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Supporting Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Adult Immigrants as Learners

Years ago, I worked as a facilitator for a literacy program called Pebbles in the Sand, under the umbrella of the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA). The program was for immigrant and refugee women who had low literacy skills in their own language. They recognized that learning English was the key to making a life in their new country. For many, the learning was difficult but these women were full of laughter and optimism. I was constantly inspired by their courage, strength, and resilience.

Recently I learned about a literacy program at Bow Valley College that works with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing immigrant adults. On top of the usual settlement challenges that all immigrants face, these learners deal with another layer of complexity in learning to communicate. First, they need to learn American Sign Language, and then they transfer those skills into learning English. Within one literacy program, they are learning two new languages. As a hearing person and adult literacy practitioner, I found this to be a new and extraordinary set of skills to acquire in a new country — an impressive task!

Here is some of what I learned about **bicultural learning** (Deaf culture, hearing culture, cultures from around the world, and Canadian culture), and **bilingual learning** (learning a visual language such as American Sign Language and learning English — a phonetic, print language).

What Literacy Practitioners Said

Wanda Becker, a Deaf educator, teaches in the American Sign Language for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) Adults program at Bow Valley College. (At BVC all the instructors in this program have been deaf — such educators serve as strong cultural role models within DHH classrooms.) The focus of this innovative education program is to help adults build their American Sign Language (ASL) skills, and their English reading and writing skills. As part of the program, learners also increase their knowledge of Deaf

and non-Deaf culture and learn about local Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing resources and services. Wanda shared her teaching philosophy and passion for the work. She said:

I became really passionate about this work after meeting people who did not know any sign language — or they knew sign language but no written language. Many of these people came from other cultures. I also work with Deaf individuals who were born in Canada or the United States who may have struggled in school with American Sign Language. I work to ensure that all of our cultures are respected equally. I start with where the person is in their language skills and work from there.

Wanda's job is complex. The learners come from diverse backgrounds (including other countries). Many know sign language from their countries of origin. Others might have some knowledge of American Sign Language. She is working simultaneously with international cultures and Canadian culture, and Deaf culture and hearing culture (bicultural). Her first task is to teach ASL, and second, to help students transfer those skills to learn English reading and writing (bilingual).

She finds that one of her biggest challenges is that there is no set curriculum for these kinds of bicultural, bilingual programs.

The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf is attempting to develop curriculum for kindergarten through grade 12. They are also working on developing curriculum for adults. This includes both immigrants and individuals born in Canada with low literacy. I work with a community of individuals who are working on these issues.

Like Wanda, Brent Novodvorski, a researcher and former instructor in the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Program at Bow Valley College believes that “language teachers need to recognize and appreciate what knowledge and skills are valued, celebrated, and carried in communities — workplace, ethnic cultures, and linguistic. Although it is varied, the curriculum has the unique position to be evolutionary and reflective of the changing world. The curriculum is the site, or a workbench, for language teachers to wield the values of membership in communities” (in Eaton 2010).

For both Wanda and Brent, the curriculum lives in the educators themselves and is not written down in any text. This means that the curriculum is being constantly adapted within a changing classroom environment. The process relies heavily on the skills and knowledge of the instructors themselves. In addition to learning the two languages, the educators purposely and consciously include learning about the values and importance of Deaf culture and community.

Supported by his research, Novodvorski makes the following recommendations for improving the learning environment for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing adult immigrant learners:

- ✓ American Sign Language should be incorporated as the language of instruction.
- ✓ DHH learners should *not* be enrolled in mediated learning environments (hearing classrooms with ASL interpreters).

- ✓ Recognize the equal status of American Sign Language and English.
- ✓ Ensure that ASL and English are visible as much as possible.
- ✓ Teachers should always continue to develop their translation skills. (Novodvorski 2009, 6)

These recommendations resonate with other people working in this evolving area.

What the Research Says

Researcher and educator Charlotte Enns shares her model of the underlying principles and goals in Bilingual Deaf Education Programs. She believes that the primary educational goal is for people to live as bilingual (in American Sign Language and English) in society. Within this model, the Deaf are seen and respected as a distinct culture and the program focuses on developing pride, linguistic confidence, and a Deaf identity. Language and culture are intertwined. Therefore, instructors are Deaf and serve as role models, along with Deaf peers. Evidence suggests that clustering Deaf learners in one class or school results in more successful educational experiences. All Bilingual Deaf Education programs are built on the premise that it is important to establish a first-language base (American Sign Language — ASL). Learners acquire language, cognition, and social structures through ASL. Academic learning and English literacy skills are then built upon this foundation. Learners transfer skills from one language to the other (through metalinguistic awareness). Instructors teach translation steps and skills through a comparative analysis of ASL and English. ASL is the language of instruction in the classroom (dual curriculum). The goal is to become literate in both languages (Enns 2006, 29-32).

The relationship between signed and spoken languages is complex. It is important for teachers to understand these complexities as well as the key differences between spoken language bilingual programs and Bilingual Deaf Education programs. When these principles are understood and implemented the benefits of first language signing skills can be linked with second language literacy development. (Enns 2006, 27)

Enns's model shares many of the same principles as those underlying Bow Valley College's DHH program.

Lastly, I want to share some personal insights I had while working on this article.

Reframing Deaf Education from Hearing Loss to Deaf Gain

The word *normal* appeared in the English language in the middle of the nineteenth century, coming out of the field of statistics (Davis 1995). It became an organizing principle that provided a means of measuring standards of human biology and behaviour (Bauman 2013, 6). "When the frame of normalcy is the predominant lens through which we see people, we can only conceive of disability as a problem" (Bauman 2013, 5). Bauman urges us to reframe hearing loss as "deaf-gain," a perspective that sees

deafness not as a loss but as “an expression of human variation that results in bringing to the fore specific cognitive, creative, and cultural gains” (10). She goes on to ask us to “consider a more wholistic understanding of the human potential for adaptation, neuroplasticity, and overall diversity in ways of knowing and being in the community” (24).

I realized that I was using the normalcy frame. I had viewed Deafness as a disability and did not understand the concept of Deaf culture. After speaking with Wanda Becker and doing some research, I opened to a new way of looking at Deaf culture — a way that respects and honours difference and alternative ways of knowing and being. In any educational setting, working with and acknowledging our differences is an important awareness for literacy practitioners to cultivate.

So much is happening at once in a literacy program, including the many dynamics between students, tutors, ourselves, and colleagues. We work in a context of multiple social differences, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, ability, and culture. Some of the difficult moments occur in the context of these differences; yet our discomfort with thinking or talking about these differences can limit the possibilities of learning from what is taking place. (Stewart 2009, 4)

There are many issues involved in being a Deaf educator working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing learners. Race, difference, abilities, exclusion, Deaf culture, and immigrant cultures are just a few of the topics that may come up in the classroom. When Deaf educators work with DHH learners exclusively in their own classes, teaching American Sign Language, and using ASL as the language of instruction to teach English, they are engaging in an overtly political act that honours Deaf culture and American Sign Language as equal to hearing culture and English.

References and Resources

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