

Cueing with language disordered children – 15 years on

Thornfield House School caters for children with specific language impairment disorders.

Cued Speech is used to develop the children's phonological awareness.

By Ann Clarke, Speech and Language Therapist

It has been fifteen years since Thornfield House School, on the outskirts of Belfast, adopted Cued Speech as part of its multi-sensory approach to teaching children with specific language impairment. Today, Cued Speech continues to be used in the school by teachers and speech and language therapists as part of a structured treatment programme to improve the language and communication skills of its pupils. Most of the children have no hearing difficulties although some may experience an intermittent hearing loss.

The speech and language therapists, teachers and classroom assistants use Cued Speech daily, however, its use is usually confined to specific children and to targeted aims within a lesson. The speech and language therapists and teachers collaborate closely to develop joint aims that also incorporate topics from the national curriculum. Often, Cued Speech is written into the short-term treatment aims and objectives for a specific child but it can also be used incidentally, for example, to clarify a word or correct an error.

Both therapists and teachers have found Cued Speech an invaluable tool to teach sound discrimination, particularly in relation to vowel sounds, and to distinguish between similar sounding words. Cued Speech is rarely used beyond a single word level. Therapists also use Cued Speech to teach sound and syllable sequencing, blending and segmentation as well as rhyming and sound analysis skills. Teachers then apply and reinforce these skills through reading and spelling activities. It may be taught to individuals or groups of children. These groups may take place in the speech and language therapy rooms or in classrooms. The composition of each group depends on the severity and nature of the children's speech and language problems as well as their knowledge of Cued Speech. Teachers and therapists may choose to run groups jointly or simultaneously in the classroom. Within Thornfield Cued Speech is used in conjunction with the Letterland programme, which teaches sounds phonically.

In addition to improving auditory discrimination and sound analysis skills, Cued Speech can be used to encourage correct articulation of words, especially multi-syllabic words, and to highlight errors in a child's speech. These errors may include incorrect rhythm and stress patterns. Cued Speech is also helpful when teaching the pronunciation of new vocabulary.

Another invaluable multi-sensory tool used in Thornfield is Paget Gorman Signed Speech (PGSS). Cued Speech can be used to cue words that have no PGSS sign. It is our experience that young children with specific learning difficulties find it easier to learn PGSS initially because it aids the development of language concepts. Once they have started to acquire some language and sound awareness Cued Speech is introduced. Consequently Cued Speech tends to be used mostly with the older children, especially the secondary aged children.

Cued Speech has been used successfully in the treatment of a variety of speech and language disorders including those relating to auditory and phonological (sound) processing, incorrect pronunciation of words, word retrieval difficulties and dyspraxia. Cued Speech not only helps to clarify sounds in words and hence aid comprehension for both child and adult but it also relieves the frustration of being misunderstood. Another advantage of Cued Speech is that it requires the children to focus on the hand and face of the speaker, which results in improved concentration. Children automatically reduce their dependence on Cued Speech once their auditory and sound analysis skills improve. Its use is then confined to situations requiring clarification or correction.

The use of Cued Speech is sometimes of limited success. Sometimes an occasional child is reluctant to learn it. Many children with specific language impairments also have memory difficulties. This can make it difficult for them to learn the handshapes and vowel positions. In such cases constant repetition and revision are required. Children with both oral and motor dyspraxia can struggle to repeat words accurately and to form handshapes correctly. In addition they may be unable to cue at

the same rate at which they speak and may often cue their mispronunciations. However, if the adult cues the sound/word they can recognise the different sounds and discriminate between them. 'It is my responsibility to teach Cued Speech to all the staff in Thornfield House School, who work with the children. Some speech and language therapists who work in the community or in mainstream schools and who specialise in treating children with specific language impairments have also been taught Cued Speech. They tend to teach younger children so they report that, to date, their use of Cued Speech has been confined mostly to sound discrimination.

Over the past fifteen years Cued Speech has proved itself to be an effective and versatile tool to aid communication and in the coming years we look forward to its continued use in Thornfield House School.'

Ann Clarke (Speech and Language Therapist)