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**Bilingual-Bicultural Approaches and ASL
Problems of Multilingual Societies in India**

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Inner Speech and ASL

Connie Mayer and Gordon Wells, in their article on the bilingual-bicultural model of literacy education for deaf students, challenge the proposal that ASL can be used as a deaf child's bridges to learning "inner speech" and written speech, primarily English. Though considerable research has been done by theorists such as Vygotsky and Bruner on linguistic interdependence, where acquisition of a language (L1) facilitates the student's acquisition of a second language (L2), Mayer and Wells argue that the linguistic differences between ASL and English are a barrier to the true functioning of the linguistic interdependence model.

Linguistic Interdependence Not Nourished

While they believe strongly that ASL is a true and viable language in and of itself, and that ASL can and should be used for the instruction of deaf students, Mayer and Wells maintain that bilingual-bicultural approaches, by their very assumptions and design, do not fulfill the requirements of the linguistic interdependence model. The real life practices of the "Bi-Bi" method do not match the theoretical conditions required for transfer of language skills to occur.

Visual-spatial Mode as Opposed to Auditory-oral Mode

Mayer and Wells explain how a deaf child who is fluent in ASL uses "inner speech" in a visual-spatial mode, whereas hearing children's inner speech is more auditory-oral. The link between auditory-oral inner speech in basic English word order helps a child code switch to English writing by simply learning to use letters and words for the "speech" or ideas they are thinking. Because deaf children think more graphically, and signs include chunks or layers of information not easily expressed in a one-to-one sign-to-word ratio, deaf children have a more difficult time learning to write English simply from their ASL linguistic background.

Differences in Word Order

When the fact that ASL word order is very different than English word order is considered, the task of learning English writing becomes even more of a challenge for the deaf student. Mayer and Wells agree that ownership of ASL can help build the cognitive skills necessary for conceptual transfer between ASL and English, but they also believe there is no correlation with linguistic transfer or linguistic interdependence between the two languages.

A Complex Situation

This research leaves the teacher of the deaf in quite a quandary. Knowing that deaf children need early access to a full, interactive language environment in order to acquire fluency in a first language (which in many cases must be ASL, as access to spoken English in English speaking countries is greatly reduced or nil), while also gaining English reading and writing skills necessary to function in a hearing society, teachers are forced to look to research involving language transfer from a first language to a second language.

A Combination of Several Techniques

Yet, the research done by Mayer and Wells has shed some doubt on the actual viability of this theory in the classroom. It seems as teachers of the deaf we must use our best language skills in both ASL and English to facilitate students' skills in each of those areas. It is possible that signed English (SEE2, contact signing, Signed Exact English, etc) may have to be used in the English classroom to teach English with comprehension checks and explanation provided in ASL when points are not clear.

Lessons from Learning a Second Language by Hearing Children

When learning a second language, students tend to pick it up faster in an environment completely surrounded by that language. So maybe ASL can be the mode of communication in other classes, while some form of signed English can be used to facilitate English language learning to help students become able to code switch better. This is an area in which I will have to do more research, as the prognosis of using straight ASL may not facilitate the student's learning best.

Some Questions That Call for Answers

I still have a few questions about this research:

1. I question the authors' definition of literacy as they describe it on page 94 of the article. They say that because ASL has no written form, students cannot attain literacy in ASL. I completely disagree with that. If a person is completely fluent in all forms of the language in question, then I consider the person to be literate in that language. ASL has no written or spoken form, and therefore the person who is a fluent ASL signer must be considered literate in ASL because there are no other forms of ASL to learn.
2. I also disagree with their statement on page 98 where they say, "an individual sign often conveys elements difficult to capture in an English word, just as spoken words can convey meanings that signs cannot." I understand there isn't a one-to-one sign-to-word ratio for ASL and English. So one sign sometimes can be translated to a whole English sentence. Ex. PRO3-GAVE-PRO1 = He gave it to me. But concepts (or morphemes) in an ASL sign can be broken down into their respective parts, which do have a more one-to-one word relationship. I think this kind of sign analysis is possible with children to help them "unpack" the meaning in an ASL sign and translate it to English.
3. And the last question I have is the "so what?" of the article. The authors explain why they believe acquisition of ASL cannot provide the bridges a different, spoken language can when learning English reading and writing. But they do not provide any options for

alternative methods of teaching reading and writing to deaf students. So my question is what are our other options?

Complexity of Multilingual Societies

Situations in multilingual societies such as the ones we have in India demand a very creative approach. Not all State governments in India, who usually have the last say in matters of education, have any definite policy relating to the co-ordination between the use of sign language and the identity of the second language that deaf students may learn. Socio-economic and literacy levels of the parents of deaf children seem to determine the choice: parents of higher socio-economic and literacy levels have the option to pursue English as the second language of choice, while the vast majority of deaf parents who hail from rural and poorer socio-economic levels will pursue the local vernacular as the language of choice. Such choices have great consequences for success in various levels of education. Hopefully in the near future greater attention will be given to these issues.

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