign can communicate with both languages. This also connects the students together with a mutual mode of communication.

Teacher Development

The results of A Study Concerning Instruction of ESL Students Comparing All-English Teacher Knowledge and English As A Second Language Teacher Knowledge show that teachers who are not trained in teaching ESL students do not have the depth of knowledge those teachers who are trained as ESL teachers do (Constantino, 1994). In most circumstances English only teachers do not have training in how to deal with ESL students. The change to their instruction is not familiar to them as it is with a teacher who is trained in ESL. Support from the school district is vital for ESL learners to be successful. The ESL teachers showed that by using tactile practices to bridge the gap between the two languages the ESL student learned faster and with more confidence (Constantino, 1994). Students must learn a new language with an understanding input that will produce and understanding output (Constantino, 1994). The two-way exchange should be meaningful and there should be a means to negotiate the information gap. Sign language is a great tool to use for this. It would provide a two-way exchange of communicative language.

It is not just deaf and hard of hearing children who use sign language. Another large segment of sign language users is hearing nonverbal children who are nonverbal due to conditions such as Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, trauma, and brain disorders or speech disorders. For parents, sign language provides a means of quick communication, particularly for those whose attention spans may be very short or language very limited. Or it may be a tool for language development prior to developing spoken language. For children, it is a means of expressing themselves so that they are less frustrated (Acredolo, 2000). This could be applied to students who are also non-English speaking. They may be verbal in another language but they are non-verbal in English, the language being taught. These same principles

apply. Picture dictionaries with the student's native language, the sign language picture and the English word would be a great resource to provide to an ELL student (Col, 1996). As they fill out the dictionary and use it, their learning will become more meaningful and they will have ownership over how they are learning the new language. This gives the student one more tangible way to communicate.

Conclusion

English is a complex language and this makes learning it very difficult. By providing students with a manual form of communication the gap between the two languages can be narrowed. Sign language does provide a tangible means to link two languages together. It does not matter what the two languages are since signing provides the connection between them. A meaningful two-way communication between teacher and student will result in more productive result therefore narrowing the communication gap. Research has shown that sign language can be used as a successful tool to bridge the gap between ELL learners and English. Sign language would provide a two-way exchange of communicative language.

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