

# How Many Ways Can We Define Confusion?

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## Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the confusion deaf students experience when reading English. Misunderstandings occur at the morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels. When students are cognizant of these problems, they can improve their reading comprehension. This paper is also an appeal to challenge the status quo, so that changes in deaf education will be made, thereby allowing students to reach their full potential. Educators should view English and ASL as equal, and both languages should be used in teaching deaf students.

## Introduction

Deaf students in schools today are not progressing at a reasonable rate. They graduate from high school, but many of them have not achieved success. A good number go on to college and continue to struggle with a language that has eluded them all of their lives. I commend deaf students for their efforts and perseverance. Our students work hard, but through no fault of their own, too many of them are under-prepared by the time they get to college. Deaf students are products of a system that has failed (Johnson, et al, 1989; Strong, 1996).

Teachers of deaf students also have a very difficult job. Yet teachers are committed and have hope. They know this field can be as trying as it is rewarding, and they are painfully aware that changes in deaf education are necessary. Professionals come to conferences such as PEPNet to gain new ideas and insights, to learn innovative teaching techniques, and hopefully, to make necessary changes.

Educational consultant, Ed Vitale, wrote a book titled, *Thinking Your Way Through English Grammar*. Mr. Vitale states the importance of taking students from where they are. Our goal is for students to improve their skills in a semester or school year. But we cannot overlook the level at which they are beginning their studies with us. What do they know? What do they already understand? Deaf students *do* have a great deal of knowledge about English. We should use what the students know as a springboard for new ideas to be taught (Paul,

et al, 1992). Ed Vitale also recommends that teachers *not* do for students that which they can do for themselves. Instead, find out what students do not know or understand and guide them in helping themselves.

When referring to English for deaf students, I am referring to English in print, not spoken English, nor the coding of English on one's hands. We must keep in mind that deaf students do not have full access to English unless they are reading (Neuroth-Gimbrone and Logiodice, 1990). Although many schools promote the manual coding of English, in reality, our students get exposure to the English language through reading. The most accessible language for deaf students is a visual one, American Sign Language. Deaf children can acquire this language naturally. Written English, then, is a second language for deaf students (Johnson, et al, 1989; Neuroth-Gimbrone and Logiodice, 1990).

## The Process of Reading

Reading is a very intricate process. Students must read, understand, and retain what was read. Consideration must be given to new words, cohesion, sentence and paragraph structure, as well as world knowledge. This can be overwhelming in one's first language; imagine the daunting task one faces when attempting this in a *second* language. Still, the goal is for deaf students to be proficient, efficient, and effective readers in English.

What transpires as a person reads? Some researchers believe that reading is a top-down process, that all of the knowledge a reader has about the world is what he brings to the printed page. Others believe that the task of reading is a bottom-up process: decoding what is written on the page. A reader must understand the words and structures in print. However, many researchers now believe that reading is an interactive process: top-down *and* bottom up (Grabe, 1993). A reader's knowledge is combined with the decoding of sentences; both are needed to decipher the written text.

When deaf students misunderstand what they read, where is the breakdown? Is it due to top-down or bottom-up processing? I believe both types of processing contribute to their misunderstandings. This discussion will focus on bottom-up processing although the intent is not to minimize the importance of a reader's world knowledge.

The amount of questioning a teacher does to determine what students have understood from reading mate-

rial will depend on the task at hand. Is it necessary for students to understand every word? Or is it enough to get the gist of the text? When the goal is to go through an article carefully and understand every sentence, the class can translate sentences into ASL.

### Morphology

The analysis of students' misunderstandings begins at the morphological level with derivational morphology. Even though the teaching of prefixes and suffixes can help increase a student's vocabulary, affixes can also cause problems as students read. Students learn that the prefix "de-" can undo or negate a term, such as "desegregation." But what about "denote," "delighted," or "depressed?" The meanings of prefixes may be overused at times, and consequently, misunderstandings can occur.

Many adjectives and their adverbs have the same meaning. For example, if students learn that the adverb form of "clever" is "cleverly," they have added to their vocabularies. However, they will see "hard" and "hardly," "bare" and "barely." In these cases, the meanings of the adverbs differ from those of the adjectives. If deaf students are not avid readers, they may not realize this.

Inflectional morphology can also be tricky. The morpheme, "ed" in English is always interpreted to mean something has been finished. When teaching grammar, one can steer the lesson to reading. The following three sentences came up during one such lesson.

- A. Last night, I started writing a letter.
- B. This morning, I continued writing my letter.
- C. This evening, I finished writing my letter.

I asked about sentence A. Was the letter finished? The students said that it *was*, because it has "-ed," and "-ed" means finished. I explained the meaning of "start" and the use of "-ed." Then I asked about the second sentence. Again, my students said the letter was finished, and once again, I explained. The vocabulary in the sentences above is not difficult, yet the students misinterpreted their meanings.

Verb inflections cause difficulties for students. The "-ing" ending is a perfect example. Students often think that the "-ing" ending always indicates a verb, though the "-ing" ending can also indicate a gerund or adjective. Irregular verb endings also throw students off. Recently, I had a terrible time convincing a student that "bit" was the past tense of "bite." She swore that she had never seen "bit" before. Other students were incredulous that "born" is the past participle of "bear."

Is there any teacher who can say that the final -s in English doesn't wreak havoc with deaf students? The -s added to third person singular verbs, the -s added to plural count nouns, and the possessive -s can and *do* become confusing. Do deaf students truly understand the

difference when they read nouns and verbs with final -s?

ASL verbs do not inflect by adding the fingerspelled letter -s to signs. ASL *does*, however, express plural in a variety of ways. A classifier might be used to show a stack of books or books in a bookcase. Plurality can also be expressed by the repetition of a sign. If negative transfer from ASL to English does occur, an easy solution is to use contrastive linguistics to explain the differences between inflections in ASL and English.

When teachers discuss parts of speech in an English grammar class, they can include a discussion of ASL grammar. A noun in English may not be a noun in ASL; an adjective in English may be a verb in ASL. Some ASL verbs also function as adjectives in certain structures (Padden, 1983). This is important information to share with our students. Bringing ASL into the English classroom validates ASL. Isn't it about time for that? Examples in both languages enhance students' comprehension of written English and allow them to develop a healthy respect for both languages (Strong, 1992).

Sometimes our students know only one form of a word. They know the word "poor" but not "poverty." They are familiar with the verb "hate" but not the noun form, "hatred." Educators mustn't assume that students understand common word forms. "Succeed," "successful," and the noun, "success" may not be difficult. But what happens with "succession"? What do students think? This is a case where teachers need to check students' understanding.

### Syntax

Syntax also causes major problems in reading. Consider the following sentences.

- A. I shocked my friend.
- B. My friend shocked me.

In order to teach "emotion" verbs and their accompanying adjectives, I sign a story involving a situation in which my friend becomes shocked. I ask students which sentence fits my situation. Many of them choose sentence B. This doesn't surprise me, since an ASL signer would set up the situation first and sign, FRIEND SHOCK at the end. This means my friend was the person who felt shocked. Verbs such as SHOCK, FRUSTRATE, SURPRISE, EXCITE, and BORE function very differently in English and in ASL. What's more, the English verbs can be changed to participial adjectives:

- A. My friend was *shocked*.
- B. My news was *shocking*.

Relative clauses in English can also be confusing to deaf students.

- A. The boy who hit the girl ran home crying.
- B. The man waiting for his wife saw the accident occur.

Many students say it was the girl who ran home crying in sentence A. Who saw the accident in sentence B? The wife, they say. When explaining the meaning of sentences with embedded clauses, any reading lesson can become a grammar lesson for the sake of comprehension.

The structure of English sentences frequently causes the meaning to be ambiguous. Consider the following:

- A. young men and women
- B. Spanish history teacher
- C. Thomas watched the police with binoculars.

English is often vague in this way. Who was young? Describe the teacher. Who had the binoculars? One must disambiguate these sentences, and then express them in ASL.

### Semantics

Semantics is a fuzzy area for reading comprehension. Explaining semantic restrictions helps students realize that words have limits to their use. Synonyms do not have exactly the same meanings (O'Grady, et al, 1982). Consider for example, the nuances of meaning in the synonyms: change, adapt, modify, and revise. Another group to consider is: important, pertinent, essential, and significant. Each of these words is used in specific contexts. Students may be unaware of subtle differences in meanings.

Understanding the connotations of English words can narrow their meaning. Some words have a positive connotation, others, a negative one. "Take advantage of" in English can be positive or negative, depending on the context. Compare this to TAKE ADVANTAGE OF in ASL. There is one sign for the positive meaning and a different sign for the negative meaning. An interesting difference to discuss in class. Students can learn to use context clues to decide if a word has a positive or negative meaning.

Figurative language is extremely problematic for deaf students; so much of English is figurative. Teachers can make comparisons between literal and figurative meanings. Two such examples are given below. How would deaf students interpret these sentences?

- A. The woman in red works in my company.
- B. My company is in the red.

Since it would be impossible to teach all examples of figurative language in English, teachers can do the next best thing: encourage students to read voraciously and provide interesting and understandable reading material (Krashen, 1993). Allow students to read comic books, the sports page, anything they will comprehend. If they lose interest in one book, they simply select another. Half the battle is convincing students of the importance of reading. Students will pick up the meanings of new

words in context as they read; incidental learning will occur (Zaki, 1997). However, students must do a great amount of reading and see words in a variety of contexts for this to happen. Teachers can provide guidance in helping them to guess correctly, rather than misunderstand, the meanings of new words.

Educators can also discourage students from reading and signing at the same time. When this is done, students are looking at one word at a time. However, idioms, just as all phrases and clauses, must be viewed in their entirety. Helping students chunk information is good practice for any sentence, whether the words are used literally or figuratively.

Another way to discourage students from signing while reading is to apply the "language overlap" principle to spoken languages. If one is trying to create an Italian sentence, would he take Italian words and impose the structure of English onto them? Is the resulting "language" Italian or English? It is neither. That much seems logical. Yet, attempts to overlap ASL and English are made all the time: simultaneous communication. This is carried over into *reading* and signing at the same time. Students who believe they are adept at signing while reading cannot explain what they have "read," because there is no meaning for them. This isn't surprising.

A common practice in a reading class is to determine meaning from context. This is no easy task for a second language learner. While reading an article about a boy who wanted to divorce his parents in order to be adopted by another family, a student saw the word "abandoned." He guessed that "abandon" meant "to adopt." He was in the right ballpark, just on the wrong end of the field. This type of misunderstanding makes sense.

English is loaded with homonyms. Even common words have a long list of meanings. If students are reading and signing at the same time, what is the probability of their signing the correct meaning of a homonym? The "best friend" of a deaf student, a dictionary, may not solve this problem. Dictionaries often cause more confusion than clarification. When seeing a list of definitions, a student might automatically choose the first meaning regardless of the context. Another dictionary-related problem is that a student might select one word from a long definition and assume that one word is the meaning.

### Discourse

Language in discourse is sometimes misunderstood. Frequently, dialogue in novels is the culprit. Page after page of dialogue comes up, and students are not sure who's talking to whom. Also, the actual words of a dialogue might be interpreted incorrectly. If one is sitting near an open window, for example, and states that the room is cold, he's indirectly asking someone to close the window. Students might take that indirect speech act (Ellis, 1994) literally: the temperature of the room is being discussed.

## Helping Deaf Students in the Classroom

Checking students' misunderstandings in morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse should aid in comprehension. Testing overall comprehension is done in a number of ways. Class discussions, summaries, and tests are frequently used. Students can also explain what they've read by interpreting it into ASL (Livingston, 1997). Those who read well can provide a lot of detailed information in this manner. If a student merely reads an article and answers questions at the end, is that a test of comprehension? Or is it a test of the student's ability to locate answers?

What other methods can educators use to help deaf students? They can encourage students to think for themselves (Bosso and Kuntze, 1994). Classroom instruction in reading strategies can foster independence and empowerment. Students can practice thinking *before* they begin reading. Scan a text. Check out new words and ideas. Build on these strategies *while* reading and *after* reading. Ask questions. Make predictions. Test those predictions. Answer the questions that were raised (Clarke, 1993). These strategies should aid in understanding and retention and put students on the road to becoming independent learners.

Independence in education means students take control of their learning. If this is not done, students will continue to see teachers as magicians who make everything happen. Literacy stories of deaf college students were collected and analyzed. Good readers had learned early in life to depend on themselves to get information. They accepted information from parents and teachers but did not depend on it. Those who were poor readers had always depended on others to provide information to them (Wood, 1998).

Educators should also maintain high standards and expectations. This may require explaining concepts in great detail, allowing extra time to complete assignments, and keeping a close watch on students who are struggling. Misunderstandings can be remedied. But lowering expectations deceives students and passes on serious problems to the next grade or level.

The task of learning a second language is made more difficult if one is not fluent in his first language. Evidence shows that students with low levels of competency in their first language will likely perform poorly in their second language (Strong, 1996; Walqui, 2000). Yet how many elementary programs make sure that deaf students acquire *their* first language? Day care workers, caregivers (Johnson, et al, 1989), and teachers at all levels can be involved in deaf children's acquisition of ASL. Deaf speakers and videotapes can supplement course work. Deaf role models can enhance students' linguistic skills (De Houwer, 1999) and boost their self-esteem. Schools and colleges can offer ASL and Deaf Culture classes.

## Helping Deaf Students Outside the Classroom

In addition to in-class strategies, there are a variety of ways to improve deaf education outside the classroom. Build positive relationships with professionals in elementary and secondary education. Expose young deaf students to ASL. Allow older deaf students to do school-related projects in elementary schools. Use distance learning to bring ASL storytelling to remote areas. Push for bilingual education programs. It's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

## The Need for Change

The following quotations govern my teaching:

"Education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know" (Daniel J. Boorstin).

"And that's it. That's why I want to teach: to make a permanent difference in the life of a child" (author unknown).

Changes in deaf education are crucial. The power to change rests in the hands of committed professionals who are willing to make a difference. The following passage, taken from an article on the teaching of sign language, is appropriate for the message of change.

Deaf children should be educated in the language of their community, ASL, and taught English as a second language through the medium of their first language. Educational programs for teachers of the deaf and sign language interpreters must adequately teach the linguistic expertise necessary for those roles. **If this does not happen, the gulf between the understanding of the deaf experience and the actual services provided to deaf people will continue to widen, so that although we will continue to understand better the damage inflicted by unchallenged policies and assumptions of the status quo, we will fail to do anything about it**" (Rudser, 1996, p. 111, emphasis mine).

Deaf students deserve more than the status quo. They are bright, capable people, and they have not yet lived up to their potential. This is a tragedy. The time has come to challenge the established policies. We *can* take action, and we *must*.

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