

THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL
Summer/Fall 1995, Vol. 19, Nos. 3 & 4, pp. 469-482

A VISUAL-SPATIAL APPROACH TO ESL IN A BILINGUAL PROGRAM WITH DEAF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Gallaudet University is the world's only liberal arts institution of higher learning created specifically for people who are deaf (including all individuals with a hearing loss regardless of their degree of loss or degree of identification with that community). It was created by Congress and ratified by Abraham Lincoln in 1864. In addition to the graduate and undergraduate programs, this 99 acre-campus houses the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School, the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, the College for Continuing Education and the English Language Institute (ELI). Gallaudet University is fully accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. Its teacher preparation program is accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teachers and the Council on Education of the Deaf. It offers fifty two bachelor degree majors, ten Master's degree specializations and three doctoral programs. Gallaudet University enjoys a position of leadership in education of the deaf in this country and abroad. Through an ambitious network of regional centers, international agreements with many universities, student exchange programs and the English Language Institute, Gallaudet has been able to disseminate valuable information as new trends and developments are identified.

The English Language Institute

Gallaudet's ELI was established as part of the International Center on Deafness (ICD) in the Fall of 1986. It was created as a response to several requests from different embassies and a growing number of inquiries from international deaf individuals who expressed interest in

continuing their education at Gallaudet but lacked the necessary command of English.

In 1988, the historical and powerful movement "Deaf President Now" helped increase the demand for access to Gallaudet. The marches, reminiscent of the civil rights demonstrations, took Washington by surprise and sent strong waves around the globe. This movement inspired and touched the imagination of many prospective students. Deaf people around the world saw their American counterparts for the first time making unprecedented demands that were later granted.

Another event that had a tremendous impact among deaf people here and abroad was The Deaf Way, A Celebration of Deaf Culture: The Arts and the Language. This huge gathering brought more than five thousand international deaf people to the campus in the heart of Washington D.C.

Gallaudet's name recognition and solid reputation has contributed to a constant flow of referrals to ELI. Fortunately, the student population that makes it to ELI usually returns to their native countries upon completion of their education. Back in their home countries, they become leaders and potential recruiters. This in turn helps to increase the number of new referrals.

ELI is a self-supported ESL program. It offers an intensive English program to international students who are deaf. It utilizes American Sign Language (the language used by deaf people in this country. It is not a universal language but it is generally accepted as the lingua franca in international forums) as the language of instruction. Although some of the participants enroll because they need to acquire English for their employment, the goal of most students is to pursue a college career. Many students acquire a fair degree of competence in reading and writing English in two semesters, but, on the average, students remain in the program for two years.

Student Profile

In its short history, ELI has had over 150 students from more than 50 different countries. Although the program began with only two students, it has 29 full time students from 17 countries today.

Students must be 18 years old when they enter the ELI program. They must exhibit ability to cope with the demands of an intensive

training program and possess sufficient independent living skills to be able to live in a dorm facility. They also have to provide reliable evidence of financial solvency to defray the cost of the program.

Because education for the deaf beyond elementary school is virtually not available in many countries, often applicants seeking admission to ELI do not have a high school diploma. It is our observation, however, that many of these applicants do not fall in the same classification as their American counterparts when we look at their linguistic abilities. American deaf high school graduates are reportedly unable to read (English) above the fourth grade level (Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989). Most ELI students are able to read above the fourth grade after completion of the program.

The student population is as heterogeneous and diverse as the countries they come from. All bring a tremendous cultural wealth to the campus and the program in particular. Some of the qualities they share are: a highly contagious motivation, a thirst for knowledge and in spite of their deafness, a reasonable linguistic competence in their own native language (usually a spoken language).

An important characteristic that many ELI students share is a distinctive artistic ability. At least thirty percent of all former students who have continued their education have chosen an art related career. This characteristic, we believe, is closely related to the results our students obtain in the Ravens Matrix Test, a non-verbal test of abstract reasoning, which we use as a reference in the admission process.

Typically, ELI students attended an "oral" educational program prior to coming into Gallaudet. Oral programs do not use sign languages. They focus on speech production and development of speechreading skills. Although these programs are popular abroad, they are heavily criticized by deaf adults in this country because oral programs have traditionally aimed at turning the deaf into "hearing" people. Oral programs here and abroad discourage the use of sign languages and seldom view deaf people as members of a distinctive linguistic community who share a culture of their own. The concept of a linguistic community of "Deaf" (capitalization is used to indicate affiliation with Deaf culture) people is relatively new in this country. It was not until research initiated by Dr. William Stokoe (1960) and taken up by many

other linguists that the language of the Deaf was documented as being a natural language which has grammar independent of spoken languages.

Teacher profile

Since Gallaudet's ELI is a unique program that aims to provide quality language instruction to international deaf students, all teachers are required to have an expertise in teaching ESL; a strong interest in language acquisition and learning; fluency in ASL and English; effective communication skills; and a positive outlook on the students' potential.

ELI teachers are willing to engage actively in the language learning and acculturation of all students. They participate in field trips; make their lessons participatory, but above all, they take an earnest interest in all students on an individual basis. They strive for their students' success.

With the exception of the program coordinator and another teacher, all of the instructors are deaf. All are knowledgeable of ASL and make an effort to use it at all times, particularly in the classroom. Most have an understanding and respect for the notion of "Deaf" culture. Their command of English is excellent. They are truly bilingual. Several teachers have learned English as a second language or have been born abroad.

Language Diversity in ELI

Since the Milan International Convention in 1880 (Moore, 1982) which "victoriously" declared that the pure oral method ought to be preferred over signs as the method to teach deaf children, the oral approach has been most predominant around the world. Oralism leaves deaf children with very few options to learn the language of signs and to meet and interact with others with the same condition. Thus, it is not surprising to have students in the ELI program who have had no prior knowledge of any sign language, nor any prior knowledge of Deaf culture. Some may have never met other deaf adults.

On the other hand, a good number of ELI students may have used a sign language created by their peers in an environment that prohibits the use of signed communication. Even in American schools that adhere to the pure oral method, deaf students create sign language to use with their deaf peers.

Competence in spoken language is not assessed by formal means in the ELI program but it has been observed and documented that several students have come in with prior knowledge of two or more languages. These students demonstrated ability to read and write with fair command of grammar and of an extensive vocabulary. It is not surprising to find that in a typical class of seven, twelve to fifteen languages are "known" but none are actually spoken in class.

The Program

New Student Orientation (NSO)

Regular classes begin in the fall after an intensive 20 day long orientation which involves teachers, parents, and various support staff associated with the program. During this period all staff and faculty in the program are required to use universal gestures that are easily understood by people unfamiliar with signed languages.

Students are given time to recover from jetlag before they take the English placement tests and the ASL interviews. The results are tabulated and discussed by the teaching staff and tentative groups for English and ASL classes are announced at the end of the NSO. The final groupings for individual courses is completed by the second week in September.

Class Schedule

The ELI program offers a year long intensive literacy program in American English. Like most similar institutes, ELI follows ESL principles and utilizes ESL methodology. However, it does not offer any conversation, listening, pronunciation nor phonetic courses. Furthermore, English is not spoken at all in class.

English writing and reading sessions are scheduled in the morning from 9:00 until 11:50 from Monday through Thursday. The afternoon lab session which meets twice a week for a total of three hours supplements the English instruction and gives students an opportunity to apply the material learned by using a word processor, the electronic mail system, and available appropriate software.

Since linguistic and cultural enhancement is the main goal of the program, the weekly schedule includes three hours of ASL instruction

plus two hours of Deaf Studies in the afternoon. Additionally, there is a three hour American Culture course and a two hour Cross Cultural Communication class.

Language Acquisition and Learning

On philosophical and practical grounds, the ELI program is guided by the principle that language cannot be taught, particularly with deaf students. Language has to be acquired. It is figured out by the learners on their own by means of exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input (Krashen 1987). In the case of deaf learners, this acquisition is accomplished visually for the most part. Therefore, the ELI program strongly advocates the use of ASL, a visual-spatial language, as the language of instruction.

Acquisition and learning of English in the ELI program is a highly visual and interactive process which takes place in a rich cultural context. American Culture, Deaf Studies and Cross Cultural Communication are courses that provide the social context in which both, English and ASL, are generated and used. However, all of the subjects listed above are designed and taught in a holistic and articulated fashion to enhance exposure to both the target language (English) and the language of instruction (ASL)

Although English grammar, for example, is studied in class, there is no specific time allocated for grammar nor is there a clear separation between grammar and reading or writing. Meaningless grammar drills have no use in the ELI classroom. Grammar is presented by way of examples and contextual applications that are comprehensive to the students. The ELI teacher more often relies on deductive rather than on inductive learning. They find themselves drawing from their students' own cultural and linguistic background.

ELI students and their teachers become actively involved in an experiential learning process in which games, role play and other creative activities are used to set up challenging learning situations in and out of the classroom. These situations include field trips to rural America, American Indian reservations, as well as museums, the local supermarket or the laundry room in the dorm.

Interactive methodology allows for students to take responsibility for each others' learning and for a diminished sense of inhibition.

Typically, program visitors comment on the level of interaction they observe and the remarkable progress ELI students make in both ASL and English. Most regular ESL programs (with hearing students) in this country have a diverse student population which is also interactive in their learning. However, our observation is that the ELI classroom offers a safe place where students who traditionally shy away from role playing and acting, gain confidence to act out stories they read in their English class. For example, an older Arab male student spontaneously volunteered to play a female role from a reading which involved three female characters. He volunteered for the role in spite of having several female classmates who could have taken up the role.

ELI faculty, staff and students strive for a climate that fosters uninhibited participation from the introduction of gestural communication during the NSO to regular classroom activities and the welcome presence of visitors from all over the world. This environment also validates the native culture and the language of each student. Students have many opportunities to share their culture and language in various class projects and also during campus wide celebrations, such as the International Festival Week which is an ELI-sponsored activity.

Curriculum

Effective Teaching Tools

Total physical response (TPR) is used in various situations from beginning stages where classroom etiquette is introduced to later stages when more complex grammatical forms and more complex vocabulary is presented. Deaf etiquette is a must because the traditional classroom etiquette is quite different. One example is the use of the light to get students' attention. Usually the teacher flicks the light once or twice. If more, it becomes annoying.

Role playing, story telling and acting are effective teaching tools for both reading and writing. Story telling is a revered and cherished tradition among deaf people from any country. Since sign languages lack a written system, deaf people have relied on storytelling to pass on their traditions, myths and legends. Acting allows for creativity even when dealing with the classics. Students can act their part and use captions as

needed. These captions may be group generated or individual adaptations from major plays.

ELI teachers rely on flash cards of all sorts to enhance their students' vocabulary. They create situations in which students have to pay attention to sight words. These situations provide the necessary context and help students become aware of the presence of English around them.

Since there are no specialized textbooks to develop English literacy skills with deaf students, the ELI program uses several popular ESL textbooks such as *Challenger 1&2* (Murphy, 1993), *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (Azar, 1989), *More True Stories: A Beginning Reader* and *Even More True Stories: An Intermediate Reader* (Heyer, 1992) and *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (Azar, 1989). Adaptation of ESL textbooks is time consuming. It requires careful consideration of the visual as opposed to the auditory presentation. Many other books are used as reference to expand and reinforce concepts. In most cases, however, teachers prepare their own materials based on student generated themes.

A favorite theme was the 1994 Miss America pageant. Several lessons involved this special event in which, for the first time in the history of the pageant, a deaf woman was crowned Miss America. With very limited previous exposure to American English and only six weeks after their arrival in the USA, students in a beginner's class were reading and discussing an article from the Washington Post. During the discussion (in ASL), students shared their perspectives as deaf individuals and the impact this event had on deaf people around the world.

The grammar-translation method (Lado, 1988), which consists of translation into the learner's native language, has no place in current ESL practices. Novice instructors of deaf ESL learners have questioned the absence of this method in the ELI program. ELI teachers do not use ASL for translation from English. ASL is used extensively in explaining the concepts conveyed by words in English. For example, if a story is presented to the group in written English, the topic is discussed in ASL and everyone is expected to react and contribute to the ensuing discussion. The meaning of new words is then presented in context. The teacher, just like other members of the class, engages in defining new

terms by using them in different written examples on the board, the overhead projector, or the captioning screen.

New words may be defined not only by the context but by free association based on the students' previous experience. For example, a student asked for the meaning of the word "often" when it came up in a story. The equivalent sign was not presented immediately. An explanation was given by way of an example using a situation that he was familiar with. All students in that group knew that Ms. Wu (not her real name) arrived late for class nearly every day, so the teacher wrote on the board: "Ms. Wu is often late for class."

ASL And ESL: A Bilingual Approach

ASL plays a crucial role in the ELI program. It is used in and out of the classroom because it is the universal language within the Gallaudet community. Its use is advocated in the ELI program because of its visual-spatial characteristics which we consider more fitting with our students' learning and communication styles. All classes are taught in ASL, except for "Communication Enhancement," an elective course for students who desire to improve their conversation skills and expand their understanding of communication technology available to them.

An example of the visual-spatial component of ASL which is used often in the ELI classroom is the way the narrator of a story places different characters in the space around him or her allowing visual placement and organization. Typically, the narrator refers to each character (in the story) by referring to the same location in a consistent manner. This technique is useful when explaining sequence and organization as it applies to writing in English.

ELI students are gradually introduced to ASL during the NSO. By September 5, when the regular university students arrive, ELI's new students are ready for a total immersion in ASL and its culture. Two months later, these students are able to communicate effectively in most social situations and with minor limitations in the ESL classroom.

Deaf Culture and Solidarity

An experienced ESL teacher may be able to detect a strong Freirean influence in the ELI classroom. This is apparent in the use of student-generated themes. Additionally, the teachers are genuinely concerned

that the themes relate to each of the student's identities. This practice leads to student success. Teachers utilize principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to guide the classroom discussions and to promote solidarity and empowerment in the group. Deaf instructors serve as excellent role models who contribute to self esteem development by showing solidarity and understanding in the language learning struggle.

Resolving issues of self esteem and identity are key to the success of ELI students. The International Student Advisor, the Cross Cultural Communication course and the Deaf Studies class are intended to provide the student with the support needed to work on these issues. The Deaf Studies class allows students to meet various community leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and politicians. This class contributes to a healthy concept of self and to motivate students to move beyond the "Deaf can" slogan ("Deaf can do anything but hear").

Student Success

Gallaudet's ELI, like many English language institutes affiliated with universities around the country, does not have a graduation requirement nor does it offer credit courses which lead to a degree. Students enroll in an institute, such as ELI, because they want to acquire English language competence to return to their country for better employment or to attend an American university. In the case of Gallaudet's ELI, most students dream of entering the undergraduate program soon after completion of their language training.

Approximately, 80 per cent of the students who complete their training at ELI apply for admission to Gallaudet. Eighty per cent of those who take the admission test are accepted as regular students. The progress made in English can be roughly translated to a gain of several grades in terms of reading comprehension and writing in one to two years. ELI has referred more than ninety students to Gallaudet and other colleges. The success of this program is exemplified by the number of former ELI students who have graduated from Gallaudet and the Rochester Institute of Technology, which houses the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

In eight short years, one former student has obtained an Associate degree (AAS), eight more have received Bachelor (BA/BS) degrees,

and two have completed their Master's (MA) degrees. The 1994 valedictorian was a former ELI student. He addressed the audience which included the President of the United States, Mr. Bill Clinton.

Critical Comments and Recommendation

Incentives program

Creation and implementation of a program such as this requires dedication and commitment. Maintaining and preserving the program is even more challenging. The dedication and enthusiasm of a few teachers alone may not be sufficient to guarantee this program will continue with the same level of distinction much longer. Ongoing opportunities to renew our energy and assess our commitment should also be made available. Incorporating a systematic incentive program based on students recruited and student success, would provide teachers with a tangible acknowledgment of their dedication.

Lack of qualified teachers

The ELI program has evolved in the past eight years. It began as a language training for a privileged few but it has changed in order to serve a wider population. For the ELI to continue to evolve and expand, it will require more qualified teachers in ESL with an expertise in education of deaf young adults. Unfortunately, recruitment efforts to this point have clearly shown that there is a severe lack of professionals with these qualifications. A very small group of teachers in the ELI program carry a big load. They are the foundation of the program but their energy is devoted entirely to teaching. We realize that there is a great opportunity for the ELI teaching staff to train other teachers of the deaf in ESL methodology. Although we realize how important this is, we believe that it will take a concerted institutional effort to recognize the impact of this idea and to allow ELI teachers to engage in such activities.

Evaluation and Assessment

In the area of evaluation and assessment, the ELI program should undertake a periodic revision. The curriculum is modified and upgraded

every year. Similarly, the English placement test should also be reviewed periodically as the same test has been used for several years without any significant changes. This test uses difficult written directions and also contains ambiguous questions. An exit evaluation is also recommended. This evaluation should be designed to measure progress in both English and ASL. It might be useful in demonstrating the language proficiency levels before and after the training in the ELI program.

Research

There are various developments which are taking place at ELI that may be of interest to researchers. Investigating the apparent correlation between the Ravens scores obtained by ELI students and the success they achieve in learning two languages (ASL and English) fairly well in such short a time may explain the need for a more visual-spatial approach to teaching deaf children in this country.

Investigation of the use of ASL, a visual-spatial language, to teach English, a spoken, linear language, could be done at ELI. Such a study could illuminate how deaf students process linguistic data that is presented in different modalities and forms and provide evidence of the need for teaching language through the visual channel rather than the auditory channel.

The regular ELI classroom also offers topics of interest for research. The Dialogue Journals, for example, contain valuable data that could be used in discourse analysis to comprehend the way English is used by students. Students from different cultures may address their teachers in different ways. It would be beneficial to teachers to know how the culture of the deaf influences their students' use of English. The ELI has tremendous potential to provide models of teaching ESL to deaf students as well as investigating the development of literacy in a second and third language in post-secondary deaf students.

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