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Advancing English Literacy by Improving ASL Skills: A Residential School's Quest

By David Dolman and Laurie Rook

Walking down the hall at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf (ENCSD) on a crisp October morning, a casual observer would have noticed similar activities in several classrooms. In one class, Nicole Williamson was teaching first graders the difference between *jumping in* and *jumping up and down* by illustrating the meanings through physical demonstration, pictures from an iPad, and the use of American Sign Language (ASL). Having written a few choices on chart paper of what could be jumped into—leaf piles, water, mud, and a box—and who could do the jumping—the child, a dad, a sister, Elijah—Williamson guided the children through the creation of English sentences using color-coding to distinguish nouns (marked in green) from verbs (marked in red):

“Who jumped?” asked Williamson, pointing to the choices on the chart.

“Elijah jumped,” one child noted.

“Good,” responded Williamson, smiling. “And is *Elijah* a noun or a verb?”

Photos courtesy of Laurie Rook



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When the children correctly noted that *Elijah* was a noun, Williamson pointed again to the chart and asked, “And what did Elijah *jump into*? Was it the leaves, some water, mud, or a box?” After this demonstration and brief questioning, students created their own sentences as Williamson and a teacher assistant circulated among them and offered guidance as needed.

Meanwhile upstairs teacher Michelle Myers and her middle schoolers were discussing the meaning of the idiomatic phrase *at all* when it is used in sentences such as *I have no money at all* or *I did not eat at all*. Meyers pointed out that *none at all* could be indicated by using both hands to form a zero-handshape that moved forward in the sign for *none*. A signer could show the same emphasis as the speaker by signing, “I have no money. None.” or “I did not eat. None.”

Across the hall, teacher Kara Cooper also helped students work with English and ASL by

Above: Using the online component to Fairview Learning, elementary teacher Chelsea Cashion teaches the Bridge Phrase went away.

illustrating the usage of the verb *went*, as in *I went to eat breakfast*, and comparing it with the idiomatic usage of *went* when it combines with *on*, as in *I went on eating breakfast*. In each case, teachers followed up by assisting students as they wrote original sentences and drew quick sketches from the sentences they had created.

Williamson, Myers, Cooper, and other ENCSD teachers were using activities that are part of Fairview Learning, a reading program for developing literacy in English and ASL designed specifically for deaf and hard of hearing children. The program had been introduced months earlier and was now being implemented in kindergarten through high school.



Left: Kindergarten teacher Nicole Williamson teaches a guided reading lesson in a one-on-one situation.

Fairview Learning was developed at the Mississippi School for the Deaf, where the student population is similar to the students of ENCSD. The Mississippi students had poor reading skills (Schimmel, Edwards, & Prickett, 1999), and end-of-year standardized test results indicated that the reading skills of ENCSD also lagged behind those of their hearing peers. In addition, ENCSD has a high minority population, with increasing numbers of children whose parents do not speak English at home. Considering the similarity in the two populations, Dolman felt that the new program was worth investigating. He sent Rook websites and articles, and the Barton College professor and ENCSD teacher began discussing

Reading, Thinking, and Adopting a Program

The decision to adopt the Fairview Learning program at ENCSD can be traced to a brief conversation between Laurie Rook, ENCSD lead teacher and reading specialist, and Dave Dolman, coordinator of the Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program at nearby Barton College. Through the years, Dolman and Rook, both authors of this article, had often talked about the dilemma plaguing deaf education—that so many bright students encounter profound difficulty in learning to read and write. Dolman, catching up on his own reading in the summer of 2014, came across a brief mention of Fairview Learning in *Literacy Instruction for Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (Easterbrooks & Beal-Alvarez, 2013). While Easterbrooks and Beal-Alvarez wrote that there was only one published empirical study of the popular Fairview Learning materials (Ausbrooks-Rusher, Schimmel, & Edwards, 2012), they also noted:

{The Fairview Learning} materials address the language needs of the deaf child, and better language skills lead to better reading outcomes, and so the Transitive Property allows speculation that these materials cause positive reading outcomes. (Easterbrooks & Beal-Alvarez, 2013)

What particularly piqued Dolman's interest was that

the idea of exploring use of the program at ENCSD.

At about the same time, Dolman was approached by an administrator who informed him that he, along with two other Barton professors, would be given a stipend and course release time to pursue a project in an area of interest over a three-year period. The offer stipulated only that the project relate to the professor's own discipline and produce something tangible, such as a publication, creative work, performance, or new curriculum. As Dolman thought about what form this project might take, he recalled his discussions with Rook, who had been researching on her own and was becoming increasingly interested in implementing the Fairview Learning program at ENCSD. After mulling it over and clearing the idea with his administration, Dolman told Rook about the possible support of Barton College—and she brought the idea to her school director, who gave the okay to explore it further.

In October 2014, a representative of Fairview Learning, responding to an inquiry from Rook and communicating through Skype, explained the program to a group of ENCSD teachers and administrators. The teachers responded with enthusiasm and funds were procured from a variety of sources, including Barton College. This money allowed purchase of materials and a two-day training by a Fairview Learning representative, an event attended by all teachers, teacher assistants, and dormitory personnel.

Fairview Learning A Look at a Program

The Fairview Learning program consists of five components (Schimmel & Edwards, 2003). Two of the components—phonemic awareness and literature-based instruction with an emphasis on comprehension—are found in almost all reading programs. The remaining three components, however, are unique. These include:

1. Memorization of 220 common words.

These words, the Dolch words—named after Edward Dolch, who identified a list of the most frequently occurring words that need to be recognized to achieve reading fluency—would be memorized so that the children recognized them on sight. The words include some of the most basic vocabulary in English but exclude nouns. Examples of words are: *run, the, eat, any, every, and made*. Seemingly straightforward, these words can present a problem for users of ASL because a single English word can have a variety of different meanings and require different ASL translations. For example, *made* can mean *earned* (e.g., she *made money*), *caused* (e.g., he *made someone happy*), and *forced* (e.g., she *made me* do it). In the Fairview Learning program, deaf and hard

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of hearing children learn 510 ASL translations for 220 Dolch words.

2. Memorization of 265 idiomatic phrases.

Called “bridge phrases” by program developers, these are idioms in which words change their meaning; they cannot be translated sign for sign. For example, *look up* is a bridge phrase that can mean *look up to the sky*, or to *look up material in a dictionary*, or *life began to look up*. As they read, however, deaf and hard of hearing children often sign the phrase *look up* by translating each word separately. Bridging teaches them to understand the various meanings of English phrases and how to translate them correctly. There are nearly 600 sign translations for the 265 bridge phrases that the children memorize.

3. Translation from signs to print. In this part of the program, children work with expressing themselves in English and ASL.

They begin by telling stories from their own lives in sign language. Teachers rework these stories and help students tell the stories in correct ASL. After much practice, students retell their stories on video, and teachers assist them in translating the stories into English and writing them correctly.

After One Year Teachers Show Support

As this article is being written, teachers have used Fairview Learning at ENCSD for just over a year, and the trainer continues to provide assistance through periodic Skype sessions. Three aspects of the program—the Dolch word lists, bridging, and literature-based instruction—were integrated into ENCSD’s curriculum during the last school year with greater intensity, as might be expected, in the younger grades. Additional training was provided at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year to deepen teachers’ understanding of how to incorporate phonemic awareness activities, including making the 21 long and short vowel patterns and the 21 consonants visually accessible through handshapes—an aspect of the program receiving more emphasis in the second year of implementation than it did in the first.

Another area receiving greater emphasis is that of incorporating children’s telling of stories in ASL and then translating those stories into written English. During the first year, middle school teachers attempted to incorporate the writing into a daily reading block, which led to frustration and meant that writing received short shrift. This year, separate reading and writing blocks were added to the curriculum,



Above: Middle school teacher Dianne Wright reviews single-meaning vocabulary words with a student prior to a reading lesson.

allowing more time for focus on working with ASL and written English.

Further, as part of the program each child's sign language skills are assessed in October and March by two evaluators. This has resulted in a careful and systematic look at each child's development of ASL, including his or her use of vocabulary, directionality, classifiers, space, body shift, facial expression, and eye gaze. As children continue to work on ASL and written English, it is expected that production of both languages will improve.

Evaluation showed that students' understanding of multiple meanings of words, measured by their knowledge of Dolch adapted word lists and their facility with bridge phrases, increased considerably during the first year of program implementation. Students also showed improvement in their writing ability as measured by the Kendall Writing Levels (French, 1999). Still, it is difficult to ascertain how much of this improvement was due to the use of Fairview Learning and how much would have occurred anyway either as a result of general maturation or other classroom activities.

The teacher reaction, however, was quite clear: all 14 ENCSD teachers who implemented the program supported it and believed that it benefitted the students. These teachers, who teach about 70 percent of the school population, were surveyed anonymously and found three broad areas of improvement. First, they found that students' English vocabulary and writing skills were improving. This was especially true in instances where words and phrases were directly taught through the Fairview Learning program. Second, several teachers felt that as a result of this improved understanding, reading comprehension was increasing as well.

One teacher noted how exciting it was to be able to point out a bridge phrase or a multi-meaning word encountered outside of the reading classroom. It seemed that the program helped students' comprehension not just in reading class but in math, social studies, science, and other subjects. Teachers noted that students improved their skills in both English and ASL. Also, some teachers noted that students seemed to respond positively to the program and thus were more motivated to learn.

When asked whether they thought ENCSD should continue with the Fairview Learning program, the result was again unanimous: 100 percent of the teachers (14 out of 14) said yes. Uniformly positive responses to new programs are rare, especially when one considers that the teachers had been asked to develop a new set of practices that required sitting through hours of training, lots of uncertainty in the first few months of implementation, and uncertain objective results. Several respondents noted that Fairview Learning had not particularly changed their teaching philosophy since ENCSD has supported the use of ASL and a bilingual philosophy for many years. Instead, it helped teachers align that philosophy with daily classroom practices, reminding them of the need to help ASL-using students decipher the meaning of the English words and

phrases they encounter on a page.

One teacher stated: "Fairview reminds me that the English sentence structure or vocabulary that I use to teach may be perceived differently or not at all [by my students]."

Another teacher said: "Keeping Fairview in mind helps me focus on how and why students are confused while reading and helps the students become more aware of multi-meaning words, bridge phrases, and ASL concepts."

Finally, one teacher offered an overall perspective, noting: "As with any program, it will take longitudinal data to really evaluate if it is making an impact in the skill sets of the children. There are no magic programs that will instantly change the reading comprehension of a child but continued, structured approaches should show increased growth in the future."

These sober words reflect what those with experience in deaf education understand: The linguistic obstacles that many children at ENCSD face in learning to read are enormous. The teacher is right ... no magic potion, pill, or program is going to automatically increase reading and writing skills. However, the Fairview Learning program holds promise for student success. We are excited to see how the program develops, and we are enthusiastic about what the future will bring for the students at ENCSD.

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