Strategies for Teaching Deaf Students

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Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss some key learning points from my experience as a hearing teacher for deaf students in a graduate course. During the three years that I was involved in the programme in different roles, I had the opportunity to learn about deaf students and the Deaf[1] community in India. The knowledge that I gained from my interactions with deaf people from different backgrounds, and from my observations and reflections, has helped increase my understanding of deaf education in India, the Deaf community in general and Indian Sign Language (ISL).

The Context

To provide higher education opportunities for deaf students in India, the University of Central Lancashire designed a graduate level programme—B.A. in Applied Sign Language Studies (BAASLS), that was implemented at IGNOU, Delhi from 2009-2014. With courses on linguistics of sign languages, applied linguistics, first and second language acquisition, bilingualism, literacy, interpreting, peer mentoring, etc., the aim of the programme was to build deaf sign language teachers, teacher trainers, and graduates with the knowledge and skills to teach deaf children. Since the mediums of instruction were Indian Sign Language (ISL) and written English, the students were required to have basic sign language and English literacy skills. However, recognizing that most deaf students were not equipped with sufficient literacy and numerical skills, there was also a year-long pre-programme called Bachelor's Preparatory Programme for Deaf Students (BPPDS), to impart skills such as English reading and writing, numeracy, computers, etc. The students were also allowed to submit assignments either as ISL videos or English texts. There were students from all over India as well as some international students from Nepal, China, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, etc. The staff comprised both deaf and hearing people, all with the requisite ISL skills.

As a Language Support Officer for the BAASLS programme, my work consisted of teaching remedial English classes, editing written assignments, and generally supporting the students in any difficulty that they had in reading or writing English. For two years, I also taught courses on first language acquisition, metalinguistic pre-requisites for sign language teaching and peer mentoring, in addition to co-supervising dissertations.

During my three years at IGNOU (2011-2014), I was part of an environment in which there were both deaf and hearing people, and where both ISL and spoken English were used. I had the opportunity to interact with deaf students, and deaf and hearing teachers. Since the teachers at the ISL course I had attended prior to joining IGNOU were deaf, I had met deaf persons before, but BAASLS gave me the opportunity to interact with a larger group of deaf people, i.e. a Deaf community.

Educational Experiences and Literacy Skills of Deaf Students

In my PPTs, I often listed the vocabulary terms that I felt the students might not be familiar with. I explained the meaning of the word and made a sentence to further clarify its meaning. In one such PPT, the sentence had the word "Constitution" referring to the Constitution of India. Students asked me what it meant. I briefly explained that the Constitution was a set of laws, rules, etc., for the government and citizens of India, assuming that the students were aware of the concept but not the English word for it. But the students were still confused, and I had to explain clearly with a lot more detail about the Constitution and its importance and how it came into being.

This incident brought to light how deaf students often study up to classes 10 and 12 without actually gaining class-appropriate knowledge. In my discussions with students, the common refrain was how their school years had been a waste because they had not learnt anything. They further explained that when the teachers spoke, they were expected to be able to understand them with the help of hearing aids, or by speech reading. The teachers, in an attempt to improve communication, used gestures and some signs picked up from the students. However the result was a mix of speech, gestures and signs, neither of which provided a complete and meaningful input to the students. Due to this gap in their school education and the absence of any incidental learning, deaf students cannot be assumed to possess relevant prior knowledge.

Sending emails to the students was a common way of communicating information regarding their courses. However, after the initial few emails, students started asking for clarification regarding the emails. When I asked them if they had read the emails, students replied quite frankly that the emails were very long and so they did not read them.

As a fluent English language user, I did not realize that texts with more than a few sentences might be intimidating to deaf learners. I also realized that deaf students are often hesitant and under-confident when it comes to reading and writing, and tend to shy away from reading material that is longer than a few sentences in length. This is probably because they do not understand it; moreover they have been taught in a manner in which only words are considered important. For example, most deaf students undergo speech therapy, where initially the focus is on individual sounds and words. Therefore, when sending emails or any other written communication to students, we had to make sure that the sentences were short, simple and clear, and the overall text was not too long.

Students often developed basic literacy skills after their one year preparatory programme. However, when they started the graduation programme, their English problems resurfaced. The reason for this could be that the students were required to suddenly move from basic reading and writing in the preparatory programme, to advanced academic texts in the graduation programme. This goes against Krashen's (1982) suggestion of providing comprehensible input. The leap that the students were required to make resulted in confusion, and in several instances, also ended up worsening their English literacy skills.

While giving instructions for assignments, I noticed that students nodded their heads to indicate they had understood, but often, they did not follow the instructions. I initially assumed that maybe my ISL skills were not clear enough. However, my discussions with other experienced teachers revealed that they too faced the same problem. A study by Marschark et al. (2009) shows that deaf students are unaware of their language skills; moreover, their comprehension problems are not just limited to written language but also include sign texts. Therefore, there is a general language comprehension problem. This

helped explain why deaf students felt that they had understood the instructions/academic content but were not able to demonstrate it.

Teaching Deaf Learners

One day, the term "models of teaching and learning" came up in the class. Students did not know the meaning of the word "model". I tried to explain the meaning, but the students were not able to understand. A deaf senior teacher who was observing my class came up and explained the concept using the example of models of bikes. He asked the students whether they looked at the different models of bikes if they wanted to buy one. He further explained that each model had its unique features and pros and cons, and they looked at what best suited their needs when they bought one. He likened this to models of teaching by saying that there were different models of teaching and learning.

The same teacher later told me that it was necessary to use concrete examples that students could relate to in order to help them understand abstract concepts. He also suggested that I use many more examples to explain a particular concept and that I look up the signs that I did not know before the class. He further recommended that I ask a student who had understood the concept to come up and explain it, since the student would explain it in a language that the other students would understand.

Some students, when asking for meanings of words, often asked for the corresponding Hindi word. One student in particular referred to an English to Gujarati dictionary. When I told them the corresponding Hindi words, the students would sometimes nod their heads, indicating that they were familiar with the words, but at other times, they would shake their head. Despite the fact that their Hindi knowledge was also limited, they still attempted to use it to understand English. They also asked for the English terms for Hindi words, thus trying to expand their English vocabulary using what they already knew.

While this might go against the language teaching principle of avoiding translation, these students were using all available resources to understand new concepts and to get clarity.

Sign Languages

In a class where we were discussing the concept of first language, most students said that ISL was their first language because it was the only language they knew fluently enough to be able to easily communicate with other people. It was also the language that they identified with. Even though most had learnt it around age 5-6 years or even later, they chose sign language over spoken languages. For most of these deaf students born to hearing parents, the language spoken around them was inaccessible. It was only when they went to deaf schools and met other deaf children that they were exposed to a sign language. However, one student who had undergone speech therapy used Hindi to communicate. She said that she felt that her first language was Hindi. This led to an interesting discussion about whether Hindi could be her first language even though she could not speak it fluently, and why she did not consider ISL as her first language. I also observed that although some students could speak, they mostly chose not to do so because they did not feel the need to speak.

On reflection, I realized that due to their early experiences with speech therapy, or when adults around them insisted that they use hearing aids and avoid using sign language, many deaf people internalized a higher prestige value for spoken languages and associated a feeling of shame with using sign languages. For most students, this was the first time that they were in an environment where their language was accepted, and was being used to teach them

instead of it being ignored or suppressed. Students were taught that sign languages are rule-governed just like spoken languages and the two are linguistically equal. Since their communication experience at BAASLS was so different from their school experiences where they could not understand anything, they understood the value of sign languages. They wondered why they could not have been taught using sign language in school. Here at BAASLS, they felt respected, accepted and valued. For example, one student wrote in the introduction to his dissertation:

> Finally when I joined my BA in Applied Sign Language Studies course where teachers, deaf or hearing would teach us using sign language, I got to know the real experience of studying in an accessible environment. Learning academic courses through sign language made so much more sense … My programme permitted us to submit our assignments either in written English or in Indian Sign Language. For students to have such a choice was absolutely a new experience and I saw how deaf students finally were gaining confidence in themselves as equal human beings, being deaf, and developing pride in their language which was not even considered language by their school teachers and parents. (Nair, 2013, 7)

This quote captures what most students often said to me about their school experiences and about being taught in ISL.

I noticed that there were wide variations in ISL in the students. With students from different parts of India and some other countries as well, one would think that communication between them would be problematic. However, all students were able to communicate with each other as well as with the staff; in fact the variations enriched and enhanced their language rather than impeding it.

In class, students always sat in a semi-circle so that they could all see each other clearly. Sometimes, when the number of students was larger or space was limited, they would sit in two semicircles/ovals, one behind the other. In such situations, if anyone wanted to say something or ask questions, they had to come up to the front of the class. The teacher then waited for the student to return to their seat before responding so that the student did not miss out on what the teacher was signing. In hearing classrooms, students do not need to come to the front, nor does the teacher need to wait, because everyone can hear each other even if their backs are turned. These are among the many small adjustments that deaf people make in their physical environments to be able to communicate better using a visual language that requires a clear line of sight.

Deafness, Deaf Identity and Deaf Culture

Most of the students in the programme had profound deafness. However, their background and educational experiences were varied. Some students had studied in deaf schools, others in mainstream schools, and some had experience of both types of schools. Some students could hear loud sounds while others could only feel vibrations. Some students were born deaf, some had lost their hearing at an early age, and others much later. Some had deaf family members, others had never met a deaf person till they joined a deaf school.

Despite their varying experiences, the deaf students were connected by a common language and by their identity as deaf persons. Hearing people often feel that deaf people miss out on sounds and music, and that it would be so much better if they could hear and speak. But most deaf students told me that they do not miss sounds because either they had never heard

sounds or they did not have any memories of them. They did not wish that they could hear. They only wished that the hearing society would be more sensitive to their communication needs. They were comfortable with their deafness and perceived themselves as Deaf, not deaf.

During my conversations with deaf students, they would sometimes ask me to repeat what I had signed when they did not understand it. If I didn't understand what they had signed, they would repeat it again and again till I got the message. I noticed that they were very patient and often gave me tips to improve my signing. It was very important for them to be able to communicate clearly so that both sides understood the message, they understood the value of barrier-free communication.

Conclusion

The BAASLS experience helped me broaden my knowledge, conceptual understanding and re-examine some notions both as a hearing person and as a linguist. For example, in language teaching, we are told that the first language should not be used at all or that it should be limited to specific situations. However, teaching deaf students a written language necessitates the use of a sign language as a medium of communication.

Also, hearing people often talk about the "silent" world of the deaf; and they associate the term "noise" with sound. However, I realized that the chatter taking place around me in ISL could also be termed "noise" even though there was no sound at all. At BAASLS, I started associating the term "noise" with "moving hands". So if we realize that "silent'" does not have to mean "no sound", then we can see that the deaf world is not so silent after all, but is in fact as noisy as the hearing world.

References

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Endnotes

[1] As per convention, "Deaf" signifies deaf people who share a language and cultural values which are distinct from the hearing society

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