

SLED Fact Sheet- Essential background - Deaf learners' language acquisition

The overwhelming majority of Deaf learners encounter language for the first time when they enter the sign language community in a school for Deaf learners.



Language is fundamental for social interaction, personal development and abstract thinking. For the majority of people, acquiring a language during childhood occurs unconsciously, automatically and mostly naturally. Every individual develops an internal set of language rules based on communicating with others who use the same language. Language development is thus a creative process that requires a child to actively process the information he or she receives. As we now know, hearing children get this information by hearing spoken language in natural interaction with other people in the environment, not through imitation or training.

For the child born deaf, this is not so. Of all the barriers to learning that Deaf children face, that of access to natural language is the most important.

This statement may be puzzling until one considers the situation of most children born deaf. Sign language – visual language – is the most natural language for a Deaf child. But since 95% of Deaf children are born into hearing families, this is rarely learned from those who surround young Deaf children unless parents are exceptionally motivated and have access to appropriate SASL training and resources. Deaf children most often encounter SASL only when they attend school, where they learn it primarily from other children, or if they are lucky from Deaf adults. Spoken language is no alternative since it remains largely inaccessible to Deaf children: they cannot hear speech and thus cannot easily reproduce it. Consequently, neither the complex structures nor nuances of tone and meaning of spoken language are available to Deaf and severely hard-of-hearing children. Quite simply, speech gives them too little visual information, hence making the linguistic information being expressed incomplete.

A spoken language – English, for example – is structured according to how the sounds of speech are produced. This is then formalised into a system of writing also dependent on knowledge of the sounds of the language. Sign Languages are very different: they have structures that allow simultaneously produced information and are produced not just with the hands, but also use three-dimensional space, directionality, facial expression and bodily movement. Everything is adapted to how the eye perceives linguistic information.

To further complicate the world of learning for the Deaf child, sign languages are not written, so it is necessary for Deaf children to master both the national sign language (in South Africa this is South African Sign Language (SASL)) and a written language such as English. In other words, Deaf children must necessarily become bilingual, not in the usual sense but in the differing and dual modes of a signed system and a written system. Bilingualism, the ability to competently switch between the two languages, increases a Deaf individual's ability to participate in society.

Technology has brought about significant changes for the Deaf. Mobile visual technology has transformed the possibilities as visual sign language calls and recordings have become as simple as voice calls and recordings. With the proliferation of text based communication, Deaf people can access online discussions on an equal basis as long as their literacy skills are sufficient.

Aural technologies have also grown exponentially with programmed hearing aids and cochlear implants opening far greater access to sound and sound approximation for people with hearing loss. The effectiveness of these devices is frequently oversimplified and overestimated. Sign language remains the only language a Deaf child can access spontaneously and freely, and develop the full capacity for nuance and grammar, and use under all circumstances. Deaf children with good sign language do much better at mastering and making the best use of auditory language technology. Learning their national Sign Language remains the most essential need for Deaf children.