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8 *Linguistic and cultural role models for hearing-impaired children in elementary school programs*

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Editor's introduction

This brief report of part of the data from a large-scale survey of teachers of the deaf by researchers at the Gallaudet Center of Assessment and Demographic Studies provides some information on teacher background variables that confirms otherwise anecdotal evidence, revealing the extreme homogeneity of teachers of the deaf and raising the issue of teachers as cultural role models. Woodward, Allen, and Schildroth looked at data on 609 elementary school teachers of the deaf, 85% of whom turn out to be hearing females. Using an ingeniously designed questionnaire, they were able to collect data on the teachers' classroom language characteristics. In addition to direct questions about language use, they provided a sample English sentence and asked the respondents to indicate, morpheme by morpheme, which elements they would include manually, either by fingerspelling, or by separate or inclusive sign. From the answers to these questions, the authors could deduce what language or sign system (if any) the teachers used. Not one of the teachers reported using ASL as a primary means of communication in the classroom. Nearly 60% used simultaneous communication and over 40% used no signs at all. The distribution of language use varied according to the kind of school, with more signing being used in the special schools. The authors infer from these data that deaf children are exposed largely to Hearing cultural role models, except in residential or day schools for the Deaf, and thus that an assimilationist approach dominates education of the Deaf. The implication of this state of affairs is that deaf children are treated much like children from other countries in that they are submerged into mainstream American society in a single generation. It is not clear whether such a goal is realistic when applied to deaf children, even if it were desirable. Profound hearing loss, in most cases, presents fundamental communication difficulties between deaf and hearing people that can only be overcome if both groups make a concerted effort to understand the culture and language of the other. If access to deaf children's own culture and language is restricted, then problems of social identity and self-esteem, in addition to language difficulties, will probably be impossible to avoid.

Since less than 5% of hearing-impaired children have two deaf parents (Rawlings and Jensema, 1977), most hearing-impaired children are not meaningfully exposed to American Sign Language and Deaf cultural values at home (De Santis, 1979; Padden, 1980). The very large majority of hearing-impaired children who have two hearing parents often experience severe communication difficulties with their parents and as a result learn very little English at home (Charrow and Fletcher, 1974; Furth, 1966). Without this knowledge of English, most hearing-impaired children of hearing parents are often unable to fully learn Hearing cultural values in the home.

School, therefore, becomes a crucial place for enculturation (Meadow, 1972) and language acquisition (Markowicz and Woodward, 1978) for most deaf children. From linguistic and anthropological perspectives, the elementary school, because of the age factor, is more important for language acquisition and for enculturation than any higher level of education. Research has shown that the time from birth until puberty is critical for language acquisition (Chomsky, 1969; Hoffmeister and Wilbur, 1980) and for enculturation (Bock, 1969).

This means that elementary school teachers are often the first adult role models with whom hearing-impaired children can successfully communicate, and their impact on the children's socialization therefore assumes even greater significance than for teachers of hearing children.

The purpose of the present study is to examine background information on elementary school teachers of hearing-impaired students and on the type of communication these teachers use in the classroom. From these data we draw several conclusions about how these elementary classroom teachers serve as linguistic and cultural role models for their hearing-impaired students.

Data collection

Data from this study were collected in the spring of 1985 by the Gallaudet Research Institute's Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies (CADS). The population for the study was drawn from those programs supplying data to the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth, which each year collects demographic and educationally relevant data on more than 50,000 hearing-impaired students.

TABLE 1. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS BY GENDER, HEARING STATUS, AND TYPE OF PROGRAM, 1985

	Special school		*Local school program*	
Hearing status and gender	*N*	*(%)*	*N*	*(%)*
Hearing female	186	83.0	333	86.5
Hearing male	13	5.9	35	9.1
Deaf female	13	5.9	1	0.3
Deaf male	1	0.3	1	0.3
Hard-of-hearing female	7	3.1	8	2.1
Hard-of-hearing male	4	1.8	7	1.7
Totals	224	100.0	385	100.0

From the 1983–1984 annual survey data base, we randomly selected 4,500 students and assigned them to one of three subject area stratification groups: reading, mathematics, and social studies. Questionnaires were sent to the programs enrolling these students, with instructions to distribute them to the reading, mathematics, or social studies teachers of the students. Students were stratified in this way to ensure that teachers in a variety of academic contexts were represented in the data base. Since sampling was carried out on an individual student basis, some teachers received two or more questionnaires. The primary aim of the analysis being to describe the communication patterns of teachers, the duplicate responses for these teachers were eliminated from the analysis. In addition, the data set was limited to teachers at the elementary school level, since communication at this level is likely to have a greater impact on the transmission of cultural values than communication at higher levels. Finally, teachers with missing or incomplete data were eliminated from the data base. The resulting file contained information on 609 teachers.

Teacher background

Of the 609 teachers in this study, 85.2% are hearing females. Only 42 teachers report themselves as hearing-impaired: 16 deaf and 26 hard-of-hearing. Of the deaf teachers, only two are male. Twenty-five of these 42 hearing-impaired teachers teach in special schools. Table 1 indicates the distribution of the 609 teachers in terms of sex, hearing status, and type of program in which they are teaching.

Of the 25 hearing-impaired teachers working in special schools, 14 classify themselves as deaf, 11 as hard-of-hearing. On the other hand, 15 of the 17 hearing-impaired teachers in local school programs consider themselves hard-of-hearing rather than deaf.

Classroom communication of teachers

Teachers were asked if they signed, spoke, or signed and spoke during their instruction of the individual students randomly selected for the survey. For teachers who signed, the following questions were asked to determine the degree to which the signing was in English or American Sign Language (ASL) and the extent to which various channels were used:

1. When teaching this student in the classroom, do you normally:
   A. Speak and sign at the same time
   B. Sign only
   C. Other
2. If you sign only, do you use lip movements for most or all English words?
   A. Yes
   B. No
3. The following list consists of phrases which have been used to characterize types of signing. Which of these best describes the signing that you use when teaching this student? (Choose only one.)
   A. American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan)
   B. Pidgin Sign English (PSE)
   C. Seeing Essential English (SEE I)
   D. Signing Exact English (SEE II)
   E. Signed English
   F. Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE)
   G. Other
4. Read the following two English sentences:
   He is looking at me.
   I am looking for him.
   A. When communicating the meaning of the two English sentences above to the *named student* in the classroom, indicate how you would communicate each of the following:
   (a. Would fingerspell; b. Would use separate sign or gesture; c. Would include as part of another sign; d. Would omit)

He	(a, b, c, or d?)	**I**	(a, b, c, or d?)
is	(a, b, c, or d?)	**am**	(a, b, c, or d?)
look	(a, b, c, or d?)	**look**	(a, b, c, or d?)
-ing	(a, b, c, or d?)	**-ing**	(a, b, c, or d?)
at	(a, b, c, or d?)	**for**	(a, b, c, or d?)
me	(a, b, c, or d?)	**him**	(a, b, c, or d?)

   B. When communicating the meaning of the two English sentences above to *this* student in the classroom, indicate how you would normally sign the following words:
   (a. Would use the same sign for each; b. Would use a different sign for each; c. Would not sign one or both of these words)

He and **Him** (a, b, or c?)
I and **Me** (a, b, or c?)
Am and **Is** (a, b, or c?)
Look in both sentences (a, b, or c?)

To determine code preferences, we first assumed that the nonsigning teachers were communicating in English. For signing teachers, code was a little more difficult to determine. Although Question 3 specifically asked teachers whether they communicated in ASL or in a manually coded form of English, the teachers' responses to this question were, in many cases, invalidated by their responses to other questions. For the current analysis, signing teachers were assumed to be signing in English unless they met the following three conditions: (a) They responded "sign only" to Question 1 (i.e., they did not sign and speak at the same time); (b) they responded "no" to Question 2 (i.e., they did not use lip movements); and (c) they responded "would include as part of another sign" or "would omit" to the sentence items *-ing* (in both sentences), *is*, and *am*. Teachers who met these three conditions were classified as being true ASL communicators.

To further specify channel differences, we examined various subchannels. English signers were classified according to whether or not they used simultaneous communication (i.e., whether they spoke and signed at the same time; see Question 1). Those English signers not using the simultaneous communication method were classified by the use of lip movements with their signs (Question 2). ASL signers, by definition, used a single channel (signing only).

None of the teachers in the survey normally uses ASL as the preferred form of classroom communication. The majority of teachers (57.5%) report using speech and signs at the same time. These teachers cannot be using ASL. An additional 41.7% of the teachers report using no signs at all. This group of teachers also cannot be using ASL. Only six teachers report signing without voice. However, these six teachers also report mouthing most or all English words while signing. In addition, most of them reported using English inflections and/or function words when signing in the instructional context.

There are, however, important differences in the use of these methods as reported by teachers in the two school settings. A large majority (almost 89%) of teachers in special schools use speech and signs, with a much smaller percentage using speech only. (Only five teachers in these special schools use signs without speech.) The use of the two methods – speech only and a combination of sign and speech – is more evenly divided in the local school setting, with a majority (60.1%) reporting the use of speech only over the simultaneous method (39.7%). One teacher at a local school program reports the use of sign without speech.

Table 2 indicates a close association between method of communication, program type, and hearing status of the teachers. Hearing teachers in special schools use speech and signs much more frequently (89.8%) than do hearing teachers in local school programs (39.4%). Conversely, hearing teachers in the local school setting report using speech without signs more often (60.3%) than do hearing teachers in special schools (10.6%).[1]

TABLE 2. TYPE OF COMMUNICATION USED BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS BY PROGRAM TYPE AND HEARING STATUS, 1985

	Special school						*Local school program*			
	Hearing		*Hard of hearing*		*Deaf*		*Hearing*		*Hearing-impaired*	
Type of communication	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Speech only	21	10.6	0	0	1	7.1	222	60.3	9	52.9
Signs only	1	0.5	2	18.2	2	14.3	1	0.3	0	0
Speech and signs	177	88.9	9	81.8	11	78.6	145	39.4	8	47.1
Totals	199	100.0	11	100.0	14	100.0	368	100.0	17	100.0

Summary and implications

This study examined the background information of 609 elementary school teachers of hearing-impaired students and the type of communication used by these teachers in the classroom.

This study produced several prominent results. Almost 9 of every 10 of these elementary school teachers of hearing-impaired children are hearing women; deaf women account for less than 3% of the total, and only 2 deaf males are among the 609 teachers. Fourteen of the 16 deaf teachers in the sample are in a special school environment; only 2 deaf teachers are in a local school setting.

The findings on teacher background strongly suggest that elementary school hearing-impaired children are almost exclusively exposed to Hearing cultural role models and have very limited contact with male teachers, especially deaf male teachers. Further, among the hearing-impaired teachers in the local school programs in this sample, none

1 Much of this information detailing the relationship between communication method and school setting undoubtedly reflects the different types of students enrolled in these two very different educational settings. Such student variables as degree of hearing loss and age at onset of hearing loss influence the type of communication used by teachers in elementary schools.

appears to be culturally Deaf: 15 of the 17 hearing-impaired teachers in this setting classify themselves as hard-of-hearing rather than deaf, and 9 indicate they did not use any form of signing in the classroom.

The only apparent culturally Deaf role models with whom elementary school hearing-impaired youngsters have classroom contact are in the residential or day schools for these students. In these special schools the majority of the 25 hearing-impaired teachers classify themselves as deaf, all report some form of signing in the classroom, and all rate their signing skills as very good.

The results regarding communication used by teachers appear quite clear: Elementary school hearing-impaired children are almost exclusively exposed to English in the classroom. None of the 609 teachers in the 1985 CADS Communication Study are using ASL as their preferred form of communication in the classroom.

In conclusion, these data very strongly suggest that the great majority of teachers in elementary school programs for hearing-impaired students serve as role models of Hearing cultural values and of English. Very few hearing-impaired students at the elementary school level are receiving meaningful exposure to adult Deaf cultural role models and fewer still to formal instruction in American Sign Language. Although it is impossible to say from this study how much of the present approach is due to conscious decision and how much is due to other factors such as teacher shortages and funding problems, it is clear that elementary school programs are utilizing an assimilationist approach rather than a bilingual-bicultural approach. Assimilation has clearly been the goal of deaf education at the elementary school level for many years (Corbett and Jensema, 1981; Moores, 1978; Woodward, 1982). Judging from assessments of administrators in deaf education (Prickett and Hunt, 1977) and studies like the present one, we see little indication of any drastic change in approach in the near future.

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