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enhancing the reading process: tips for asl/english bilingual classrooms

By Melissa Rusher

As a classroom teacher, I was able to find research showing that American Sign Language (ASL) can enhance reading comprehension for deaf children when correctly integrated into a bimodal bilingual context (Andrews, Ferguson, Roberts, & Hodges, 1997; DeLana, Gentry, & Andrews, 2007; Hoffmeister, 2000; Kuntze, 2004; Li, 2005; Nover, Andrews, Baker, Everhart, & Bradford, 2002; Padden & Ramsey, 2000). However, research findings often did not include practical instructional tips. Instead, I relied on instinct, or a “try and see” method, in my use of bimodal strategies.

In my current role as a teacher trainer, my goal is for future teachers of the deaf to have a more solid foundation. From my own personal teaching experiences, in my observations of effective reading teachers, and with support from current literature, I have compiled a list of strategies that will help teachers using a bimodal bilingual approach to reading instruction.

- **Catch their interest and keep it!** Becoming a fluent reader is challenging, and motivating students to read is important. Select high-interest materials and passages. Use books with deaf characters when possible.
- **Translate, don't transliterate!** Deaf students who use ASL to communicate need to use a translation approach to show reading comprehension. After decoding the English words, students must then essentially translate what they have read into an equivalent, accurately-expressed message in ASL. Students who sign the text word-for-word are transliterating, and it will be difficult for you to see whether or not they truly understand the text. Students should translate, or interpret, the text instead by giving a semantic equivalent of the message in ASL form after they finish reading. In general, students should also be encouraged not to sign along while reading because this simultaneous attempt to sign and read is more likely to show you the student's sign vocabulary than reading comprehension. Below are two exceptions:
 - Emergent readers do read aloud, and for young deaf readers this means reading and signing. The key is for teachers to guide these beginning readers to make sense out of what they are reading so they do not end up merely reciting the text.
 - Some students may choose to sign brief passages to themselves while reading in an attempt to figure out meaning from the context.
- **Handy 3x5s!** The temptation to look at the text while signing will cause some students to stumble along. Have students read a few lines or a complete paragraph to themselves without signing. Cover the text with an index card and then ask the students for their

translation. This is a great way to facilitate a mental code-switch—to help the students mentally change the language channel. This supports language separation and allows you to see what they really understood.

- **Unknown vocabulary? No problem!** When students translate, they don't have to know every word on the page. This is a great relief to deaf students who might obsess about the one word in the paragraph they don't know instead of the 29 that they do know. The translation process allows the teacher to help the student use context clues and language expansions—valuable strategies for any reader.
- **Accept all kinds!** When translating, students should have the option of literal or free translations. In literal translations, students are more constrained by the source text. In free translations, students can take creative liberty. Accept either translation depending on what strategies you want to see used. However, remember that a translation means students must produce a signed rendition of the text that is accurately expressed in ASL.
- **Build their confidence!** Learning to read this way is time-consuming. Students can get bogged down in the time it takes to translate and lose interest. Start off by allowing them to read a whole paragraph at a time and just give you the main idea or “gist” of the paragraph. This increases students' motivation for this type of reading. With a few weeks of practice, they will start to speed through the text. Once they do, ask them to add in more details.
- **Focus on meaning!** Just as students can get bogged down with vocabulary, teachers can overemphasize syntactical structures. Teach students to make semantic approximations rather than focus on syntax. Sophisticated translations will come much later. You can, however, model these as appropriate to the age and functioning level of your students.
- **Chunk and bridge!** Students do not automatically realize that there are not word-for-word equivalents between ASL and English. You must help them learn to identify words or groups of words that have a one-sign equivalent or a non-manual equivalent. Begin by pointing these out directly, but help students gain the ability to pick them out themselves. Engage in discussion and build critical thinking skills. Chunking and bridging are similar concepts, but bridging involves drawing brackets [] around the phrase that has a one-sign equivalent.
- **Crutches not allowed!** When students do not know a word, they may try to use fingerspelling as a crutch. Instead, encourage them to identify a similar concept, using a thesaurus if necessary. Fingerspelling should be used only when a sign equivalent does not exist.
- **Seize the moment!** The translation process provides opportunities for you to point out parallel structures between ASL and English.
- **Monitor and adjust!** Use scaffolding to help students move from actual to potential development and monitor progress so that students are continually challenged.

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