

The Combination of Cued Speech and Signed French to Improve Spoken Language Acquisition by Young Deaf Children¹

Olivier Périer, Anne Bochner-Wuidar, Bernadette Everarts and Janine Michiels

It is widely recognized that, whether strictly oral or strictly manual methods of teaching are used with deaf children, the majority of profoundly deaf school leavers of today have not acquired adequate mastery of spoken and written language. These unsatisfactory results are usually attributed to the lack of adequate communication in the early period most favorable for language acquisition (Périer and Bochner-Wuidar, 1981). Because brain plasticity appears to be at its highest during these early years, the fundamental functions of language need to be established during that period in order to ensure normal development of later stages.

In an attempt to cope with the problem cited above, the staff of the Centre Comprendre et Parler and the Ecole Intégré de Brussels decided in 1980 that a more efficient communication system than the exclusively auditory-oral one previously utilized had to be made available to deaf children and their parents. Claims that this effectively permitted deaf children to develop linguistic competence at a rate and to an extent closely approximating that of their normally hearing peers had been made by Schlesinger (1978), using bimodal communication, and Cornett (1967), through the consistent practice of Cued Speech. It was, therefore, decided to train the staff in these two methods, to inform parents about both, and to encourage them to adopt one of them. They were thoroughly informed, and were afforded opportunities not only to witness demonstrations of both methods but also to participate in introductory courses so as to personally experience what continuous practice could mean to them. Parents were then asked to choose that system with which they felt most empathy, and to utilize it consistently whenever they spoke with their child.

About one-third of the parents chose Cued Speech, a system which is a manual complement to speech-reading, designed to clear its ambiguities and to render visible the posterior phonemes that are not seen on the lips. A limited set of eight hand shapes produced in five (in French) different locations near the speaker's mouth provide information about syllables and, after intensive training, can be done at the rate of normal speech. The prelingually deaf child who is consistently spoken to with these cues receives visual information about phonemes equivalent to that which the normally hearing child receives through the auditory channel. He is, as a result, in a position to develop receptive competence in spoken language. The parents who chose Cued Speech did so because they understood that this was a potent tool for the development of spoken language. For many of them, uneasy about sign language, Cued Speech was more acceptable as a complement of oral communication.

The other two-thirds of the parents opted for bimodal communication. The type of bimodal communication which they were offered should more correctly be called "unilingual bimodal communication". It is a form of total communication in which spoken and signed language are expressed simultaneously. The signed French utilized in this case borrows the signs of the proper Sign Language of the Deaf, rearranged in the syntax of French, so as to make simultaneous production of speech and signs possible. These parents' choice was made because they felt ill at ease with the "artificial" nature of Cued Speech and the need for speech analysis which it implies. They thought that they would be incapable of keeping their natural expressiveness while cueing, and that their child would not be able to respond to this "abstract" system. Incidentally, it should be noted that for the young prelingual child, the visual information brought by Cued Speech is not more abstract, and is in fact simpler, than the acoustic information about phonemes which the normally hearing child has to cope with. Another reason for their choice was that, as explained to them by the professional team, the signs are readily available to the child for expressive utilization, whereas in Cued Speech the small child cannot himself master the system for expressive use, and there is, therefore, an inevitable discrepancy.²

The parents of Sacha, a profoundly deaf child, were reluctant to make a choice, seeing the advantages of each system and fearing that by choosing one, they would deprive their child from the benefits of the other. These particularly eager parents decided to utilize both systems alternately or in combination. They would speak and sign what they could,

¹ This paper was published in **Signs of Life: Proceedings of the Second European Congress on Sign Language Research**. B. Tervoort (ed.), Amsterdam, 1986, pp. 194-199. It is reprinted with permission. The authors apologize for the similarity of the opening paragraphs to those of the paper on effects of prolonged Cued Speech practice - prepared, of course, for a different audience.

² Editor's Note: The assertion by the authors regarding the inability of young children to use Cued Speech expressively is not supported by the experience of many scholars and practitioners.

with their limited knowledge of signed French, and use Cued Speech for names, for the function words which are not expressed in Sign Language, and for all words for which they did not know the sign. Once a sign was understood, they would alternate the use of this sign with the Cued Speech expression of the same meaning, so as to progressively introduce Sacha to the understanding of the Cued Speech presentation.

Reservations were expressed by the professional team because it was feared that this dual approach would create confusion in the child's mind. The parents were not, however, forcefully dissuaded from trying what they felt they had to do. Observations of the child's progress demonstrated that the fears of confusion were not justified. Sacha's language was developing particularly smoothly and rapidly, so that his parents were encouraged to continue with full support from the team, the speech and hearing therapist adopting the same communication system.

While Sacha's language was progressing rapidly, his parents continued to follow a course of signed French, at the rate of one hour per week. They realized that the gap was rapidly widening between their child's need for more and more vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, on the one hand, and their own slowly progressing competence in signs on the other hand. They have, therefore, evolved in their communication method with Sacha using progressively more Cued Speech and less signed French and have reached a point at which most of their communication is through Cued Speech alone.

The videotape which was presented at the Congress first shows Sacha and his mother, when he was 4 years 3 months. At that time the mother is still alternating the use of signs and cues. The second part shows Sacha one year later, in conversation with a teacher using Cued Speech alone. Sacha is a prelingually profoundly deaf child, with a four-frequency PTA threshold of more than 100 dB in both ears. He wears two behind-the-ear hearing aids with a 60 dB gain at 1000 Hz, with which he benefits from his restricted residual hearing. Sacha has always evidenced useful residual hearing, up to 4000 Hz, which is no doubt responsible in part for his good vocal quality.

The tape is captioned in French, so as to be fully understandable by deaf viewers, and in English. The translation is as close as possible to the French spoken text; however, it has been necessary in some cases, in order to make sense, to express some typically conversational French structures by different structures in English, an effort being made to select structures of equivalent linguistic complexity and correctness, or, in some cases, incorrectness. Noteworthy features of the tape are:

- the intensity of the child's visual attention,
- the correct prosody of short utterances such as "*Je ne sais pas*" (I don't know),
- the correct expressive use of important function words like "*aussi*" (also), "*comme*" (like), "*parce que* (because),
- the mastery of grammatical snares like the near future "*il va venir*" (he's going to come), or the reflexive verb form "*je m'appelle*" (I call myself) which is the usual French way of saying "My name is..."
- the sense of humor displayed by Sacha in his expressive language when he pretends that his name is the same as his mother's and that he is also a girl,
- the imagination displayed by Sacha through his spoken language when asked of which country he would like to be king, to which he answers "king of the ghosts,"
- the spontaneous use of litanic repetition and stretching out of words to express duration, when Sacha, at the end of the tape, says "*des semaines, des semaines, des semaines, des semaines*" (for weeks, and weeks and weeks and weeks).

First Sequence

Sacha (S) and his mother (M)

M Il est déjà tard, on peut le réveiller [It's already late, one can wake him up]

S Après [Later]

M Après! [Later!]

S Il va venir [He's going to come]

M Il va venir? [He's going to come?]

S Il va venir [He's going to come]

M Coucou! [Peek-a-boo!]

S Il réveille, le bébé [He wakes up the baby]

M Comment tu t'appelles? [What's your name?]

S Je m'appelle Cathy [My name is Cathy]

M Mais Cathy, c'est moi [But that's me, Cathy]

S Mais je m'appelle aussi Cathy comme toi [But my name is also Cathy like yours.]

M Comme moi? [Like mine?]

S Oui. [Yes.]

M Ah! mais je pense que tu te trompes un peu parce que tu ressembles à un garçon et Cathy c'est un nom de fille [Oh! But I think you're wrong because you look like a boy and Cathy, that's a girl's name.]

S Mais je suis aussi une fille [But I also am a girl].

M Ah! Tu es une fille! Mais tu a mis un pantalon comme un garçon [Oh! You're a girl! But you put on trousers like a boy.]

S Mais non! [Oh no!]

M Non? et tu habites où? [No? And you live where?]

S Ici. [Here.]

M Dans la grande maison? [In the big house?]

S Oui. [Yes.]

M Mais quelle belle mansion!... et tu vas déjà à l'école? [Well, what a beautiful house!... and do you already go to school?]

S Non, parce que aujourd'hui c'est samedi. [No, because it's Saturday today.]

M C'est samedi? [It's Saturday?]

S Oui. [Yes.]

M Mais alors tu as congé. Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire aujourd'hui? [But then you're on holiday, what are you going to do today?]

S Je vais manger maintenant. [I'm now going to eat.]

M Tu vas manger? [You're going to eat?]
Quest-ce que tu vas manger? [What are you going to eat?]

S Je ne sais pas, je vais te dire après. [I don't know, I'll tell you later.]
Voilà au revoir! [Now, goodbye!]

M Au revoir. [Goodbye.]

S Je ne sais pas où manger... Oh, regarde! [I don't know where to eat... Oh look!]

M C'est quoi ça? [What is that?]

S Des photos. [Snapshots.]

M Des photos? [Snapshots?]

S Des photos. [Snapshots.]

M Mais c'est un peu cassé, un peu tordu... Dis, je pense que tu peux manger ou dans la cuisine ou à table dans le salon. [But it's somewhat broken, somewhat bent... Say, I think you can eat either in the kitchen or on the living-room table.]

S Non, je ne vais pas manger dans le salon, je vais manger au G.B. (general store) [No, I am not going to eat in the living room, I am going to eat at the G.B.]

M Au G.B.? [At the G.B.?]

S Oui. [Yes.]
M Ça alors! Et qu'est-ce que tu vas manger? [Oh my! And what are you going to eat?]
S Des frites. [French fries.]
M Des frites? Avec quoi? [French fries? What with?]
S Avec du poisson. [With some fish.]
M Avec du poisson? Et qu'est-ce que tu veux sur ton poisson? [With some fish? And what do you want on top of your fish?]
S De la sauce. [Some sauce.]
M De la sauce? [Some sauce?]
S Au revoir! [Bye-bye]

Second Sequence

Sacha (S) and the director of the school (D), with whom Sacha is not familiar.

D Quest-ce que c'est, ça? les Maximonstres? [What is that? The Maximonsters?]
S Les monstres. [The monsters.]
D Tu connais? Dis, tu vas me le raconter, oui? [Do you know?. Say, you are going to tell me, yes?]
S Toi. [You.]
D Tu vas me raconter le livre. [You are going to tell me the story.]
S Toi. [You.]
D Non, toi...moi je ne le connais pas. [No, you... me, I know it.]
S Moi non plus. [Me neither.]
D ... et toi tu me le racontes...Non? [... and you - you're going to tell it to me... No?]
On va voir, on va voir, Allez...Oh. [We'll see, we'll see. Come on...Oh.]
S ... [...]
D Regarde. [Look.]
S Ah ça c'est Maximonstre. [Ah that's Maximonster.]
D Ah. [Ah.]
S Et ça c'est Max. [And that's Max.]
D Ça c'est Max, ah bon, dis...dis, ils sont gentils les Maximonstres? [That's Max, oh well, Say...say, are they nice, the Maximonsters?]
Oui? et qu'est-ce qu'ils font? [Yes? and what are they doing?]
S ... [...]
D Attends. [Wait.]
S ... [...]
D Oui? oui, allez raconte. [Yes? Yes, come on, tell me.]
S Ah, fait des bêtises. [Ah, playing the fool.]
D Il fait des bêtises, ah et quelles bêtises? [He's playing the fool, ah, and what kind of foolishness?]
S Je ne sais pas. [I don't know.]
D Tu ne sais pas? Quoi? On continue alors. [You don't know? What? Then let's go on.]
S Il...le p'tit chien. [He...the little dog.]

D Il quoi? [He what?]

S Non, regarde, encore des bêtises. [No, look, more trouble making.]

D Il fait encore des bêtises? [He's still making trouble?]
ah dis mais il veut frapper le chien? [Hey, but he wants to beat the dog?]

S Il veut frapper *son* chien. [He wants to beat *his* dog.]

D Ah son chien? C'est son chien et comment il s'appelle. [Ah, his dog? it's his dog? And what's its name.]

S Je ne sais pas. [I don't know.]

D Alors on invente? comment? [Then let's invent? What?]

S Ma. [Max.]

D Non, Max c'est le garçon. [No, Max, that's the boy.]

S Oui, c'est Max. [Yes, it's Max.]

D Ah oui...et toi, tu as un chien? [Oh yes, and you, you have a dog?]

S Snoopy, Snoopy. [Snoopy, Snoopy].

D Snoopy...moi aussi j'ai un chien. [Snoopy...me too, I have a dog.]

S Comment il s'appelle? [What's his name?]

D J'ai *une* chienne. [I have a *she*-dog.]

S Mais comment il s'appelle? [But what's his name?]

D Ah, écoute bien...Bouboule. [Ah, listen well...Booboole.]

S Bouboule, bouboule. [Booboole, booboole.]

D Oui...dis, et toi, c'est un grand chien? [Yes...Tell me, and you, it's a big dog?]

S Non, je suis pas un chien. [No, I'm not a dog.]

D *Ton* chien, *ton* chien. [*Your* dog, *your* dog.]

S Il s'appelle Snoopy. [His name is Snoopy.]

D Oui, mais...il est grand? [Yes, but ...it is big?]

S Oui. [Yes.]

D Oui? Comment? [Yes? How big?]

S Et *ton* chien? (And *your* dog?)

D Ah non, le mien est petit, c'est un caniche. Dis, comment ça s'appelle ça? [Oh no, mine is small, it's a poodle.
Tell me, what's the name of that?]

S Ah...je n'sais pas...ah, une tente. [Ah...I don't know... ah, a tent.]

D Ah oui, hein, une tente, [Ah yes, hey, a tent.]

S Ici, il ne veut pas être roi. [Here, He does not want to be king.]

D Dis, il ne veut pas être roi? Pourquoi? [Say, he does not want to be king? Why?]

S Parce qu'il ne veut pas. [Because he does not want to.]

D Et toi, to aimerais bien être roi? Oui? [And you, would you like to be king? Yes?]
Le roi de quel pays? Toi, le roi des Maximonstres? Non? de la Belgique peut-être? [The king of which country?
You the Maximonster king? No? King of Belgium maybe?]

S Non. [No.]

D Non. [No.]

S Le roi de fantômes. [The king of ghosts.]

- D Ah mais alors je vais avoir très peur de toi, hein! [Oh but then I shall be much afraid of you, hey!]
- S Roi des fantômes...et maintenant il part. [King of the ghosts and now he's going away.]
- D Il part, dis, où? où? [He's going away, you say, where? Where?]
- S Dans son pays. [To his country.]
- D Dans son pays. [To his country.]
- S Il navigue...il navigue pendant long temps. [He's sailing... he sails for a long time.]
- D Dis, il navigue longtemps? [Say, he sails for long?]
- S Des semaines, des semaines, des semaines, des semaines. [Weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks.]

Discussion

The observation of Sacha's unusually rapid progress has led the school and center to apply the same combination of signed French and Cued Speech with other small children. A growing number of parents have followed suit. Many of these who had chosen bimodal communication and obtained initial success were unable to keep up with their child's progress because of their own limited proficiency in signed French. They have welcomed the possibility of transferring from known signed expressions to their equivalent in Cued Speech, which their child quickly recognized, becoming thereby progressively familiar with the Cued Speech system. From then onwards, the parents can continue to expand their child's reception of spoken language through Cued Speech without any limitations.

The manual aids combination described in this paper and illustrated by the tape is associated with early hearing aid fitting and a vigorously emphasized audio-oral program largely based upon Guberina's (1981) verbo-tonal method. This method has proved efficient for speech development and auditory training, but insufficient by itself for language acquisition. The adjunction to that method of the signed French - Cued Speech combination ensures good communication, with its favorable consequences upon psychological well-being. Moreover, it restores the conditions for language acquisition at or near the normal age through a natural learning process instead of contrived instructional situations. Parents no longer need to become substitute therapists and organize formal training sessions for their child. They can become just parents again, provided that they make the initial effort to acquire the supplementary communication techniques.

The results so far observed, though still preliminary, indicate that the children who benefit from this system at an early age will have more opportunities than before for acquiring a real mastery of spoken and written language.

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