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**Use of Phonological Information and
Doltch Words to Improve
Reading Levels in Deaf Education**

Michelle Pandian, M.S.

USE OF PHONOLOGICAL INFORMATION AND DOLTCH WORDS TO IMPROVE READING LEVELS IN DEAF EDUCATION

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The Fairview Method

In their article (Reading...Pah! (I Got It!)), Schimmel, Edwards, and Prickett provides a description of how the Fairview Method for learning reading (<http://www.fairviewlearning.net/methods.php>) was implemented and found successful at Mississippi School for the Deaf. This provides us some valuable information for programs in India too.

Components of the Method

The Fairview system includes the use of five strategies simultaneously, including “a shortcut to phonemic awareness, Adapted Dolch words, Bridge lists and the Bridging process, reading comprehension, and ASL development/language experience stories.” Each of these strategies combined to produce significant results in reading achievement increases for the students at MSD elementary school.

The Performance of Deaf Students from Minority Groups in the United States and Deaf Children from Rural Areas in India

The study took place over several years (1996 – 1999). Using statistics from Holt, 1993, the authors quote the widely published typical reading level of older deaf students as between third and fourth grade. Though some deaf students read at levels above the mean, the authors point out that students with characteristics such as minority status, participation in special school programs, severe to profound hearing loss, and/or additional disabilities are consistently scoring below the mean.

Deaf children from rural areas and socially and economically weaker social groups and families in India do not have much access to deaf education. When they receive some support facilities, these facilities need to be so developed as to enable them to reach standards that would help them get jobs. So, we need to identify methods and practices that would help these children to reach better reading levels and thereby access better education.

Schimmel, Edwards, and Prickett set out to find ways to increase the reading levels of these types of students. After seeing success with just 5 children in 1996, they expanded the Fairview program to several elementary school classes and then to the whole elementary school, where they found very successful results.

Use of Phonological Information

The program components were used in specific ways to increase the children's reading comprehension. Research has shown that skilled deaf readers do make use of phonological information. With this in mind, phonetic training was given to the students at MSD in the hope that they will find ways to use that awareness in their reading.

Their results showed that all the students mastered this phonemic training, some learning to sound out words and others using it to identify letter patterns in spelling such as the long "I" sound in "igh."

Training in Dolch Words

Students also were trained in the use of Adapted Dolch words. Dolch words are those in English with the same spelling and different meanings such as *can*, meaning a can of something, or *can* as in "I can do it."

When reading Dolch words deaf students are forced to use context to figure out which word meaning is implied.

The students studied lists including 40 English words that have 60 meanings and 70 different signs. Teachers were instructed how to use these words with the appropriate conceptually correct ASL signs to increase the student's comprehension. This training benefited the teachers as well as the students and helped them become more conceptually correct signers.

Use of Bridging and Bridge Lists

In the same area, Bridge lists and Bridging (the skill that enables a person to sign phrases conceptually rather than word for word) were used with both the students and the teachers. This enabled the teachers to use "more consistent linguistic input in ASL" with the students to facilitate their comprehension and help them translate printed words to conceptually correct signs.

Direct ASL Instruction

Another part of the program focused on direct ASL instruction for the children, who began without an understanding that ASL and English are two separate languages. Using stories about the child's own experiences, instruction was geared towards improving the student's ASL production and reception, as well as transcribing the stories to written English correctly. Significant improvement was seen in the students' expressive ASL structure as well as receptive ability.

Using a Commercial Reading Series

Lastly the program also focused on reading comprehension using a commercial reading series called the *Multiple Skills Series*. By the end of the program, students had increased their reading levels on the average by 1.8 grade levels. Eighteen students actually increased their reading levels more than 2 grade levels.

Improvement in the Use of ASL and Reading Skills

The authors posit that as the children's ASL skills improved, so did their English reading skills, as if to demonstrate implicit causation.

I would venture to say that the other parts of the program probably had just as much or possibly more influence on the children's reading improvement as the direct ASL instruction, although I agree that direct ASL instruction is needed as well.

The article shows by numerical results that the deaf children benefited from the program as a whole. Using the Fairview system, both the students and teachers had significant gains in their use of ASL, and the students demonstrated gains in reading achievement heretofore not seen among deaf students.

Reference

Schimmel, C. S., Edwards, S. G., & Prickett, H. T. (1999). Reading?...Pah! (I got it!): Innovative reading techniques for successful deaf readers. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 144(4), 298-308.

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