

Making it Visual and Meaningful: Curriculum Adaptation for Deaf Students

Summary of Presentation

Objectives

Literacy is essential for success and an enhanced quality of life in our society. It is estimated that 2-3% of Canadians are Deaf and the majority of them have inadequate literacy skills (Schein, 1996). This prevents most Deaf people from attaining post-secondary education (Carver, 1991), limits their opportunities for employment (Carbin, 1996) and results in a loss of human capital. What disables Deaf people is not that they cannot hear, but that they cannot read and write. This presentation will discuss the preliminary findings of a three-year study addressing the literacy crisis in the Deaf community through curriculum refinement.

The low reading success of deaf students has been a long-standing and well-documented fact in the field of deaf education (Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989). One factor contributing to this failure is that deaf students are typically taught to read from an auditory, rather than a visual or meaning-based perspective (Erting, 1992; Strong, 1988). For example, they are taught to connect printed letters with speech sounds, which they cannot perceive, rather than with manual signs that are meaningful to them. Another factor is that deaf children are taught through structured practice and basal readers, rather than naturalistic exposure to appropriate literature (Livingston, 1997). The overall question guiding the research has been: How can a literacy curriculum be adapted for deaf students to incorporate visual language processing, meaning-based strategies, and bilingual teaching principles?

Methods and Procedures

The first year of the study has focused on developing a research instrument through the refinement of existing curricula and teaching materials. This process is essential to the integrity of the larger study because a standard bilingual approach with deaf students, although an acknowledged need, does not currently exist. The adapted curriculum is based on the Manitoba provincial documents for English Language Arts at the emerging literacy level (Kindergarten and grade one). Initial work in adapting the provincial document to incorporate bilingual teaching and learning principles with deaf students has been completed by teachers at the Manitoba School for the Deaf. I have continued to build on and refine this work, with particular emphasis on expanding the practical applications of these principles. Specifically, a complete teaching unit has been outlined for each of the six major learning outcomes. Methods for building on the students' skills in ASL as the language for viewing and representing literature and drawing them into reading and writing in English will be outlined through videotaped examples in this presentation.

As I discovered through previous work, another limitation that teachers faced in implementing an adapted curriculum is a lack of appropriate materials. For this reason, twelve books (two for each teaching unit) were translated into ASL. Books were selected based on their relevance to the lesson and focus on particular linguistic features, such as past tense verbs or location words (in, on, under). Samples of these materials will also be shared and viewed in the presentation.

Significance of the research

This research study has contributed both practical and theoretical knowledge to the field of education psychology. The initial phase of the project, to refine an existing curriculum for literacy learning in Deaf students, is needed by practitioners, but has also contributed to the theoretical understandings of bilingualism in different language modalities, reading and its relationship to speaking, and the significance of accessibility in the learning process. The research has contributed to a greater understanding and knowledge of literacy learning in deaf children, and will provide the framework for the next phase of the study focussed on evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.