

Cued English at the Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education

How much can late and limited exposure to Cued Speech be of benefit to signing deaf students?

The following article was written by Cate Calder for the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BAToD) Magazine and will be appearing in their May issue. We are grateful to them for allowing us to print it here.

About the author: *Cate trained as a BSL interpreter and can be seen interpreting the South West region's television news. She has worked as a Cued Speech Transliterater; is a part-time information officer for the Cued Speech Association UK and is an experienced and inspiring tutor.*

'Background. In 2006 ERADE, in co-operation with the Cued Speech Association, initiated a trial of using Cued Speech with 19 signing deaf students. The aim was to support their vision of bilingualism and to improve literacy skills long term. Sessions at school include Deaf BSL-using adults to model and teach BSL skills and English modelled through Cued Speech (cued English or CE) as a tool for selected students to support literacy. The term Cued English is used within the school to emphasise its use as a literacy tool and to ensure there is no confusion with speech therapy. The use of CE with older (up to age 18) signing deaf children, using BSL as the language of tuition (rather than using Cued Speech as a direct communication method in the first instance) is pretty ground breaking. The process has been dictated by the needs and wants of the students. Both hearing aid and implant users are involved; but the degree of hearing loss does not seem to affect the 'ease of learning'. A research assistant has been employed to analyse the progress of 6 of the students.

Where has the journey taken us? For the teenage students afternoon workshops, given entirely in BSL, introduced the concept of English having different 'forms' using the metaphor of water. Water can take the forms of steam, ice or water, and this concept helped the students to separate English into the sounds made by speaking it (like steam in the air) the words frozen onto a page (ice) and the flow of words off a pen as they are written (a flowing river of water).

But did the students think in English? Staff and students alike drew 'think bubbles' to show what languages they had in their own heads. Most staff felt their 'think bubbles' held more English than signing; most students felt they had more signing than English. With some students we were able to discuss the idea of 'full language' ie BSL rather than 'signing' and fluent English rather than 'knowing some English words'. Interestingly, the students didn't feel they had 'full BSL' in their heads and most felt that they struggled to 'remember' English words.

We looked at why lip-reading is so hard, from those terrible visemes to beards! We talked about the number of words most English users know (approx 250,000) and we explained that every one of these words is made up of smaller 'building blocks' of sound. They thought there must be hundreds, thousands, even a million of such building blocks and were surprised and delighted to find that there were only 44 sounds. 44 is do-able!

We showed them a DVD of 'born profoundly deaf just like them' teenagers in America. These folk had 'think bubbles' which held 'full ASL' and 'full English'. Full English? How was that possible? The answer is that they were all exposed to English through Cued Speech from an early age.

Steam, water and ice. This brought us full circle back to 'water'. We explained that hearing children 'absorb' language by being 'immersed in the steam of its sounds'; they hear it used all day. Their 'think bubbles' get filled with this language of sound. At school they are taught to 'catch' these 'sound words' by writing groups of letters; steam gets turned to ice. When hearing people look at this ice on the page their brain remembers the steamy sounds in their head. Take a pen and you can make the words flow yourself – you 'catch' the sounds and let them flow off your pen to freeze as ice. And the hearing child does this, because their head is full of sound. The only difference with the American, deaf, Cued Speech-using teenagers was that rather than absorbing the sounds by hearing them they absorbed them by 'seeing' them. Cued Speech showed them visually what their ears could not hear and their minds stored these 'silent sounds'; their heads were still filled with 'sound language'.

We discussed Cued Speech as something that works at the 'steam' level of English – it could show which sounds hearing people use to make the words they speak. This could help them to more easily understand how English works, it could make sense of the lip-patterns and may help them fill their 'think bubbles' with more English. We explained that this was a new idea for deaf people of their age but we would give it our best shot if they wanted to try. To their credit every one of them said yes.