

Critical Literacy: Deaf Adults Speak Out

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe a variety of teaching and learning strategies that were used within a classroom of Deaf adults participating in a high school English course as part of an upgrading program. The class was conducted in a bilingual manner; that is, being Deaf and communicating with American Sign Language (ASL) was not regarded as a deficit, but as a cultural experience comparable to and distinct from cultures based on oral languages. The students' knowledge of ASL was used to help them develop their skills in English literacy. The emphasis in the classroom was to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning. Teaching activities were designed to help students create meaning around larger social issues. The goal was to improve their English reading and writing skills, and help them relate to what was happening in the world around them and lead them into action.

Many Deaf¹ people see themselves as normal (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). “Disability” is often in the eye of the beholder. The greatest obstacle for Deaf people is not their deafness, but that others with normal hearing understand very little about being Deaf and are unable to communicate well with them. In order to understand the learning and life experiences that Deaf adults bring to the classroom, background information regarding educational context, bilingual deaf education, and the nature of visual language processing must be outlined.

Deaf Education

Over the past 100 years, many different methods for educating deaf children have been introduced. These methods generally fall into two categories: those that use signs in some way (manual methods) and those that focus primarily on the child's oral and auditory skills (oral methods). Although some individual deaf students have emerged with appropriate academic skills,

¹ Throughout this document *Deaf* is used to refer to a cultural and linguistic minority group, whereas *deaf* represents the audiological condition of hearing loss.

the majority of deaf students continue to lag far behind their hearing peers regardless of the method used to educate them (Holt, Traxler, & Allen, 1997; Moores, 1987). A group of researchers at Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college for deaf students in North America, suggested two primary reasons for the failure of deaf education systems: (a) lack of access to curricular content at grade level and (b) general acceptance of the notion that below grade-level performance is to be expected of deaf children (Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989).

The problem of accessing the curriculum is largely a language-related issue. The issue of language/communication has been at the heart of all discussion in the field of deaf education. It is not unusual for deaf children to enter kindergarten without a sophisticated competence in any native language, signed or spoken (Bodner-Johnson & Sass-Lehrer, 2003). This immediately puts them behind their age mates in language development and the social and cognitive development that comes from having interacted with parents and peers naturally throughout their preschool years (Hart & Risley, 1999).

When deaf children enter the school system, often the focus continues to be on developing their English skills. This is accomplished through speech, auditory training, lipreading, and English-based sign systems. Deaf children are often attempting to learn a language that is not presented to them in a fully accessible way—either in spoken or signed form—at the same time as they are attempting to learn curricular content. As a result, they may miss significant information. Teachers, therefore, often approach the task of educating deaf children in a very structured and analytical manner (Livingston, 1997). Without a natural language, social interaction and meaningful discourse are greatly diminished in deaf children's home and school environments (Erting, 1992). A natural signed language, such as American Sign Language (ASL), can take advantage of deaf children's strengths in visual processing and link them with a community of users. Viewing deaf children more holistically places a higher educational value on *communicating* and *learning* rather than emphasizing *speaking* as the top priority.

The second problem of low expectations is primarily an issue of the values and attitudes that have developed among those who educate deaf children. The deaf education system is an expensive system—highly specialized teachers, low student–teacher ratios, and advanced technological devices. How is it possible that such a well-developed, costly, and elaborate system has failed? One conclusion is that it must be the inherent limitations of the deaf children themselves.

Although teachers of the deaf are highly specialized, many professional preparation programs focus primarily on speech-centred educational methodology that may not prepare them to meet the actual communication needs of deaf students. If a teacher's students fail to improve their academic skills, it is often assumed to be the result of inadequacies in the children or the general difficulty of teaching English to deaf students (Spencer, Erting, & Marschark, 2000). It is seldom suggested that the problem may actually result from a failure to communicate between teacher and student. In the past, an analytic approach has been applied to the education of deaf children, where processes like reading and writing were broken down and taught as a series of specific and discreet skills. When children, hearing or deaf, do not learn language or other concepts from natural exposure and stimulation, there is a tendency among educators to teach it more explicitly (Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1988; Stires, 1991). Although there is a place for explicit or direct instruction of specific skills, it must be balanced with more naturalistic and contextualized activities. Traditionally, programs for teaching deaf students to read have emphasized the mechanistic features of language, such as spelling, sentence patterns, and grammar rules, because they are easier to teach (Livingston, 1997). Basal reading programs for deaf students are readily available and they carefully introduce text containing limited vocabulary and sentence

structures, and then gradually add new words and structures as the child progresses (Quigley & King, 1981). The basal reading process involves imposing structures, incorporating intensive drill and practice, and breaking down the information into smaller, but also less meaningful, chunks. If such structured reading programs are used excessively, they can contribute to creating highly dependent learners, something that is often found in deaf students (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002). A more sociocultural approach is called for: one that will consider the impact of natural language learning, expose children to the full range of interaction and discourse within the classroom, and value the social context of literacy.

A bilingual approach to educating deaf people has the potential to incorporate the features of natural language, interaction, and social context within the classroom. Applying a bilingual model to the education of deaf students involves viewing deaf people from a cultural perspective. This includes recognizing ASL and English as different and distinct languages and valuing both of them equally, developing pride and identity in being Deaf, exposing students to Deaf role models and peers, and addressing issues and conflicts with cultural sensitivity and awareness (Evans, Zimmer, & Murray, 1994). It also implies that deaf students are learning ASL as their first language and learning English as a second language, usually in written form.

Bilingual Deaf Education

The promise of a bilingual approach to educating deaf students has not been fully realized partly because it requires a shift from viewing deaf people as disabled to viewing them as belonging to a distinct linguistic and cultural group (Lane, 1992) and partly because bilingual education with deaf students differs from spoken language bilingual programs in several ways (Evans & Seifert, 2000). These differences include the language modalities (signed and written), only one language (English) having a written form, and students arriving at school with varying levels of development in their first language. These differences indicate that the principles of spoken language bilingual teaching cannot be directly applied to educating deaf students. Adaptations to the unique features of visual language processing are needed. For this reason, a gap remains between the theoretical aspects of a bilingual/bicultural approach to teaching deaf students and the practical aspects of its implementation (Israelite, Ewoldt, & Hoffmeister, 1992). Teachers continue to question if, and how, they can use their deaf students' knowledge of ASL to develop and promote their English literacy skills (Mayer & Wells, 1996; Ritter-Brinton, 1996).

It is critical to reduce this gap between theory and practice as well as begin to unlock the literacy potential of deaf students. There is now growing evidence from case studies (Evans, 2004; Schleper, 1992; Wilcox, 1994) and the ongoing work in Sweden and Denmark (Mahshie, 1995; Svartholm, 2000) to indicate that appropriately adapting the principles of bilingual teaching is the key to successfully developing age-appropriate literacy skills in deaf students.

Overall, there is agreement that early exposure to ASL allows deaf children to establish an effective way to communicate and interact with the world around them (Paul & Quigley, 1987). Disagreements arise in how this should be applied to guide deaf children into reading and writing English. Hearing people have the advantage that the correspondence between the written pieces and the retrievable speech patterns follow the same linguistic structure. Additional translation steps are needed for the deaf learner (Livingston, 1997; Paul, 1998). Strategies unique to educating deaf students, such as using ASL as the language of instruction, balancing explicit teaching and natural exposure to language structures, making translation conceptual rather than

literal, and using multi-modal information (print, signs, words, pictures), contribute to literacy learning (Evans, 2000a, 2000b, 2004).

Another principle of bilingual education that needs clarification is that students learn to transfer skills from one language to the other through the development of metalinguistic awareness. Cummins (1984) proposed that the two separate language systems of spoken language bilinguals are linked to a common conceptual core, suggesting a common underlying proficiency. This implies that experience with either language can promote the proficiency underlying *both* languages. The common proficiency does not exist at the surface levels (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) of the first and second languages but at the deeper conceptual levels—knowledge, thinking skills, literacy strategies. This implies that although deaf students need to be taught the specific vocabulary and grammar of English, their English literacy development can be facilitated by building on existing concepts, knowledge, and learning strategies acquired in ASL.

Understanding Visual Language Processing

ASL is one of the natural signed languages used by Deaf people throughout the United States and Canada. The units of ASL are composed of specific movements and shapes of the hands, face, and body. Just as speech sounds in spoken languages are defined by phonological features, such as manner, place, voicing, and nasality, the structure of signs can be defined by location, movement, handshape, and palm orientation (Valli, Lucas, & Mulrooney, 2005). Signs, or “words,” are combined according to syntactic and discourse rules to create meaning. Since ASL uses body movements instead of sound, “listeners” or receivers use their eyes instead of their ears to understand what is being said. And because all linguistic information must be received through the eyes, the language is carefully structured to fit the needs and capabilities of the eyes (Neidle, Kegl, MacLaughlin, Bahan, & Lee, 2000).

Processing language visually involves different features than processing language acoustically, and natural signed languages take this into account. Visually, information is perceived and processed in a spatial or layered manner, whereas auditory information is processed sequentially. The same is true for visual memory and auditory memory. We remember visual information according to where things were located in space, and auditorily, we remember the sequence of sounds (Poizner, Klima, & Bellugi, 1990). Due to the motor movements involved, the time it takes to make a sign is twice as long as the time it takes to say a word; however, the clause length of ASL and spoken English are the same. This indicates how the grammatical information of ASL is organized spatially (incorporated into the movements of signs), rather than added onto signs sequentially. An example of this is adding an elliptical movement to signs as a temporal marker conveying that the action is occurring for an extended period. Adding this movement to signs like “SICK” (made by touching middle fingers to forehead and stomach) or “WAIT” (holding both hands with palms up and wiggling fingers), indicates that these activities have been going on “for a long time.” ASL uses motion and position in space to convey some concepts that depend on temporal–sequential transmission in spoken language. ASL is uniquely adapted to capitalize on the difference in language processing between Deaf and hearing individuals by using space and motion where spoken language uses time for the same purpose (Klima & Bellugi, 1979).

In an attempt to make English more accessible to deaf children, several forms of English-based sign systems have been developed by educators. The goal of such a system is to present

simultaneous signed and spoken utterances as complete representations of English. These systems cannot be called “language” in that they have been developed by committee rather than through regular use in a community; they tend to be taught rather than acquired; and their grammatical organization is derived purely from another language. These systems, as well as not being a complete representation of a signed language, are also not complete representations of English. As indicated previously, spoken languages are organized sequentially to fit with auditory processing, but this sequential organization does not translate accurately into the visual mode.

The appropriateness of altering a language for instruction is questionable. Programs teaching French to English-speaking children or adults do not facilitate this instruction by first introducing French words in English word order or French words with English grammatical endings. The perceived purpose of introducing English-based signing is to balance the exposure to the two languages in the classroom; however, this is not accomplished by introducing an incomplete manual code for a spoken language. The balance is more naturally established by interacting in ASL and exposing children to English in print form.

Purpose of Study

In the past, many deaf students experienced an education system that oppressed their natural language and culture, and emphasized what they lacked rather than building on their abilities (Johnson et al., 1989). The unique combination of bilingual and whole language theories provides a framework that views Deaf people from a cultural perspective, incorporates the features of visual language processing, and builds on the conceptual foundation established through ASL to develop English literacy skills. The current program implemented such an approach to improve the literacy skills of a group of Deaf adult learners. By valuing the learning they acquired through a variety of life experiences the program also helped them interact at a critical level with the world around them. The purpose of this study was to describe the teaching and learning strategies that were effective in facilitating adult Deaf students’ knowledge of ASL to help them develop their skills in English literacy. The goal was to improve their English reading and writing skills, but also to help them relate to what was happening in the world around them and lead them into action.

Method

The study implemented a qualitative approach to assess the overall effectiveness of an educational program through descriptive methodology. Specifically, a participatory action research design was used with the researcher moving between the roles of teacher and researcher within the classroom, and the adult Deaf students serving as key participants. The primary sources of data were student portfolios (including assignments, assessments, and self-evaluations), classroom observations, and the teacher’s journal. This section will outline the program, teaching approach, and course content, followed by a description of the students and their initial levels of literacy functioning.

Description of Program

The class of Deaf adults was part of a larger general adult high school upgrading program developed for hearing students. The program followed the provincial government department of education guidelines for a mature student Grade 12 (high school) diploma. Admission criteria required that all students be a minimum of 19 years of age or older and out of school for at least one year. There were no academic criteria for anyone entering the program. There was also no cost to any of the students for tuition or supplies. Government subsidies, based on student enrollment numbers, were provided to the organization administering the program to support teacher salaries, facilities, and resources. Courses offered included mandatory Math and English, plus five optional credits to complete a full diploma. The optional courses offered to the Deaf students included Computer I and II, Family Studies, Deaf Studies, American Sign Language, Career Exploration, and Student Initiated Projects.

The general program (for hearing students) was set up primarily as an individualized tutoring program where students could drop in and attend at their convenience. The Deaf program, on the other hand, operated as a cohort group with regularly scheduled classes. This difference reflected both the collective nature of the Deaf community (Padden & Humphries, 2005) and the importance of a common language of instruction—ASL. The Deaf program was set up to offer three credits (courses) each year over a 2-year period during evenings and weekends. The English course extended over both years. Students received two credits for this course and completed the provincial standards examination in English Language Arts at the end of the second year.

Although some of the impact of the entire program will be reflected in the results, this paper focuses on the experiences within the English class. Therefore, the remainder of the program description specifically outlines aspects of the English course.

Teaching Approach

The teaching approach implemented in the English class was grounded in a bilingual Deaf education framework (i.e., cultural view of Deaf people, visual learning strategies, use of ASL and English) and incorporated two essential theoretical perspectives of literacy learning. These two theories included the three levels of literacy (as defined by Freire & Macedo, 1987) and the four conditions of an effective literacy learning environment (as described by Cambourne, 1995).

Freire and Macedo (1987) defined literacy as occurring on three levels. *Functional* literacy is an understanding of the linguistic structures and the ability to decode text—basic reading and writing skills. *Cultural* literacy involves going beyond the literal meaning of the text and understanding the information within a particular cultural framework or set of values. *Critical* literacy extends beyond the text to an understanding of political and social forces that influence equity and justice—“reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). An example of these three levels of literacy is demonstrated in a classic Deaf joke about a Deaf couple staying in a hotel. The husband returns late at night and can’t remember his room number. He proceeds to honk his car horn continuously in the parking lot and identifies his room by the one without the light on. At the functional level, this joke is funny because people are awakened in the middle of the night. A cultural understanding of this joke also recognizes the advantage that Deaf people have in terms of being immune to disturbances by noise. However, a deeper and critical

interpretation of this joke also indicates an awareness of the limited access Deaf people have to commonplace interactions within society.

The four conditions of an effective literacy environment (Cambourne, 1995) include *immersion*, *demonstration*, *engagement*, and *expectations*. Immersion is fairly straightforward in that students must be “bathed” in narratives, poems, letters, posters, cards, advertisements, notices, books about events, nature, community, and so on. It is important to note that the quality of the language and ideas in which students are immersed also matters. Demonstration requires that the teacher model a variety of genres in reading and writing. It also involves demonstrating inner processing by using “think alouds,” where the teacher talks out loud about how she figured out the meaning or spelling of a word. This demonstrates metalinguistic skills during the activities of reading and writing. Most importantly, the teacher should model passion and enthusiasm for text. Engagement occurs when students become active participants with the materials and demonstrations presented to them. In order to do this, a safe environment must be created where risk taking is encouraged and approximations are accepted. Students will be engaged if they believe in their ability to learn; see the potential value of what they are learning; are free from anxiety; and trust and respect the teacher. Expectations that teachers have for students can contribute to building their beliefs and confidence in themselves. The teacher must have an attitude of awe and respect for student potential long before the student recognizes it. It is important that successes (and failures) be attributed to strategies and effort rather than who the student is or luck because these are factors the student cannot control. The specific methods of incorporating the features of Freire & Macedo’s (1987) literacy levels and Cambourne’s (1995) conditions of effective literacy learning are more clearly outlined in the following description of the classroom guidelines and activities.

Classroom guiding principles. ASL was the language of instruction—a key feature of the classroom. In this way, teacher and students were able to converse freely and an emphasis was placed on expressing and understanding ideas prior to a concern for accuracy in grammatical form. It also meant that ASL was used to discuss English text and that translation between the two languages was often required and encouraged. For example, the teacher would initially introduce a new topic to the students in ASL; then the students would be required to read information related to the topic in written English; next a discussion in ASL would occur to ensure comprehension of the written material; and finally, the students would complete a follow-up assignment in written English. Information could just as easily be presented first in written English. This alternation allowed for exposure to both languages and ensured that students gained an understanding of the concepts introduced.

Teaching was structured to build on the rich life experiences and general world knowledge of students. This involved getting to know students more personally and encouraging and supporting the sharing of their stories and activities. A regular classroom practice that evolved from considering the students’ needs more holistically was the incorporation of an opening “go-around,” allowing each student to comment—without interruption or judgment—about how they were feeling or what was happening in their lives. Concerns that this activity would take too much time away from teaching were quickly dismissed, as it was apparent that once students shared these personal issues their ability to concentrate on academic tasks increased.

It was also important to create an environment where risk-taking was encouraged. Sensitivity to previously negative educational experiences was reflected in positive teaching strategies that emphasized students’ abilities, modeled rather than corrected, and provided opportunities for success. Students were made aware of the need for daily practice of skills and that through this kind of regular practice improvement would occur. Teaching materials were relevant and mea-

ningful and selected together with the students. Although all students covered the same units, some of the assignments and materials varied to differentiate the instruction for individual student needs. For example, all students studied a novel, but several novels were presented to give students a choice in terms of interest and reading ability. According to the regular language arts curriculum, the six primary language arts skills were emphasized throughout the course: listening (attending in ASL), speaking (signing in ASL), viewing, representing, reading, and writing.

Expectations of students. All class members agreed to the following six basic “rules” at the beginning of the course: (a) read for 30 minutes every day; (b) write for 15–20 minutes every day; (c) keep up with homework assignments; (d) attend all classes or inform teacher if not attending; (e) help each other—“putdowns” not tolerated; and (f) try your best.

Teaching units/topics. The program followed the standard provincial curriculum components and included topics such as short stories and poetry (selected from the text, *Matters of the Heart* edited by Higgins-Buck, 1995), drama/plays (*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, and *Children of a Lesser God* by Mark Medoff), novel studies (*Dances with Wolves* by Michael Blake, *Keeper 'n Me* by Garnet Raven, and *In Search of April Raintree* by Beatrice Culleton), journalism (print and video), and correspondence (letters, email, and TTY). Although only one of these works specifically involved Deaf characters (*Children of a Lesser God* by Mark Medoff), class discussions and assignments always helped students to make connections between the themes of oppression, poverty, language loss, culture, and acceptance of others that were common to their experiences as individuals and members of the Deaf community.

Description of Students

The class consisted of 13 adults whose age ranged from 21–60 years; however, most students fell within the 30–40 year age bracket. The gender distribution was very one-sided, with 12 women and one man. All the students were Deaf and involved in the Deaf community. They were all fluent in ASL, but for three students it was not their first language. These students learned ASL when they moved to Canada, which had occurred over the past 3–8 years.

The group represented a range of life experiences. Eleven had attended a specialized school for deaf students (eight in Canada, two in Poland, and one in Hong Kong). The remaining two students had been mainstreamed within hearing schools; however, it was not known what kind of support was provided to the students in these settings. Five of the 13 students were married; all five had children, although one student’s children were grown and out of the house. The remaining eight students were single or divorced, and four of them also had children. At the time of the class, seven students were working full-time, three students were working part-time, and three were unemployed.

The students’ literacy skills were not formally assessed at the beginning of the program, as there were no entrance requirements based on academic standing. However, several informal measures were used to determine a starting point for teaching. This included a self-portrait, reading and writing attitude surveys, a spelling test, and a written language sample.

Self-portrait. Self-portraits can provide a global measure of students’ attitudes and outlook and give some insight into their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Campbell-Hill &

Ruptic, 1994). It was noted that 7 of the 13 students included a depiction of worries, concerns, and fears in their drawings at the beginning of the school year. These initial portraits were also drawn with dark colours or simply as very basic black and white sketches. An additional three students did not seem to understand the concept of a self-portrait and initially drew pictures of schools or a classroom to suggest a literal representation of the step they were taking, rather than how they were feeling about it.

Reading Attitude Survey. The students completed the Reading Attitude Survey (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) at the start and end of the course. A summary of the student responses to the survey items is presented in Appendix A. This summary indicated that at the beginning of the course the majority of students (8/13) did not enjoy reading poetry *at all* and had *some* trouble understanding what they read. Six of the 13 students did have reasonably positive attitudes towards reading in that they did not consider reading boring *at all* and liked to read *a lot*.

Writing Attitude Survey. The Writing Attitude Survey (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) was completed by all students at the beginning and end of the course; these responses are summarized in Appendix B. Initial survey responses indicated that most students (8/13) found writing *a little* boring and only did *a little* writing at home. Six of the 13 students felt they were *not at all* good writers at the beginning of the course.

Spelling test. A 10-word spelling test (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) was also included in the assessment process, including frequently occurring words that cannot be spelled phonetically in order to analyze the students' strategies.

Written language sample. The final component of the assessment was a writing sample that the students completed in-class during a 20-minute period. The analysis of these samples included length, vocabulary, sentence structure, and use of grammatical markers. Specifically, 9 of the 13 students had initial samples of only 50–150 words in length, and the longest sample was only 255 words. There were four students whose initial writing samples were well organized, grammatically accurate, and included some complex vocabulary, such as “motivated,” “realized,” “vulnerable,” and “commitment.” There were five students whose initial writing samples showed some major gaps in their abilities. These samples included very limited information, scattered ideas, poor sentence structure (run-on or incomplete), and numerous grammatical errors related to verb markers, word usage (noun vs. adjective), and omission of articles.

Findings and Discussion

The context of this study was an English language arts class for adult Deaf students within a high school upgrading program. The primary goal for these students was to develop their English literacy skills. Findings indicate that through this program they were able to accomplish that goal, as well as develop in other ways that were not expected. The changes in the students' literacy abilities, including both their written language skills and their attitudes towards reading and writing, are reported here, followed by a discussion of the teaching practices and learning experiences that contributed to changes in student confidence, empowerment, and participation in society.

Changes in Literacy Skills

Literacy skills were assessed with a spelling test and by collecting in-class writing samples. As previously mentioned, the 10-word spelling test (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) was not a particularly effective measure of student growth because many of the items were too easy for this group. The average of the pre-test scores was 7.2 correct, whereas the average of post-test scores was 8.6 correct. This improvement was primarily due to the four students who increased their scores by 2 or more points. Spelling is also an area of literacy where deaf people tend to perform well, relative to other aspects of written language skills, due to the visual nature of this task (Kelly, 2003). It was interesting to note, however, that the students that scored most poorly on the initial tests and showed the least improvement in the area of spelling were the students who had immigrated to Canada. This is not surprising given their limited exposure to written English.

The other component of the literacy skills assessment was completing a writing sample during a 20-minute period. The analysis of these samples indicated considerable changes in several areas. In general, improvements were noted for all students in terms of overall length, sentence structure, and appropriate use of grammatical markers. In the initial samples, 9 of the 13 students wrote less than 150 words; the final samples of all students were at least 250 words in length, with several students writing more than 500 words. The four students whose initial writing samples were of good quality did not show much change in the form of their writing (grammar, vocabulary, organization), but improvements were noted in the content. They were more imaginative and creative in describing possibilities rather than facts, expressing feelings and ideas rather than simply relating events. This also resulted in the use of more complex sentence structures to include conditional and relative clauses (e.g., “if,” “because,” and “however”). There were five students whose initial writing samples were very limited, disorganized, and included numerous errors. Although their final writing samples still contained grammatical errors, a noticeable difference was evident in the organization (i.e., using paragraphs and clearly making a series of points), as well as sentence structure (i.e., sentences were generally simple, but complete) in their writing.

Changes in Attitudes Towards Literacy

Students completed a self-portrait as well as attitude surveys about reading and writing. These assessments allowed for a comparison of changes beyond their English language skills from the beginning to the end of the program and were separate from specific course content and assignments.

The students' self-portraits were used as a very global measure of their general emotional state. It was noted that 7 of the 13 students demonstrated a dramatic change in their drawings from the beginning of the school year. Whereas their initial portraits included a depiction of negative emotions, the final portraits displayed happiness, pride, future goals, what they had learned, and what they were looking forward to. Similarly, the dark colours and pencil sketches of initial portraits were replaced with bright colours in the final drawings. The three students that initially drew their physical surroundings revealed more personal emotions and demonstrated that they had gained an understanding of the concept of a self-portrait.

The students completed the Reading Attitude Survey (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) at the start and finish of the course. A complete summary of students' responses is outlined in

Appendix A. Although the collapsing of student responses in a summary format hides the important individual changes of each student, it does reflect the general trend of the group towards a more positive attitude to reading. Specifically, Table 1 indicates the survey items that showed positive changes for the majority of students.

Table 1
Selected Items and Responses from Reading Attitude Survey

Survey Item	not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot
4. I enjoy reading poetry.		6	3	2	1
8. I enjoy talking about what I read.				7	3
11. I like to read stories I have written.			7	2	2
12. I think I'm a good reader.			6	2	1
13. I like to read.				3	5

The first point is significant in that many of the students (7/13) initially indicated they did not like reading poetry *at all* or that they had never been exposed to poetry in any of their prior schooling. This issue will be discussed further in the following section. The next two items (talking about reading and reading stories they have written) reflected classroom practices and by participating in these activities students came to enjoy them more fully. The final open-ended question of the Reading Attitude Survey also indicated that students had moved beyond simply reading newspapers or magazine articles and were now reading novels and stories and discussing what they read with others.

Students completed the Writing Attitude Survey (Campbell-Hill & Ruptic, 1994) at the beginning and end of the course. A summary of the students' responses is provided in Appendix B. Although there was some variation in individual responses, a progression towards more positive responses was noted by most students in eight survey items, as outlined in Table 2.

Changes in students' attitudes towards writing also reflected the kinds of activities they were expected to do in the course: writing stories, sharing writing with others, and writing more at home. Although most students (8/13) still only thought of themselves as *somewhat* good writers, this was a big change from feeling like they were *not at all* good writers at the beginning of the program. More importantly, many students (9/13) were now having *a lot* of fun writing. The final open-ended question that asked students about the kinds of things they like to write showed

Table 2
Selected Items and Responses from Writing Attitude Survey

Survey Item	not at all	a little	some	a lot	a whole lot
1. I like writing stories.				6	
2. Writing is boring.	8				
4. I enjoy writing notes and letters to people.				9	
8. I like to share my writing with others.				8	2
9. Writing is fun.				7	2
12. I think I'm a good writer.			8	1	
13. I like to write.				6	1
14. How often do you write at home?			10	1	1

that students had much more specific purposes for writing at the end of the course. Rather than simply writing to communicate with hearing people, they were writing to correspond with family members, keep a journal, write reports or memos at work, and write to express themselves.

The students' individual assessments indicated that although the starting points varied, in general all made some gains in terms of attitude and abilities. Students reported more positive attitudes towards reading and writing, but also indicated how they used these skills more frequently and in different ways within their daily lives. The program's emphasis on content, ideas, and personal expression were reflected in the gains that students made in organization, cohesion, and creativity in their written expression. These gains are important for students in any literacy program; however, for these students the goal of critical literacy and increasing their ability to participate in society was also a key factor. The evidence that supports growth in confidence, empowerment, and meaningful connections in the lives of these students must be considered.

Confidence

At the end of the course, the students were asked what they felt they had learned; 11 of the 13 students responded with answers that reflected an increase in their level of confidence. They commented directly that they "feel confident and now know that no one is dumb," or "I enjoy expressing my opinions and feelings," and "now I'm writing with confidence." Several students indicated, "I didn't expect my reading and writing to improve" and were surprised by the gains they had made. Although many students reported an increase in their confidence, 8 of the 11 students also mentioned that they wanted to improve in this area, to build more confidence and feel less anxious, fearful, nervous, and shy. The ability to identify these areas for improvement reflected greater self-awareness and self-reflection.

Students suggested an increase in their confidence with comments like "I have never been taught a poem before." Similar comments were made about writing essays or being expected to discuss what they had read with others. Whether or not these activities were part of their previous education, these students did not believe they had the ability to do them. Having a teacher who believed in their abilities and expected them to complete these tasks increased their own confidence to try to succeed.

Increased confidence from the teacher's perspective was reflected in the students' increased willingness to write in class when required to do so and the increased length of their written responses and assignments. This change was best stated by one student:

I was really dreading doing all these hours of reading and writing when I started the class.... But now, it's so exciting! The reading relates to our lives, there is so much variety in what we do.... I really look forward to the classes!

A similar sentiment was expressed by another student: "Oh darn! There's no English class this Wednesday because of Remembrance Day."

Empowerment

The concept of empowerment involves taking control of one's life, and in this context, it referred to the students taking control of their own learning. For many of the Deaf adults in this program, becoming empowered learners involved shifting from doing assignments *for* the teach-

er, to making decisions about what they wanted to learn and how they could apply it to their lives in a meaningful way. This shift is suggested in the following comment: “This course changed how I read – before I could just read the book and put it away; now I’m always thinking about it and analyzing what the author is doing.”

Empowerment was also reflected in the fact that all the students truly believed that their skills had improved in some aspect of literacy. Six students indicated an improvement in their reading abilities; four students mentioned improved essay writing; three students specified a greater understanding and appreciation for drama and plays; and others felt their story comprehension, letter writing, and ability to concentrate had improved. Students also made decisions regarding the areas of literacy they would like to learn more about, such as improving their knowledge of grammar structures, developing a better understanding of metaphors and symbolic language, and procrastinating less in completing tasks. Identifying areas of improvement involves taking an active role as a learner—a new experience for these students.

Students were sometimes resistant to participating in teaching activities, but later recognized how they contributed to their learning and articulated these benefits and insights: “Doing the drama helped me to understand more about the story – I overlooked that sentence completely when I first read the play.” As empowered learners, students were not only aware of their own abilities and areas for improvement, but developed sensitivity to the strengths and needs of others. Students commented on learning to respect and appreciate the opinions and feelings of others, and valued different perspectives in discussions. The students actively helped each other by interpreting the teacher’s explanations to those who did not understand, working one-on-one within and outside of class, giving each other feedback, or assisting with editing in writing assignments. These behaviours suggested less reliance on the teacher as the only one with expertise and a confidence in their own capabilities.

Connections

For many of the Deaf adults in this program, the purpose of reading and writing was primarily functional: it served as a means of communicating basic information with the hearing world. In their previous classroom situations, the experience of reading and writing was the completion of structured tasks for the purpose of getting a passing grade. Reading to learn, to be taken away to other places and times, to experience different perspectives or relate to the similar emotions of others, was not a known entity to these students. However, they began to experience literacy at this deeper level during the current program. This was reflected in one student’s comment, “I am so excited about this book that I am sharing the story and what happens with my family every time I read some more.”

The fact that students were interested in passing books around and recommending books to each other demonstrated that they found reading to be a meaningful activity. These were often books they were reading on their own time, not as part of class assignments. Students also came to value and enjoy discussing books so much that they frequently could not wait until class and started phoning each other as soon as they finished a book so they could discuss it with a friend. The emotional connections that students were making with the content of stories was poignantly realized by the teacher when she looked up at the class during a “reading aloud” (signing) of the short story *The Elephant Man* by Frederick Treves, and there was not a dry eye in the room. When reading a story brings one to tears, a deep emotional connection has occurred.

The students applied their newly developed skills and confidence to other aspects of their lives. Several students wrote letters to complain or express concerns to their landlord or other service organizations. Another student commented, “I’ve noticed how my reports at work have really improved – my supervisor has commented that my English is better, there are more details, more information, and the message is clear.” These examples indicate that the students were making connections between their learning and taking actions to positively change and improve their lives.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence for the transformative effects of education. A group of adult Deaf students improved their English literacy skills, but more importantly were empowered as confident learners and were able to apply their abilities in meaningful ways. A key feature in the success of the program was adopting a cultural view of being Deaf. This perspective does not focus on the “deficit” of not hearing, but rather on the abilities of Deaf people to use visual language and visual learning. Through the implementation of a cultural and bilingual approach to educating Deaf students, the previous problems of many deaf education programs—a lack of curricular access and low expectations (Johnson et al., 1989)—were alleviated.

The key factor in providing the students with full access to curricular content was the use of a shared language of instruction, ASL. It was important to the students that they were all Deaf people learning together. This was relevant to having shared cultural experiences, educational backgrounds, common values and beliefs, and more importantly, a shared first language. The teacher being fluent in ASL also contributed to the success of the program. The importance of shared communication and the role it plays in creating true, meaningful dialogue in the classroom cannot be overemphasized. Without this kind of interaction between teacher and students and among the students themselves, real knowing and learning is not possible (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Some of the key features of the program that facilitated an attitude of high expectations included the teacher’s ability to (a) create a safe environment through the encouragement of risk-taking and the acceptance of approximate answers, (b) foster the students’ beliefs in their abilities to learn, (c) demonstrate the potential value and relevance for what students were expected to learn, and (d) earn the students’ respect and trust (Cambourne, 1995).

The students lived up to the high expectations put upon them within this supportive environment. On a functional level, the students increased their reading repertoires and the grammatical accuracy and complexity of their writing; however, they also gained access to the cultural level of literacy and its set of resources. This allowed them to appreciate different perspectives, empathize emotionally with others, and place their own experiences within a larger context. For most of the students, the transformation continued on to the development of critical literacy skills. These students were empowered to take action and make changes within their lives. For two students the change was dramatic in that they enrolled in post-secondary education programs to change their careers—one as a counselor and the other as a human resources officer. Two other students made changes to more rewarding and meaningful employment, whereas one of the previously unemployed students found a job. Less dramatic examples of empowerment were evidenced in students’ increased involvement in the Deaf community, including one student volunteering to archive historical artifacts for the local Deaf organization and several other

students joining committees. These transformations clearly demonstrate the importance of teaching students to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The findings of this study specifically apply to programs for educating Deaf adults, but may also have implications for the education of Deaf students of all ages. In particular, effective communication and interaction in the classroom is critical to all learning, suggesting that for some students ASL should be considered the language of instruction. This implies the use of translation and comparison between the two languages (ASL and written English) to develop metalinguistic awareness and literacy skills. The bilingual teaching strategies implemented in this study emphasize that language, not speech, is the foundation for literacy learning. Literacy is not just about what is happening with the eyes or the ears, but primarily about what is going on inside the head—literacy involves making and sharing meaning (Wolkomir, 1992). If speech is meaningful to children, whether they are hearing or deaf, then it can be used to mediate print; however, if speech is not meaningful to a deaf child then another mediator, such as ASL, must be used to make the connection. Meaning drives learning and as teachers we must find ways to link unfamiliar symbols, such as language in print, with symbols that are familiar and meaningful to children (Harwayne, 2001).

Another key teaching strategy used in this study that can be applied to a variety of educational settings is to balance explicit teaching of grammar and language structures with naturalistic exposure to literature. All students, including those who struggle with reading, need exposure to written language in naturally occurring contexts. In structured or basal readers, many of the context cues are eliminated to avoid complex grammar or vocabulary (Ewoldt, 1984, 1987). Reducing deaf students' opportunities to use context to determine meaning may be eliminating precisely their strength in reading comprehension (Yurkowski & Ewoldt, 1986). Readers need stories that they can decode, but also connect to their own experiences and make truly meaningful (Wells, 1986). In general, this study promotes meaning-based or whole language theory, where knowledge and skills are learned within the context of a meaningful task, something understandable and relevant to the learner (Mayher, 1990).

Clearly, ongoing research is needed to systematically monitor the implementation of a bilingual approach to educating Deaf students, both adults and children, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of visual, meaning-based teaching strategies and the impact they can have on English literacy learning. There is a need to maximize the potential of Deaf people and increase the opportunities for them to move beyond a functional level of literacy into cultural and critical ways of interacting with text.

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Author’s Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Charlotte Enns, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2. Email: ennsj@cc.umanitoba.ca. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the students of the Deaf Grade 12 program for their courage to take risks and learn, and for teaching me the value of relationships in the classroom.

Appendix A

Reading Attitude Survey – Summary of Pre- and Post-Course Responses

	not at all		a little		some		a lot		a whole lot	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1. I like reading stories.	2	0	3	2	2	3	5	4	1	4
2. Reading is boring.	6	8	2	2	4	3	1	0	0	0
3. I like to read in my spare time.	0	0	3	4	5	1	4	5	1	3
4. I enjoy reading poetry.	7	1	3	6	1	3	2	2	0	1
5. I like reading at school/work.	1	0	2	1	6	6	3	4	1	2
6. I have trouble understanding what I read.	1	2	2	4	8	7	1	0	1	0
7. It's fun to read at home.	0	0	2	1	5	5	3	4	3	3
8. I enjoy talking about what I read.	3	0	1	1	4	2	5	7	0	3
9. Reading is fun.	0	0	4	1	1	3	4	5	4	4
10. I wish I had more time to read at school/work.	1	0	1	4	4	4	6	2	1	3
11. I like to read stories I have written.	2	2	6	0	2	7	2	2	1	2
12. I think I'm a good reader.	4	1	1	3	3	6	5	2	0	1
13. I like to read.	2	0	2	2	1	3	6	3	2	5
14. How often do you read at home?	1	0	3	3	5	5	3	3	1	2
	Pre					Post				
15. What kinds of things do you read? (open-ended question)	magazines		12		magazines		13			
	newspaper		10		newspaper		13			
	cook books		5		novels		10			
	devotions/Bible		3		books (non-fiction)		8			
					library books		7			
					children's books/homework		4			
					biographies		3			

Appendix B

Writing Attitude Survey – Summary of Pre- and Post-Course Responses

	not at all		a little		some		a lot		a whole lot	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1. I like writing stories.	4	0	3	3	5	4	1	6	0	0
2. Writing is boring.	2	8	8	5	3	0	0	0	0	0
3. I like to write in my spare time.	3	0	7	4	3	5	0	4	0	0
4. I enjoy writing notes and letters to people.	0	0	4	1	7	2	1	9	1	1
5. I like writing at school/work	1	1	4	2	3	4	4	6	1	0
6. I have trouble thinking about what to write.	0	0	2	4	3	6	5	3	0	0
7. It's fun to write things at home.	0	1	5	0	7	5	0	5	1	2
8. I like to share my writing with others.	1	0	5	2	3	3	4	6	0	2
9. Writing is fun.	1	0	5	1	4	3	3	7	0	2
10. I wish I had more time to write at school/work	0	2	2	1	3	4	5	3	4	3
11. I like to read.	1	0	3	1	2	5	6	5	1	2
12. I think I'm a good writer.	6	2	3	2	3	8	1	1	0	0
13. I like to write.	1	1	5	2	4	3	2	6	1	1
14. How often do you write at home?	1	1	8	0	3	10	1	1	0	1
	Pre					Post				
15. What kinds of things do you write? (open-ended question)	communication-hearing people		12		communication-hearing people		13			
	shopping list		5		cards/letters to family		10			
	notes to teachers		3		TTY/email		8			
	emails/TTY		3		journal		7			
					stories		6			
					work reports		4			
					poems		2			