

Brandon Stotts-Nay

Professor Rachelle Handley

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Benefits of Sign Language for Deaf Learners

The article investigates the importance of deaf children and the language they develop at an early age. Studies have shown that learning languages based around verbal communication are important and critical to a child's development. These studies try and pin point language learning's "sensitive periods" or windows of opportunity. This is the time that children need to be exposed to language in order to develop certain language aspects such as phonology, grammatical processing, and syntax. These developments are "sensitive" within the first four to five years of life. The article was written to focus on the development of deaf learners and if early development of language affects them. For this article they studied deaf learners who were taught spoken language and compared them to deaf learners that were taught sign language.

Hearing children being taught a spoken language on average have the following learning patterns: Within the first six to eight months the hearing baby will begin to understand simple words. Around age one, hearing children begin uttering their first words. When they are approximately five years old they begin to understand the syntax and grammatical structure of their spoken language. Alright, with this being said the article steps to the other side and examines how deaf children develop spoken languages. It is completely different and is extremely challenging for the child to understand a spoken languages "mysterious lip reading" movements. Nonetheless, in some situations they are expected to learn and speak this as their first language. This takes an obvious toll on the deaf child. Hearing children at thirty months learn on average sixty to one-hundred twenty new words a month, while deaf children only learn one new word per month. Hearing children around the age of five have a vocabulary of

approximately one thousand to two thousand words. A deaf child learning a spoken language has a vocabulary of twenty-nine words or less around the age of five. Even after years of learning a spoken language only about twenty percent of deaf individuals' speech is readily recognizable or sounds intelligible to the average listener.

Deaf children that are exposed to sign language rather than spoken language within that "sensitive period" learn language much faster. Some research suggests that deaf babies acquire their first words earlier than hearing babies. Hearing babies utter their first words by thirteen months, however deaf babies produce their first signs as early as eight months. If deaf learners absorb sign language in a natural environment then it is learned the same way hearing learners obtain their language. Natural environment is said meaning that they are learning it at home on a constant basis as a hearing learner would learn a spoken language.

For deaf learners the ability to learn a language is greatly influenced by the communication medium and the language of instruction. There are three main types of ways that deaf learners can be taught language. One is by the aural-oral method. This approach has a main goal of adapting the deaf learner better into the hearing world by making them more oral. They use auditory training such as speech, lip-reading, while prohibiting any signing. There is the total communication method. This approach uses simultaneous communication methods and mostly includes speech, signed English, fingerspelling gestures, and lip-reading. This form of communication doesn't work well because of the grammar and syntax of the two languages being used (spoken language and the sign language). When sign language is used and the spoken language is learned as a second language it helps greatly with the development of the deaf learner's language.

The conclusion of the research suggests that the sensitive period of language acquisition can also be applicable to sign language. Another point made is that Deaf learners of Deaf parents that are

exposed to sign language at birth are able to make the same mile stones, even at an earlier age, than hearing learners.

This article was cited by only one other article. That article dealt with fingerspelling coding and the impact it might have on a Deaf learner's ability to improve their English language skills (regarding mostly reading and writing). The article is not free so I was not able to see exactly where they referenced it but I assume they did in the introduction when setting up language development.

The scientific method was used, not exactly as we talked about in class, but it did go through the process. It had a hypothesis, testing, and then a conclusion. The research was presented in a decent manner. I don't think that they needed to touch on the human rights section of the South African Sign Language. I think they could have left out that section and written something specifically for that cause. Although the section about language development went along with it, I don't think it seemed to fit very well in this study. The topic was clear enough that I did not have to do any additional research other than what I already know about the topic. It did a great job at introducing the question and even gave background on other studies that have been done for spoken language development.

The article did not change my opinion on the topic but rather shed new light on the subject. How the figures were reported from the studies is the only thing I would have done differently. I thought it was confusing sifting through the paragraphs to gather the information. I would have recommended a data chart with three columns of data to represent the language development of 1) hearing children, 2) deaf children learning a spoken language as their first language, 3) deaf children learning sign language as their first language. As for additional research for this topic, it might be interesting if they studied further the language development of deaf learners based on the different communication mediums.

Bibliography

Van Staden, A., Badenhorst, G., & Ridge, E. (2009). The benefits of sign language for deaf learners with language challenges.