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LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF CHILDREN FROM FAMILIES WHERE ENGLISH IS AN
ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

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In our increasingly diverse school communities, teachers of the deaf frequently come across the challenge of communicating with children from hearing families where English is an additional language (EAL). The numbers are substantial: in January 2011, the Department for Education reported that there are 16.8% primary school pupils with first language known or believed to be other than English (see Table 13a at <http://tinyurl.com/85ch2gw>). The numbers of hearing impaired pupils with a first language known or believed to be other than English are also high: 15.1% at School Action plus, and 32.5% with a statement of SEN (DfE School Census January 2011, see Table F <http://tinyurl.com/87atvfo>). In their most recent Survey (August 2011) the Consortium for Research in Deaf Education (CRIDE) indicated that 15% of deaf children in both primary and secondary education used another spoken language (other than English) at home (see <http://www.batod.org.uk/index.php?id=/publications/survey>) There are very many 'other spoken languages' and although schools can usually provide support in some languages, it's often a challenge to cover them all.

In this article, we will discuss a few issues that we have found to be important when considering communicating with EAL deaf children so that they will develop their spoken language. We'll start with the families.

Families of EAL deaf children

EAL deaf children's communication will depend on the language/s and communication styles they are exposed to in their homes. Families of EAL deaf children can be described as being linguistically diverse – they usually speak their home language or languages fluently, as well as English with varying degrees of proficiency. Older siblings at school may speak English, while grandparents or relatives newly arrived in the UK may only use the home language. Some sign language can be used, either BSL or another SL. Most of the families we have come across speak languages like Somali, Sylheti, Mirpuri Punjabi and many others – languages which are

not well documented, and for which there is little or no information about typical language acquisition in hearing children.

A familiar dilemma for these families concerns the choice of language they use with their deaf child. Previously, advice to families erred on the side of caution: 'speak only one language to your deaf child', based on the (now known to be mistaken) view that an EAL deaf child could be doubly disadvantaged. Advice to parents now is similar to that for hearing EAL children: "there is no 'right' way"; "talk to your child as much as possible because having lots of input (it does not matter in which language) truly benefits language development"; "use the language with which you are most comfortable and fluent, spoken or signed".

The reason for this advice is that there is a wealth of research showing that bilingualism is an advantage, and does not in itself lead to communication difficulties. The trajectory of language development for bilingual children may be different from monolinguals, but silent periods and some temporary delays are normal. The bilingually developing child may use the same words for the same things in their home language and in English, or they may have words for some things in home language and for other things in English – this increases their vocabulary. They may sometimes mix up the grammars, especially if they hear 'code mixed' languages from family members, but they will separate the grammars in time, because they hear good models for English from teachers and peers. Deaf children can be bilingual: many are bilingual in a spoken language and a sign language and although research evidence is sparse, there are case studies of children with cochlear implants showing age appropriate development in two spoken languages.

What do we know about EAL deaf children?

Since the introduction of the Neonatal Hearing Screening Programme (NHSP), all deaf children benefit from early diagnosis together with the technological advances in hearing aids and cochlear implants. So EAL deaf children are more likely to enter education having made some progress with understanding and speaking their home language. This will enhance the speed of their subsequent language development in English. In our experience, they make quicker progress in learning English if their early exposure to their home language is not interrupted. Nevertheless, when they start school, they are unlikely to have fully acquired their first language. Indeed, we do not know if this will be English or the home language. We do know that they continue the language acquisition process well into primary school. Unless lots of English has been spoken at home, most of them start school with no or little English, and their language level is likely to be lower than English-speaking children with similar hearing loss and needs.

They can develop (and maintain) their home language and learn English as hearing EAL children do. Some EAL deaf children drop their home language and learn only English as they advance through the school years. For some, as they grow up, their best language may turn out not to be the home language, indeed, they may lose motivation to use the home language depending on support and input from within and outside the family and to some extent on peer pressure. The family cannot control the child's choice of language use.

Although their early progress can be slower, they learn spoken English in the same way as do their English deaf peers. They can then make the equivalent academic progress. It is interesting to note that many difficulties in understanding and using spoken English, encountered by all deaf children, are very similar to the problems encountered by EAL hearing children. This is especially noticeable as they get older and have to use language in a more sophisticated way, for example, abstract language, embedded clauses and so on, as is required for the curriculum and for SATs. In our experience, working with small groups of deaf EAL children to reinforce language concepts is extremely valuable. Teachers adopting similar practice with EAL hearing children found that they also benefitted greatly.

So how do we facilitate our communication with these children? Here are a few pointers based on our experience and our research:

Draw on all modes of communication. Intuitively, we will use visual cues to aid our communication with EAL deaf children, as indeed, we do with all deaf children. In turn the children will use all their resources to communicate with us. So use lots of gesture, signing, miming, facial expression, lip-reading; writing, pointing to pictures and objects.

In the early years of school, invest in intensive individual adult-child interaction. Findings from our longitudinal study (some of which were reported in this Magazine in 2008) have shown that facilitative one-to-one input, given regularly and frequently is of invaluable benefit to deaf EAL children.

Have high expectations - a deaf EAL child can learn English in the same way as other deaf children, albeit at a slower pace in the early years. However, if the child's spoken language development seems particularly atypical, and is not progressing, this is probably not because of the EAL per se, but is more likely to be due to other language and developmental issues that need further investigation.

Celebrate the child's home language, and the immense achievement of a profoundly deaf child becoming bilingual.

Work with parents: they are central to their child's language development particularly in the early years. Promote natural parent-child interaction: it's an essential component of language learning. Encourage them to communicate in their most fluent and comfortable language – usually the home language. Give them confidence to use other communication modes especially gestures, signs and visual cues. Learning sign language can be very helpful for parents if they are interested. Facilitate parents' engagement with school: employing interpreters and translators for meetings and documents is expensive but, we believe, this is a cost that has to be met.

Good communication with EAL deaf children and their families, together with appropriate support and high expectations is an effective route to promoting the children's language development. If the language is significantly delayed on school entry, then 1:1 adult child interaction is a crucial element of the developmental path, but the good news is, that with NHSP, improving technology, early intervention strategies and growing knowledge of the possibility of dual language acquisition, there is growing evidence of impressive bilingual language development, even for the most profoundly deaf child.

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