

What are They Doing With Their Hands? If That's Not Signing, What Is It?

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August, 2010

The District 917 Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students wants the students it serves to have full access to the languages which most effectively promote their development. For some learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, this language is English, for others American Sign Language, and for others, access to both languages is needed. Regardless of which languages are determined a student will learn, the District 917 Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students believes it is essential for students to become proficient readers and writers of English. The program also believes many learners need the opportunity to become proficient in American Sign Language. Additionally, with the benefit of significant advances in hearing aid and cochlear implant technology, the program wants its learners to maximize their abilities to be listeners and speakers of English. As a means toward these goals, there are two different manual systems being used with deaf and hard of hearing children in the Intermediate District 917 center-based Program for Learners who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing sites located at Gideon Pond Elementary (preschool and elementary components) in Burnsville, and Century Middle School in Lakeville, Minnesota. People are familiar with what signing looks like. Producing American Sign Language (ASL) must be done without voice because it is not English. ASL is a signed language, not a spoken language. It is a completely different language with its own grammar distinct from English. Therefore, one cannot be speaking English and producing the completely different grammatical structure of ASL on the hands at the same time. (It would be like trying to speak German while writing Spanish at the same time.)

If you see people talking and signing at the same time, they are probably using Pidgin Signed English (PSE), or Signed English. You may ask, "Isn't that good enough to learn English? Can't children learn English if a person is signing in English word order? The answer is "no." The terms imply one can. Well-meaning educators have used these manual systems for years as a means to make English accessible to deaf children to achieve English literacy. However, the reading abilities of deaf children nationwide raised with these methods have not improved in the past 40-50 years of their use in the education of deaf and hard of hearing learners.

What has been studied and concluded by researchers in recent years is that there is no "English" in Pidgin Signed English, Signed English or invented sign systems like S.E.E. (Signing Exact English). Why is that? It is because these signed systems do not convey the consonant-vowel structures of English, which are the building blocks to the linguistic structure of English. For example, if one learns the sign for "cat," it does not give you the consonant-vowel structure, "k-a-t." There is nothing wrong with producing the ASL sign for "cat." However, it is not English. The ASL sign for "cat" is the ASL word to label the animal that is a cat. The English word "cat" is the English word for the animal that is a cat. A child who is deaf growing up with sign language in America must memorize the English word "cat" as a sight word, as well as memorize as sight words any other English words associated with a sign or fingerspelled word. Hearing children in America typically have reading vocabularies of approximately 150,000 English words or more by the end of high school. There is no ASL word (sign) equivalent for most of those English words due to there being approximately 5000 signs in American Sign Language. The task of memorizing that many words as sight words, and then decoding them efficiently while reading, does not happen for most children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Hearing children who are successful readers do not memorize all words as sight words in order to be able to read.

So what manual, visual system does convey the consonant-vowel structure of English? It is cued English. Cued American English uses a system called Cued Speech to convey the language of American English. Cued Speech is a set of eight handshapes representing groups of consonants that, when placed in one of four locations near the face representing groups of vowels and paired with a mouthshape, represent the consonant-vowel phonemes, or combinations, of a traditionally spoken language. The District 917 Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program is using cued English to convey English completely and visually to its students.

Reading research has made it clear that one of the major keys to reading success is “phonemic awareness”. Cued English provides the consonant-vowel building blocks to develop phonemic awareness in deaf and hard of hearing children through vision just as speech provides those building blocks to hearing children through hearing. We know that hearing children who are successful readers “decode” words phonemically when reading. Research shows that deaf children raised with cued English also “decode” words phonemically. Our program carefully discussed and researched information on cueing in making the decision to use cued English in our program. It is not a system well understood or acknowledged yet in deaf education for its tremendous potential for changing the prevalence of illiteracy and underachievement in the deaf and hard of hearing population at large in this country. We visited programs that used cued English as the language of instruction and were amazed at the reading and writing abilities of the profoundly deaf, as well as hard of hearing, students, whose levels were at or above the grade level of their hearing peers.

After several years of implementation of this model in our preschool and elementary programs at Gideon Pond Elementary in Burnsville, we have seen a significant impact in countering the nationwide legacy of underachievement among deaf and hard of hearing learners in reading, writing and general academic achievement. **In comparison to the national average net gain of only 0.2 grade equivalent in reading achievement per year of instruction for deaf and hard of hearing learners, the average grade equivalent (G.E.) net gain in reading achievement in the 917 Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program at Gideon Pond for one year of instruction is averaging at least 1.0 G.E. (2001 to 2006 data).**

We are also seeing the benefits of using cued English to accelerate the acquisition of spoken English and auditory listening skills for learners who benefit from hearing aids and/or cochlear implants.

With a job market in that reportedly requires minimally a ninth-grade reading level to obtain and hold jobs providing an adequate living wage, we have everything to lose by not providing deaf and hard of hearing children with a tool that leads to English literacy. We want proficiency in English, and ASL, too, as determined by IFSP and IEP teams for our students. We have bilingual language access to try to achieve these goals. For further information, contact Kitri Larson Kyllo, District 917 Asst. Director, at 952-707-3091 or kitri.kyllo@isd917.k12.mn.us.

NOTE: The use of cued English with special needs populations other than deaf and hard of hearing children has met with successful results. It has been a very successful tool for some students impacted by other neurological difficulties, such as auditory processing disorders and other learning disabilities.