

DEAF CHILDREN'S LITERACY
LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL AND
SCHOOL

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This thesis presents a study, which was carried out among deaf children attending a preschool in Sweden. During the course of the study some of the children began school. They started to sign early in childhood and they use Swedish Sign Language (SSL) in all communication with teachers and peers both in preschool and at school.

SIGN LANGUAGE AND DEAF BILINGUALS

In the present study, the concepts “sign language” and “SSL” (Swedish Sign Language) are used. The latter is the Swedish national sign language. There are national sign languages all over the world; some not yet investigated (Dively et.al., 2001). The deaf¹ community in Sweden uses SSL to communicate (Heiling, 1999) and it is also the sign language used when communicating with the children in the study. SSL is a language that has developed among the deaf parallel with spoken language developing among the hearing (Bergman, 1994). This parallel development of spoken and signed languages has occurred in many, if not all places, around the world. (Erting, et.al., 1994; Stokoe, 2002; Emmorey, 2002). In this study, the term *sign language* refers to that which is used among the deaf.

In 1981, the Swedish government declared SSL to be the first language of the deaf community (Mahshie, 1995). It was also stated that deaf children in Sweden should be bilingual in order to function both in Swedish society in general, as well as within the deaf community. The aim is for children to reach this goal by the time they leave the school for the deaf. This means that the schools for the deaf are expected to provide proper education in both languages, i.e. written Swedish and sign language SSL (The Swedish Board of Education, 2004). The curriculum requires that education in reading abilities help every pupil to reach the same goals as hearing children, with the exception of oral presentation (The Swedish Board of Education, 2004). In a literate society, it is very important that all children develop a high level of literacy. As Olson and

¹ I am aware of the commonly used capitalized D in for example Deaf community and Deaf people. I have nevertheless chosen not to use it since it was not used in the original text. In Swedish texts D is never capitalized.

Torrance (2001) put it: “[i]n order to understand and participate in the modern world it is increasingly obvious that one must have access to writing /.../” (s. 12). Thus, it is of a great importance that the children meet and have the opportunity to learn about Swedish written language as early as possible.

AIM OF THE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAME

There has been little research describing how young deaf children show their interest in the written form of the language and how this interest develops in a bilingual setting, using sign language as the mode of communication. The present study is thus an investigation of early childhood literacy events in a signing and bilingual setting from the child’s perspective.

The theoretical basis of this study is the theory of social constructivism, Bruner’s theory of children’s learning and Vygotsky’s theory of thought, language and literacy development. Deaf children’s literacy learning is seen as a joint construction by the participants in the literacy events.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study has been to describe young children’s literacy events in a preschool and during the first school year, how they interact and negotiate meaning through which literacy is constructed in everyday life.

The study also attempts to answer four main questions, namely;

- How do the children themselves interact in reading and writing, with peers and adults?
- In what situations do deaf children show interest in symbols, letters, words and text?
- What do young children try to read or write?
- What can a description of these activities and the ways they are performed contribute to a better understanding of deaf children’s ongoing constructions of literacy?

Deaf Literacy

Research into deaf literacy shows that deaf children have problems reading and writing (for an overview, see Musselman, 2000; Chamberlain, Morford & Mayberry, 2000; Marschark, Lang & Albertini, 2002). This particular field of research supports mainly two differing opinions concerning the development of

reading ability and deafness. One view maintains that deaf children learn to read using essentially the same processes as hearing children do, which means mainly using phonological processes while reading. The opposing view proposes that deaf children use qualitatively different processes when learning to read, which means that deaf readers are presumed to be using sign language, fingerspelling, orthographic information and semantic information. A third perspective emphasises the development of literacy skills as not only a linguistic and cognitive achievement but also “a social achievement” (Padden & Ramsey, 2000, p.185) in a signing environment.

The research efforts reported are centred round themes such as word processing, coding and different techniques used by deaf children, or programs used by their teachers. This research is also conducted mainly among children having learned sign language late in childhood (Paul, 1998; Musselman, 2000). There is some research, however, showing that children raised in families of signers (i.e. deaf parents using sign language) display a higher level of reading performance than children raised orally, that is, with parents using spoken language instead of sign language (Paul, 1998). Research also suggests that good sign language communication can be used as the mode for explaining the structure of the written language in school (Svartholm, 1998, Strong & Printz, 2000; Hoffmeister, 2000; Padden & Ramsey, 2000). However, there has been little research on deaf children’s literacy development early in childhood, when attending kindergarten and preschool classes, and in a signing environment (Ewoldt, 1990, 1991; Erting, 1992; Williams, 1993; Padden, 1996; Erting, Thuman-Prezioso & Benedict, 2000). This research holds that deaf children show an interest in reading and writing early in childhood and that their early development shows great similarities with hearing children (Ewoldt, 1990, 1991; Erting, 1992; Williams, 1993; Erting, Thuman-Prezioso & Benedict, 2000). Padden (1996) shows that fingerspelling is important in the child’s development and that forming strategies to learn the position of letters is what deaf children do when hearing children invent their own spelling. Harris and Beech (1998) show that hearing children outperform deaf five-year-olds in phonological awareness and, later in school, in reading progress. However, they found four deaf children in the test group who performed just as well as the hearing children. Two were educated in a non-signing school and showed good phonological awareness and speech ability. Two children had deaf families and were good signers but performed poorly on tests of phonological awareness.

Hearing Children's Literacy

In published research about hearing children's reading and writing, a paradigm shift occurred during the twentieth century together with a change in the role of the teacher in reading and writing instruction (Hiebert & Raphael, 1996). "Behaviourism downplayed the role of the teacher from instructional leader to system manager. Cognitive science placed the teacher at the centre of children's literacy learning /.../ Within social constructivism the teacher remains an important participant in the student's learning, but in the role of mediating learners' interaction." (p. 585). In research today, it is often emphasised that learning begins in an environment where reading occurs among peers and together with adults that show interest (Adams, 1994; Smith, 1994; Kamil et.al., 2000). Many studies have shown that children begin to use the written language all by themselves if there are pencils and paper at hand. Studies also show that children start very early, well before formal instruction starts (Hall, Larson & Marsh, 2003) and that in this process, children "are doing critical cognitive work in literacy development" (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001, p.3). Research has also pointed to the importance of adults reading to the child, interacting with the child during literacy events, and to the importance of having books around in order to provide opportunities for the child to try reading by himself as well (Elley, 1992). Another view is held by a group of researchers often called "phonic advocates" (Pearson, 1994, p.vii). They argue that reading cannot be learned without the child understanding the alphabetic code through an awareness of the phonological system. These researchers are divided into two groups often called *phonic advocates* and *whole-language advocates*. Adams (1994) concludes in her research review that "[i]t is time for us to stop bickering about which is more important. To read, children must master both, and we must help them" (p. 424).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA PRODUCTION

This study has an ethnographic approach, which in this case means firstly, observing and video-recording the children in their daily interaction and play situations and secondly, holding semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents and children during the data production and during the analyses in a longitudinal study carried out over a period of two years. During this period, examples of writing by the children were collected, their language proficiency in sign language was assessed and visits in their homes were carried out.

The children, three to six years of age, were the children in a signing class. During the study, four of them started primary school for the deaf. This means that observations during both preschool and primary school were collected.

Data were also collected from the local health authority's records of the children concerning their early language situation in the home, the start of their sign language development and their hearing status.

The six participants

The children were selected as a complete preschool group, which, at the start of the period of data production, consisted of the six children, aged 3:1 – 6:9, four boys and two girls. They are described in the records and by their teachers as a normal group of young children. One of the children has deaf parents and siblings, one has parents who are hard of hearing and the other four have hearing families. All of the children started to learn to sign at an early stage. Sign language is their first language and they are described as fluent signers by their teachers, although two of the children with hearing parents are late developers to some degree.

The children are regarded as deaf and were born deaf. Three of them have a profound hearing loss with no measurable hearing, the other three have a severe prelingual hearing loss (70-90 dB). One of the children has a Cochlea Implant (CI), which he got late during the study, and three of them wear hearing aids. All of them are regarded by their parents and teachers to be in need of sign language. One of the children, using hearing aids, knows some words and tries to speak with hearing persons who do not know signs.

The preschool and school

All of the children were attending a preschool class in a Swedish town when the study started. The preschool is adjacent to the special school for the deaf in this region of the country. The preschool has children from one to six years of age. The children do not actually start school until they reach the age of seven, but even before then, they attend school several days a week together with the older children. The preschool and primary school teachers work closely together preparing the children for a good start at school. In the preschool, there is a team

consisting of three teachers and in the primary school, the team consists of two teachers and an assistant. Both teams include deaf teachers or assistants.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to describe young children's literacy events in a preschool and during the first school year, how they interact and negotiate meaning through which literacy is constructed in everyday life. The results of the study describe three main groups of results.

Firstly, the print environment seems to be very important as regards stimulating the occurrence of literacy events. The texts must be meaningful and the social interaction around them is crucial. Here, the adults seem to be important for this interaction to take place. The results indicate that if the teacher do not give attention to a text it will not attract the children's attention either, unless the children themselves have realized that the text contain some kind of message. Thus, the children interact socially around written language when given the opportunity to participate in such events. The deaf children in the study seem to regard writing, first of all, as a communicative practice.

Secondly, the results indicate that deaf children, like hearing children, develop literacy skills at an early age in much the same way. The results indicate that the deaf children write scribbles, play with writing, try to understand written words and text and interact with peers and adults in just the same way as described in literature on hearing children. They do critical cognitive work in order to understand what reading and writing is all about. During the last year at preschool (5-6 years of age), deaf and hearing children differ. While most hearing children start to write, inventing their own spellings, deaf children collect whole words, fingerspelling them, memorizing them and use them in their writing. The results indicate that when adults talk on a meta-level with the child about differences between Swedish and SSL, the child does, in fact, understand. But the teachers in preschool seldom do this, which indicates that they may think that the children are not sufficiently mature for this kind of discussion. The role of fingerspelling is also crucial. It is used in many different ways to try to figure out the meaning of a word, to memorize it, to recall a word from memory and to communicate something in addition to being a part of sign language itself. While using fingerspelling, the children seem to be stimulated spontaneously to use their voices.

Thirdly, the results indicate that when children fail, it is often due to misunderstandings emanating from an educational setting where adults do not have a sufficiently deep understanding of what it means to be only visual, non-auditory and that teachers often underestimate the children. When they do so the child itself seems to feel that it knows less than it actually does, which affects the child's self-confidence.

IMPLICATIONS

This study indicates that knowledge about text occurs in social interaction and is negotiated. This means that every child is in need of an environment using a language accessible to the child, that is sign language in this case. A rich first language is necessary for the child to be able to understand and develop its second language; the written language.

The decontextualised language, e.g. telling stories and reading aloud to the child, is important for developing an understanding of what written language and writing is all about. Teachers should read a lot to the children and stimulate them to tell their own stories and write things down. Teachers should talk to even very young children about differences between sign language and the written language. They should talk not only about the content of a story but also about how stories are written, about the written form, about words and sentences. Furthermore, the teacher should assess the child's literacy skills so that he/she will be able to support the child. It is important to identify and establish the learning contexts and material that support and encourage the deaf child during literacy events. The teacher should invite the child to talk about its own learning to promote awareness of the child's own thinking about reading and writing and for the teacher to learn from this. Adults may need to reconsider their own assumptions about what deaf children can and cannot do.

The visual way of understanding the world needs to be better understood. It is imperative that the teachers analyze their own strategies for working with and understanding the child. The teacher should learn from the deaf children's strategies for performing activities at the same time as maintaining contact with each other.

We need to learn how to see.

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²The list is a copy of the list from the thesis in original. It consists of the references in the summary and all the references from the complete doctoral thesis.

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