Sign Bilingualism in Education - Policy and Practice

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Abstract

The document 'Sign Bilingualism: A Model' (1998) by leading proponents Pickersgill and Gregory described sign bilingual education (SBE) and clarified definitions and principles for those working in the education sector (Swanwick, 2006). The goals of SBE are that deaf children become linguistically competent, have a wider access to curriculum, facilitate literacy skills and provide a positive sense of identity (Gregory, 2006). This report focused on relevant theories proposed by Pickersgill, Gregory and Swanwick, seeking to identify and demonstrate how the move to SBE has positively made a difference to the education of deaf pupils and identify any weaknesses that remain. Key findings were that whilst their original model laid out the idea for educating deaf pupils within mainstream, giving equal status and access to English (spoken and written) and British Sign Language (BSL), the application was challenging. Their model presented extensive explanations and guidance to the education community of how best to support, teach and communicate with deaf pupils but this failed to take place. Variances in practice from the SBE model (1998) were partly due to medical advice, instructing parents of deaf children with CI to avoid using sign language believing it would hinder the development of oralism/auralism (Nussbaum and Scott, 2004). An updated model explained what was occurring at ground level and how to continue practice using Sign Supported English (SSE). It ignored research showing that the acquisition of BSL is as easy as spoken language if access is equal and available (Swanwick, 2000) and that deaf children with deaf BSL-using-parents achieve academically higher than deaf peers with hearing parents. This is due to well established pre-linguistic skills demonstrating that sign language is of benefit for the education of deaf pupils (Gregory, 1996).

Introduction

'Sign Bilingualism: A Model' (1998) compiled by Maranda Pickersgill and Susan Gregory described sign bilingual education (SBE) clarifying definitions and principles for educators (Swanwick, 2006). The goals of SBE are that deaf children become linguistically competent, have a wider access to curriculum, facilitate literacy skills and provide a positive sense of identity (Gregory, 2006). Previous to this publication, the biggest events for bilingual education in the United Kingdom (UK) were the introduction of cochlear implants (CI) (1989) and the first Local Education Authority (LEA) to adopt SBE (Gregory, 2006). This report focuses on relevant theories proposed by Pickersgill, Gregory and Swanwick, seeking to identify and demonstrate how the move to SBE has positively made a difference to the education of deaf pupils and identify any weaknesses that remain.

Sign bilingual is the fluent use of two or more languages, one of which is a signed language (Swanwick, 2006). SBE is an approach to the education of deaf children, which in the UK, uses British Sign Language (BSL) and English. It is based on the fundamental recognition that as deaf children can potentially acquire sign language more easily than spoken language they should be afforded the opportunity to develop a signed language (Gregory, 2006).

BSL has a vast lexicon of established signs to describe concepts and distinct grammar system, which with distinct regional variations mean translations require a skilled language user (BSL and English) who can select the appropriate English words to convey accurate meaning (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1998). It can be beneficial in enabling deaf pupils' expression and ease of communication. Some mainstream schools use different manual systems such as Signed Supported English (SSE) or Signed English (SE), which produced at the same time as spoken English facilitates learning of the English grammar system. A drawback is that signs selected for use with SSE or SE can be contextually incorrect misconstruing information.

Language Acquisition

Swanwick and Gregory (2007) stress the importance of recognising that deaf children have the same potential of acquiring language as their hearing peers. Sign language is as easy to acquire as spoken language and if access to two languages is equal and available, the development of one does not interfere with the other (Swanwick, 2000). Achieving age appropriate language development relies on early intervention to avoid delays in development and in accessing education (Gregory, 1996). Working with hearing parents to facilitate their own support development is also pivotal to supporting their deaf children.

The principal of linguistic knowledge of a first language (L1) supporting the understanding and development of a second language (L2) is known as the linguistic interdependence model (LIM) (Cummins, 1989). Mayer and Wells (1996) argue it is not accurate to claim that the LIM stands true for the case when L1 is well established BSL and L2 is English (literacy) as there is no exposure to speech or English-based signs (due to deafness) thus the conditions do not match the conditions laid out in the LIM.

There are namely two common situations that need to be addressed, children of deaf signing-adults (CODA) and deaf children of non-signing hearing adults (DofH). Should one parent have hearing and one is deaf it may be expected that for ease of initial communication sign language would be L1 and spoken language L2. A third but quite rare situation to be discussed is where deaf children have hearing parents who are fluent signers. Studies suggest that deaf CODAs where L1 is BSL achieve better academically than those DofH due to the early establishment of pre-linguistic skills (Gregory, 1996). One study (1987) exploring the effect of sign language (Italian) as L1 on the development of spoken language in deaf children aged 2-4 showed that although the onset of spoken language was slower than their acquisition of sign language their sign language was a necessary support of spoken language acquisition (Swanwick, 2000). Maxwell (1989) found the same result with an older deaf child (1.6-7.5 years old). This crucial identification together with the argument that BSL does not inhibit intellectual and linguistic development, leads to the conclusion that the use of BSL in education maybe beneficial (Swanwick, 2000).

Children exposed to two simultaneous languages where one is sign language, usually only occurs in CODAs. However, this may happen with a deaf child if both hearing parents are fluent in sign language but is quite rare. Research conducted by Collins-Ahlgren (1974) where two hearing parents, fluent in sign language, signed and spoke to their deaf child from birth resulted in secure language acquisition and comprehension equivalent to the child's hearing peers.

Sign Bilingual Education Model into Practice

SBE entered mainstream education when Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) published their Sign Bilingualism model (1998). It was hoped that professionals would welcome the recommendations facilitating greater inclusivity but enthusiasm was short lived due to inconsistent practice and training standards (Gregory, 2006). In 2006 Swanwick proposed that the 1998 model needed updating to match changing attitudes towards SBE and the popular use of CI. Gregory (2006) notes that historically and in some cases to date, those who support the use of CI feel that the use of sign language can inhibit a child's ability to learn aural/oralism (Nussbaum and Scott, 2004) when in fact it should be recognised as a supportive measure to language acquisition. Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) tried to pinpoint that deaf children should attain sufficient competence and proficiency in BSL and English to support their needs in adulthood (Pickersgill and Gregory, 2008).

The SBE model (1998) can be broken down into the following: language and communication; curriculum and assessment; staffing; parents and the community. Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) explain that both spoken and signed languages should be given equal status and regarded as a language of the educational process. Problems arise in that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents meaning DofH children have limited access to a range of communication methods, which can result in stress and frustration on both parts (Sign and Mental Health Foundation, 2013). Access should be planned from pre-school ensuring opportunities for early acquisition and promoting language preference. However attending a mainstream school and choosing to use BSL could result in social exclusion from non-signing peers. It must be noted that BSL is not part of the curriculum for either deaf or hearing pupils so their only access is from support staff. To ensure classroom cohesion as well as access to the 'hidden curriculum', pupils should have access to BSL classes to enable signed communication between hearing and deaf peers. A hindrance to achieving Pickersgill and Gregory's ideal is that the Government does not recognise BSL as a full language. This means that any BSL lessons would have to be extra-curricular.

The SBE model (p.4) clearly states 'the level of cognitive demand or challenge in teaching should reflect the child's preferred language level and not that of the second language'. Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) recognised that if a child prefers BSL then teachers should ensure that tasks are appropriately devised for them. The difficult logistics of carrying out curriculum and assessment in a bilingual manner is oft-overlooked, although if carried out successfully they would certainly be beneficial and more inclusive. Realistically, changing assessments for a minority is both non-inclusive and time-consuming.
It could be argued that modified assessments should be offered to both hearing and deaf children to maintain equality or preferably begin with a fully inclusive technique. Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) recognised that assessment should take into account the preferred language of the child, if this is BSL a competent (at the child's level) signer should produce appropriate assessments.

Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) make several references to BSL, Deaf culture and Deaf history being taught to deaf children in the hope of establishing a positive identity and empowerment. Unfortunately this would again be classed as an extracurricular activity. Restrictive timetables at secondary level provide minimal opportunities for this, meaning deaf pupils only receive extra support out-of-class, which is hardly inclusive. They also argue that employment opportunities should be made available for deaf and hearing staff. Native users of both BSL and English should be employed and essentially staff should be bilingual but in reality this is easier said than done due to funding restrictions. Research shows that deaf people working in education who are resources to deaf pupils (instructor, role model, BSL tutor etc.) are only 5% of the total resources available and only 25% are hearing who have some degree of sign language (CRIDE, 2012). Lack of deaf staff does not promote this ideal proposed by Pickersgill and Gregory (1998). Ignoring the difficulties deaf people face finding employment in

general (due to lack of deaf awareness in organisations), many simply do not have the skills required by industry to apply for the posts needed to support the SBE model. Employed deaf people generally (65%) have unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, which is over double the 25% of hearing employed people (The Open University, No Date).

Despite the lack of employment of inappropriately skilled deaf staff there is a plethora of inadequately skilled hearing support staff working within educational settings. Communication support workers (CSW) rarely possess an appropriate learning support worker's qualification or more than a level 2 BSL qualification (Deaf Education Support Forum, 2010). Knowing the BSL curriculum for levels 2 and 3 (Signature, 2013) the vocabulary for supporting the content of the National Curriculum is beyond the signer's ability yet seems to be in their remit suggesting that pupils are learning a 'dumbed down' version of the curriculum, impeding development (Lang, 2003).

Pickersgill and Gregory (1998) assert that links should be established between the Deaf and hearing community preferably peer groups of both deaf and hearing outside of school such as Deaf social and youth clubs. They make specific comment of how all members of the deaf children's families should also have interaction with the Deaf community. This seems to be something oft-forgotten; families should learn as a unit to improve communication supporting the ethos of Genie Networks, a charity in Greater Manchester who aims to support deaf people and their families (Genie Networks, 2014).

Finally, evaluating the effectiveness of Pickersgill and Gregory's (1998) SBE model presents many difficulties due to the variance of provision and children experiencing it. There is also some evidence that the research carried out is polemic in regards to proving the effectiveness of SBE rather than reporting on what is actually occurring (Gregory, 1996). Evaluations of SBE in the UK is limited but in countries where similar models have been used for longer periods suggest that it is successful in developing both literacy skills and sign language skills (ibid). Swanwick and Gregory (2007) state that the changes that needed to be recognised within an updated SBE model include greater research into BSL linguistics, the recognition of BSL by the Government (2003), the greater acceptance of the use of sign language within education, evidence suggesting improved attainments of deaf pupils using sign language in schools and the greater number of CI users within schools. The main significant difference was the assertion that SSE should play a significant role within the education of a deaf child and become the main form of curriculum delivery. Although this may seem like one small factor, the implications are huge when compared to the effect it would have on Pickersgill and Gregory's 1998 model.

Although the use of SSE can contribute to a greater understanding of the English language it removes understanding of BSL functions and structure and therefore creates problems of understanding between proficient BSL users and those using SSE thus creating a new subgroup of deaf sign language users separate from the BSL using deaf community. The effects of which results in BSL and English no longer having equal status within education and therefore changes the ethos set out by Pickersgill and Gregory (1998). In addition it affects their intent on creating a positive deaf identify and empowerment through links with the Deaf community. The difficulty is created where deaf children who use SSE try to communicate with children who use only BSL and fail.

Whilst some deaf students may acquire a good standard of BSL not all are developing the complex structure required for use in higher education (Gregory, 1996). Considering most deaf children are exposed to BSL by hearing educational workers who have learned the language and mainly use SSE this really does not surprise (ibid). It is also apparent that the suggestion of SSE use in schools removes the ability of choice to use BSL. Deaf parents who use BSL may not be happy about their deaf children being educated in SSE resulting in a communication breakdown within the home. The new document (2007) states that parents should remain informed and their views should be respected. Schools should facilitate opportunities for hearing parents to interact with the Deaf community and enable them to further understand the deaf identity and develop their skills of BSL. It could further be argued that SSE is not a language in its own right and therefore its usage does not make a pupil sign bilingual (as per the definition) and therefore the 2007 paper by Swanwick and Gregory should be a proposal in its own right rather than an update of the previous model.

The Effects of using Sign Bilingual Education

It is important that deaf pupils are supported in accessing the hidden curriculum irrespective whether it is of educational value or just a classroom occurrence. To achieve this, support workers would need to feed information to the deaf pupil about everything that is happening (just as a BSL Interpreter should do) or their peers would need to keep communication to a method understood by the deaf pupil. Unfortunately, SBE is not offered to hearing pupils unless they have learning difficulties. Over 90% of deaf parents have hearing children (Children of Deaf Adults International, 2001); so perhaps an overlooked issue of SBE is that it is not offered to hearing CODAs suggesting that SBE is linked to the medical model of disability. However, hearing CODAs who only have access to BSL at home may not be able to have support for schoolwork due to their parent's deafness. An example could be learning to read through phonics. Hearing parents could easily support this method but a deaf parent may have no concept of what a phonic is. If hearing CODAs were given SBE it could facilitate the growth of communication with parents and other significant deaf adults in their life in addition to improving their support system for schoolwork.

Conclusion

Pickersgill, Gregory and Swanwick have all made extensive contributions to education for deaf pupils. All are respected theorists and therefore their models are worthy of consideration. Difficulties arise in application, which have led to models being changed to fit the current climate and financial restrictions. The original model laid out the idea for educating deaf pupils within a mainstream setting giving equal status and access to English (spoken and written) and BSL as ways to both communicate and learn. Whilst it presented an extensive explanation and guidance to the education community of how best to support, teach and communicate with deaf pupils, this however failed to take place.

Swanwick and Gregory (2007) acknowledged variances in practice from the SBE model (1998) due to medical advice, which instructed parents of deaf children with CI to avoid using sign language believing it would hinder the development of oralism/auralism (Nussbaum and Scott, 2004), and thus published an update. This explained what was occurring and how to continue practice focusing heavily on SSE, which as previously stated is not a language in its own right nor fully utilises the lexicon of BSL and therefore the use of which does not make a person sign bilingual.

Establishing a positive deaf identity is difficult without the access to the deaf community Gregory and potentially leaves deaf children feeling 'broken' compared to their hearing classmates often leading to feelings of frustration and withdrawal hence giving restricted access to the hidden curriculum. This focus on SSE ignores research showing that sign language is as easy to acquire as spoken language if access is equal and available (Swanwick, 2000). Research highlights that deaf BSL using CODAs achieve academically better than DofH oral/aural peers due to well established pre-linguistic skills demonstrating that sign language is of benefit for the education of deaf pupils (Gregory, 1996).

Pickersgill and Gregory's input (1998) seems to have been overlooked, possibly due to the problems of implementing their suggestions through lack of understanding, funding and appropriate bilingual staffing resources. Their ideal of deaf children attaining sufficient competence and proficiency in both BSL and English (each having equal status) to support their needs as an adult becomes near impossible without correct resources in place (Pickersgill and Gregory, 1998, 2008). The lack of Government recognition of BSL only acts as another barrier to achieving Pickersgill and Gregory's goal. The 2007 paper does offer support for educational staff and a way of educating and supporting deaf pupils, however it is the author's view that this is not as effective as the original paper 'Sign Bilingualism: A Model' by Pickersgill and Gregory (1998).

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