Literacies in Context: Engaging deaf primary school children in their learning and assessment

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ABSTRACT

Early language deprivation of deaf children is a key disabling factor, and access to sign language in deaf education is mandated by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The research reported here involves 20 deaf children at a primary school in Odisha. The project supports early development of reading and writing skills, in a context with Indian Sign Language as first language (L1) and spoken/written languages as second languages (L2). The study follows a strength-based approach where the linguistic and cultural resources of Deaf Communities are valued, and deaf children's real-life uses of languages and literacies [1] form the basis of learning, so that the children are led from what they know and are interested in, to higher levels of competence. We have created new methodologies of assessing deaf children's multilingual and multimodal skills with a series of activities adapted from the Languages Ladder [2]. These activities create bridges between sign language, fingerspelling (manual alphabet), and reading/writing, with visual prompts adapted to the local cultural context.

As group work based on the children's real-life literacies continues, we regularly track progress using multilingual-multimodal portfolio entries [3]. The study shows how communicative isolation is eliminated, and educational engagement of deaf children can be significantly improved.

Keywords - Deaf children, English literacy, Linguistics, Multiliteracies, Sign Language

INTRODUCTION

Deaf people in poor/developing countries rarely have access to good education. This causes many problems, for example unemployment, low income/earnings, and poverty. India has one of the world's largest deaf communities with an estimated 2-3 3 million users of Indian Sign Language, ISL [4]. The United Nations [5] has three Sustainable Development Goals linked to this problem (goals number 1, 4 and 5). The World Federation of the Deaf says only 3% of deaf signers in developing countries can get education through sign language. An important area of education is literacy. Deaf signers need better access to literacy learning, especially English literacy.

To approach these problems, we were part of a team, led by the fourth author, in a 1-year pilot project called '"Literacy development with deaf communities using sign language, peer tuition, and learner-generated online content: Sustainable educational innovation" funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development, both in the UK. In this pilot project, we worked with signers in India, using Indian Sign Language (ISL). The first two authors, who are deaf sign language users, were peer tutors/ research assistants in the project.

Supported by trainers, in a team lead by the fourth author, the project tried out new approaches to teaching and learning. The guiding principle is that we focus learning on 'real language' and 'real literacy' and develop the curriculum together with the learners. The 'real literacies' approach [6, 7] originally developed for adult literacy learners, postulates that learning is most useful if based on authentic texts and practices. The aim is that students

learn on the basis of activities, situations and texts which they would come across in real life and which are of immediate relevance to their lives. Taking a real literacies approach means that the foundation of learning is investigation of authentic texts that are presented to students in their everyday lives, for example road signs, application forms, SMS texts, newspapers and whatever else students encounter. We also used a special online platform/site called SLEND (Sign Language to English by the Deaf). In this project, the learners improved their English literacy skills and also their sign language abilities and metalinguistic awareness. We therefore realised that our approach was not just concerned with English literacies, but with multiliteracies. This means the many different/multiple/multimodal ways of literacy, for example, reading, writing, signing, gesturing, drawing, typing, emojis, video editing, etc. We also knew that a huge challenge is presented to deaf children in India. Few have access to education with properly trained teachers who are ISL users.

So we successfully bid for funding for a larger, follow-up project to the ESRC and DFID: "Peer to peer deaf multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of Deaf children and young adults in developing countries." This paper concerns the experiences of the first two authors in particular in working with one group of children in Odisha.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND OUR PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The project is working with four groups of children over the three year period. Two of these are in Africa (Ghana and Uganda); however this project reports only on the experience of working with children in Odisha. Owing to the nature of our challenge, far longer was spent in training than in the first project. The first and second authors have been working with children for the first time. We explain our approach through the use of illustrative examples.

Figure 1: Early encounters with picture books

When first working with the Deaf children, we found they were happy to discuss sign language vocabulary through exploring the visual pictures in the book. They can understand meanings better when the deaf peer tutors explain vocabulary to them.

Figure 2: A peer tutor working with children

A Deaf peer tutor is teaching the children. His approach is more dialogic than didactic. The children are very keen to learn so the tutor responds to questions and guides them towards further knowledge and understanding. The children progress through starting to write. This pedagogical approach means they are improving their sign language capacities at the same time as they are learning to write in English.

Our research uses a multimodal portfolio approach. We gather evidence about learning at the same time as we are teaching. We explain everything through sign language and often add new information and explain things. The children are writing and drawing, occasionally making mistakes. The tutor can explain any errors to them but, most importantly, encourages them to enjoy what they are doing and to work onwards. They are beginning to improve their understanding and uses of words and sentences in English.

FINDINGS

This paper is presented in relatively early days of the project. We first illustrate some findings from the pre-tests, which were presented to the children as pleasant learning activities rather than formal decontextualized tests.

Figure 3   Multimodal pre-test

We were workings with deaf children for the pre-test. We have shown some example to them for vocabulary within 10mins linked to the picture. A deaf child could remember to find word and then wrote the words fill in the picture with images. The Deaf children becomes interested in learning more through proper explanations using sign language.

Figure 4 – Slot and fill in pre tests
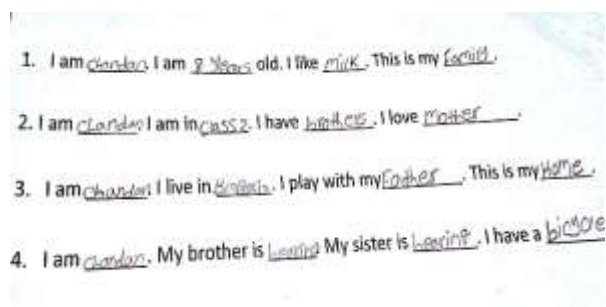
We have shown sentences and explained words and sentences through Indian Sign Language to Deaf children. After that they have understood what the tutor explains this is confirmed using sign language. A Deaf child could then fill in the sentence himself or herself. The Deaf child looks happy to write the sentences. We aim to encourage them to form the English sentences themselves in the future.

Figure 5   Real Life English

The peer tutor guided tthe Deaf children with new topics linked to Real Life English: in this case Letters of the Alphabet which they have encountered in the environment and some texts. Some of the learners do not learn as well as others. Then those who have understood take to explaining to others using sign language. They share with each other in learning through practical ways.

Figure 6.   Learning through play

Children learn much better if they are enjoying learning. Children also learn a great deal through play. Here the children are playing some games linked to English. This gives them a freedom to learn spontaneously as they enjoy the challenges provided by the game. They have good learning quickly. So it is encouraging to continue using this approach with them.

Figure 7 Examples from the multimodal portfolios of one child
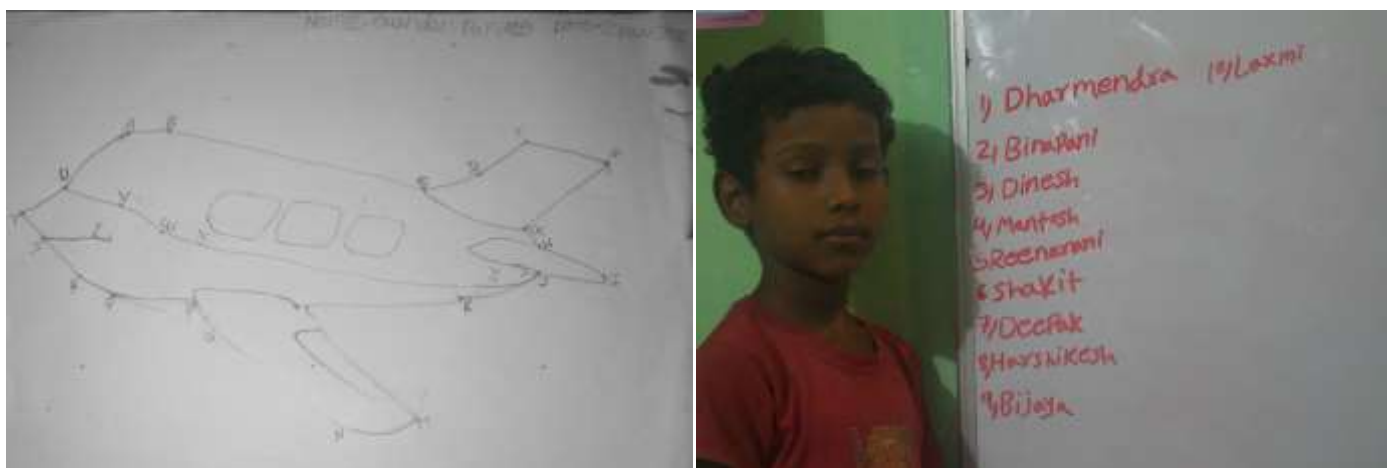
These are portfolio examples by a deaf child. The peer teacher had explained how to write small and capital letters and the A to Z alphabet also. They learned this in the context of the topic. Then the deaf child wrote A to Z alphabet but he likes to draw an aeroplane within A to Z. He also wrote name lists with a classmate on the whiteboard. The peer teacher explained on 'name' how to follow a rule as beginning with a capital letter and then using small letters. This child wrote this list entirely accurately. These examples display both the accuracy of the child's learning, as he used rules of standard written English and perfect orthography, and also how he brought creativity to the task of displaying his knowledge of the alphabet.

CONCLUSION

Our project displays the value of adapting the real literacies approach to working with children; to using the concept of multiliteracies and to valuing the creativity inherent to young children's language learning in all modes [8].

Functional literacy is often claimed to be one of the main keys for deaf children to overcome present and future marginalisation in education, employment, and societal participation [9]. Yet there is also substantial criticism of functional literacy approaches where they do little to connect with the lives and identities of learners. Our project emphasises the need to connect with children's lived experiences rather than impose irrelevant curricula. Essential to our approach therefore is an emphasis on multiliteracies. Deaf children, just as any other, have access to multiple communication capacities.

Although it is very early days of the project, we are already convinced that our approach is generally effective and fruitful. This is because the children are evidently learning. They are learning ISL at the same time as they begin to learn English literacy and indeed some of the world knowledge they have lacked so far. In addition, there is evidence that the children's wellbeing is enhanced.

Acknowledgements

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