

Closing the Achievement Gap: Using Collaborative Pedagogy to Increase Writing Proficiency among Deaf Secondary and Post-Secondary Students

According to a recent report by CNN, Deaf¹ high school students across the country are failing to graduate because they cannot pass the English portion of the graduation assessment exam (“Deaf Students” 2004). For many Deaf students, the mastery of reading and writing poses an almost insurmountable challenge that must be overcome in order to function in a hearing world. In fact, educators at the Mississippi School for the Blind and Deaf say no Deaf student has ever passed the English assessment test on the first try while the average first-try pass rate for hearing and disabled students is 83.1 percent (“Deaf Students” 2004). The implications of these statistics extend well beyond high school. The fact that Deaf high school students are taking assessment tests multiple times in an effort to graduate suggests that these students are entering college with significantly low levels of writing proficiency. Having limited literacy skills acts as a barrier to the success of Deaf students not only in their secondary and postsecondary education but also in the workforce. Because reading and writing are essential components to many professions, many Deaf individuals find themselves confined to low-level jobs (IT Training 2004).

Because Deaf student enrollment in secondary and post-secondary institutions is increasing, English instructors may find that a growing proportion of their student

¹ The adjective “Deaf” (with a capital D) is used to refer to those individuals who identify with the Deaf community. This may or may not include those who are hard-of-hearing. For the purposes of this paper, I will be including those who are severely hard-of-hearing when using the term, “Deaf.” The adjective “deaf” (with a lower-case d) is used to identify individuals by their degree of hearing loss. In other words, “Deaf” is a reflection of one’s culture whereas “deaf” is a medical reference to the degree of one hearing loss.

population is Deaf. By learning more about the challenges Deaf students face in their writing, English teachers will be able to adapt their pedagogical methods in order to better serve the Deaf student body. In the past, teachers have primarily used directive pedagogy to instruct the Deaf. Directive methods involve little collaboration or free thought on the student's part. Often teachers using directive pedagogy will focus on lower order writing concerns such as grammar and sentence structure. This differs from collaborative pedagogy, which includes a more student-centered learning approach. Teachers using collaborative pedagogy focus primarily on higher order writing concerns such as organization and content. In light of challenges faced by Deaf students, teachers have traditionally resorted to more directive instruction; however, researchers are beginning to suggest that general directive approaches may not be the best instructional tool to use when educating the Deaf. Some researchers now claim that collaborative methods can be more beneficial for the Deaf student. Before discussing the different schools of thought regarding the best instructional approaches for teaching Deaf students how to write, it is necessary to understand some of the challenges faced by Deaf students when learning how to write.

Challenges faced by Deaf Individuals:

The challenges that Deaf students face when learning how to write are some of the most formidable barriers that these students will face throughout their education. One such challenge results from the structural differences between English and American Sign Language (ASL). ASL differs considerably from English in that it has no written component. Because ASL has no written component, most Deaf students will not be familiar with even the basics behind the writing process such as the three stages of writing: planning, composing and revising. Furthermore, many will have little experience distinguishing between lower order and higher order concerns. As a result, Deaf students

not only have to learn a new language, English, but they also must learn a new mode of communication.

A second key challenge lies in what Michael Oakeshott, a renowned English philosopher, refers to as reflective thought. In “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Oakeshott argues that “the human conversation takes place within us as well as among us, and that conversation as it takes place within us is what [he] calls reflective thought” (Oakeshott 1962). According to Oakeshott, reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized (Oakeshott 1962). Kenneth Bruffee expands upon this principle in his article, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” Bruffee asserts that reflective thought stems from social interaction—that is, conversing with others (Bruffee 1984). Assuming the validity of Oakeshott’s and Bruffee’s arguments, a new question arises: what if one takes away the element of sound? How does this affect the production and maintenance of reflective thought?

Of course, Deaf individuals are perfectly capable of reflective thought, but it may be inferred that the reflective thought of a Deaf individual differs considerably from the reflective thought of a hearing individual. According to Bruffee, we think in ways we have learned to talk (Bruffee 1984). If the primary language of Deaf students is ASL, it can be inferred that the reflective thought of Deaf students is primarily visual, in terms of signs (or visual features of a word), rather than auditory, in terms of speech, such as the reflective thought of a hearing student (Conrad 1979). Because the reflective thought of a hearing student is primarily auditory, in terms of speech, I will refer to it as an “inner voice.”

Given that many Deaf students have limited exposure to the discourse features of spoken language, for example, how sentences in context cross refer (through pronouns etc.), interrelate, and sustain meaning (Webster 1986) they do not have the opportunity to develop an inner voice. This lack of an inner voice has profound implications when teaching Deaf students. One’s inner voice is responsible for the mental pronunciation of words when a person reads. Without this voice, the essential components of prewriting

and revising become much more difficult, if not impossible. In the prewriting stage, one must evaluate which words to use in order to convey a specific meaning to one's audience. An inner voice allows reflection upon the construction of each sentence. Similarly, during the revising stage, a hearing writer uses his inner voice to evaluate correct sentence structure, meaning and coherence. According to Alec Webster, author of *Deafness, Development and Literacy*, without processes of prewriting and revising, writing cohesive texts is extremely challenging (Webster 1986).

Over time, a hearing ESL student may develop an inner voice sensitive to English rhetoric by speaking and listening to the English language. This inner voice will allow them to perform a mental check of their writing by scanning for the correct auditory patterns. Simply stated, they can revise their writing to make sure "it sounds right." Deaf students, however, cannot perform this type of mental check.

The likelihood that many Deaf students lack an inner voice provides a good explanation for many of the problems encountered in Deaf writing. As Cooper and Rosenstein point out, Deaf students tend to use shorter and simpler sentences compared with their hearing peers (Cooper *et. al* 1966). The lack of an inner voice prevents a Deaf writer from combining sentences because she will not know how two sentences sound or if they represent coherent text when put together. Furthermore, the lack of an inner voice also causes problems when students try to use relative clauses and the passive voice. Their limited ability to rehearse written language mandates that they stick with writing simple sentences that follow the subject-verb-object format.

Perhaps the most compelling way to show the effect that a lack of an inner voice has on writing is to present a writing sample written by a Deaf student. The following is an excerpt from a writing sample of an 18 year-old student with a prelingual, profound hearing impairment. The excerpt was drawn from the longitudinal research of Quigley and his collaborators. The theme is going on a picnic (Paul 1998).

The family have plan to go to picnic, they packed the foods for lunch. Two children were exciting and will have a fun at there. Father puts a big basket in his car and all of they left the house but the boy saw a dog stay outside and excited with wagged his tail. He tamed and hug it then he took it in the car. They left to the Picnic. Father drove there about 6 miles away then arrived. They took off from the car. A little girl ran to the swing. Father and his son played a baseball. The boy fall on the ground and got hurt. Mother yelled “Time for lunch” They ate lots and they tasted so good. (Quigley *et. al* 1979).

Rethinking Writing Instruction for the Deaf in secondary and post-secondary institutions:

With these obstacles and others to overcome, it is no wonder that Deaf students have difficulty writing in English. Compounding these challenges are the instructional tools or rather, the directive pedagogical approaches that essentially hold back the student by failing to challenge her thinking. Directive approaches to learning are frowned upon in secondary and post-secondary institutions because they fail to address the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. While the aforementioned challenges appear formidable enough to merit using a directive approach, researchers such as Sharon Livingston, a leader in Deaf education research, claim that a collaborative pedagogy is superior to directive pedagogy when instructing Deaf students.

One experiment conducted by Livingston suggests that collaborative tutoring methods may prove more beneficial for Deaf students. Livingston examined whether Deaf students improved their writing on a second draft of a story after teachers made written comments on the students’ first draft and engaged in a conference prior to revision. Livingston examined two areas: (1) the difference between the first draft and the second drafts and (2) the teacher-student interactions during the conferences. She found that the students, themselves, initiated most of the revisions; in fact, they did this

more often than the teachers. Livingston also noted that many of the teacher's comments focused on sentence level errors while the students attempted to move the conversation to a more advanced level in which they would discuss higher order concerns. When students succeeded in engaging in collaborative methods of learning, higher-order concerns, such as their organization and their content, improved in their second drafts. The results of this experiment suggest that a collaborative method of tutoring writing may be more beneficial than previously thought. Furthermore, it appears that many instructors revert to a more directive approach when tutoring Deaf students rather than engaging in collaborative methods used with hearing students.

While this experiment is indicative of the benefits of collaborative learning for Deaf students, there have been few complimentary experiments conducted. Because so little research has been done using collaborative teaching methods on Deaf students to increase their writing proficiency, it is not clear whether these methods will be more effective than directive methods; however, the few studies that have been completed suggest that English teachers may want to, at the very least, consider refocusing their efforts towards collaborative methods when tutoring Deaf students. Perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from Livingston's experiment is that more research needs to be done to explore the relationships and effectiveness of collaborative learning on Deaf students.

With a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by Deaf students in their writing and how these challenges are unique to Deaf students combined with continued research into the most effective instructional methods for Deaf students, English teachers will make great strides in closing the writing achievement gap between Deaf students and hearing students.

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