

Chapter 10

Teaching a Teenager to Read: A Case Study of the Failure Free Reading Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Imagine yourself as a deaf education teacher at the high school level. One day, a new student arrives from another country in your classroom who can only express themselves with two words, “no” and “wrong” in sign language. The student’s only attempts at communication include nonsensical vocal utterances. His family reports that they are not able to understand his basic needs or wants due to his inability to clearly communicate. The student has been tested for additional disabilities and shows no delays in non-verbal intelligence but has been identified as a student with severe language delays. How do you proceed with instruction? A basic background knowledge of deaf children, children in other countries, and deaf children in Vietnam is needed to determine the most effective strategy to teach language and reading skills to this type of student.

INTRODUCTION: DEAF CHILDREN

Roughly one to three in every 1,000 infants born in the U.S. will be identified as deaf (Finitzo et al., 1998). Most deaf children are born to hearing parents who have never met a deaf person prior to their child being identified as deaf (Benedict, 2013;

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Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). These families likely use a spoken language, which tends not to be readily accessible to the deaf child (Humphries et al., 2012) and leads to a lack of common language with other members of their family (Hutchins, 2010). Due to the differences in language needs, children with hearing parents who have chosen not to sign in the home tend to have low-quality language input (Hall et al., 2017; Humphries et al., 2012) because their home language environment is not fully accessible. The lack of an accessible language at home leads to little to no meaningful natural interactions that provide children with an opportunity to acquire language and knowledge (Goldin-Meadow, 1999; Meek, 2020), leading to a weak foundation for the academic learning that is required for success in adulthood (Luft, 2017).

For children who need to master a second language, such as immigrants, a lack of a solid first language foundation will make the mastery of a second language harder (Cummins, 1979; Haug, 2005; Mayberry, 2007). For those who do not acquire language until they are older, the term ‘language deprivation’ is frequently used (Hall et al., 2017). This prolonged, severe delayed acquisition of language can alter brain structures and neurological development, impacting future academic success, and lead to problems with cognition and executive functioning (Hall et al., 2017; Pénicaud et al., 2013). Delays in language acquisition have a domino effect on many areas of academics, most notably the development of reading skills (Humphries et al., 2012; Mitchiner et al., 2012).

The ability to read is fundamental to success in society, with data showing that the inability to read is linked to high unemployment rates and low high school graduation rates (Snow et al., 1998). When investigating deaf readers, the mean reading comprehension scores for 18 year old deaf students has remained at or below the fourth grade level (Allen, 1983; Furth, 1966; Holt, 1994; Marschark & Harris, 1996; Traxler, 2000) leading to the prediction of negative outcomes for many deaf individuals. The reason for low reading proficiency in deaf children is not a “one size fits all” answer, as there are confounding variables, such as gender, socio-economic profile, degree of hearing loss, level of accessibility of language in the household, and quality of educational facilities that have large human and educational significance (Wang & Andrews, 2014).

Additionally, traditional approaches to teaching deaf children how to read often come from the belief that deaf readers are deficient in English phonology, vocabulary, and syntax (Andrews et al., 2016). There is not yet a full understanding of how deaf children make connections between print and thought prior to developing a full grasp on language (Marschark & Everhart, 1997). Competency in language provides the foundation for reading (Perfetti, 2011), and those who enter school severely language delayed lack the vocabulary knowledge with which to build reading skills.

In tune with a deficit model of deaf readers is the fact that the majority of reading curriculums used with deaf children focus on teaching auditory phonics. There is

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