

# **FILIPINO SIGN LANGUAGE IN DEAF EDUCATION: DEAF AND HEARING PERSPECTIVES**

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## **A Deaf Perspective**

What is Filipino Sign Language? It is the language that the Filipino Deaf community uses. “The most important thing about sign language is the deaf person using it.” (PDRC and PFD, 2004). Language essentially represents a person’s identity. The first language of a Deaf child is a natural visual language. It is this language that breaks the barriers between him/her and the hearing society. The Deaf community uses this natural visual language to communicate and transmit what it holds dear to the next generation.

For most deaf children, language acquisition happens under two possible circumstances: one is natural and the other is through formal teaching. Natural sign language is learned without effort from interactions between Deaf parents and their Deaf children and between Deaf children and the Deaf community. Deaf children who are exposed to native users of natural sign language acquire conversational skills naturally and easily. Formal language learning, on the other hand, happens in schools where there is access to other languages such as Manually Coded English (MCE).

Many people including those in schools do not realize that there is a natural sign language used by the Deaf community here in the Philippines. They think that all regions and schools use American Sign Language (ASL) or Manually Coded English (MCE) such as Signing Exact English (SEE). They do not recognize the existence of this natural language of the Deaf community, neither do they recognize the rights of deaf people in schools.

Globally, the Deaf people’s right to their own language has been upheld. Cognizant of developments in sign language research, the following resolution has been adopted by the Tenth Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf held in Helsinki, Finland.

“Be it adopted: The distinct national sign languages of indigenous deaf populations should officially be recognized as their natural sign language of right for direct communication...

“Be it further considered: ... Teachers of the deaf are expected to learn and use the accepted indigenous sign language as the primary language of instruction.” (WFD, 1987 cited in PDRC and PFD, 2004, Part 3, p.37 ).

In the Philippines, beginning in the eighties, the Department of Education has already prescribed that the local sign language shall be used in the curriculum. Article 5, Section 1.4.1 of the Policies and Guidelines in Special Education states that “Pilipino Sign Language shall be used in the education of the hearing impaired.” (SPED Division, 1986). Although there is such a policy on the use of language in teaching the deaf, this is not what is happening throughout the country. The National Sign Language Committee in its preparation of the Status Report on the Use of Sign Language in the Philippines has

gathered video evaluations of over 170 teachers in public and private schools in the elementary and high school levels from Regions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, and NCR. Majority of the hearing teachers use an artificial sign system and sign supported speech. (NSLC, in progress).

Artificial sign systems such as Signing Exact English (SEE2) and Sign Supported Speech may have their applications in the teaching of English to Deaf students. However, for deaf children, understanding and being understood are very important during communication in the classroom. They cannot learn content without a clear understanding of what happens in the classroom.

There are many linguistic features of Filipino Sign Language that are not found in artificial sign systems, which are based on English grammar. Also, artificial sign systems use a lot of initialization (the handshape of the sign is based on the first letter of the word) and affixation (the use of manual signals to represent affixes), etc. which make the signing unnatural and impractical. To deaf children, the use of artificial sign systems is long and boring. For example, the phrase “once upon a time” is signed word for word instead of signing the phrase conceptually or contextually. When signed word for word, deaf students do not understand the message, but when translated and provided the sign gloss LONG-TIME-AGO, the phrase is understood since this is a natural sign language form which uses a visual timeline and three-dimensional space.

Lastly, Tanjusay’s experience as a teacher of Deaf students in the elementary grades confirm that the use of natural sign language is more effective in teaching deaf students. She found that the students were neither able to learn nor understand the lesson when she used SEE 2. There was very little response to the lesson so she tried to use natural sign language. Students became very interested and participated in class. She opines that it is very important to teach using natural sign language in the classroom.

## **A Hearing Perspective**

The Philippines is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) which states the importance of sign language as the medium of communication among the deaf, prescribing the recognition of natural sign language and deaf people’s access to education in their language. The practice of special education in the Philippines is likewise influenced by American legislation. The 1999 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) regulations specify that education of persons with disabilities should use their native language and that for deaf individuals, native language refers to the mode of communication s/he normally uses such as sign language (IDEA 34 CER. 300.19, 1999 cited in Pittman and Heufner, 2001).

The Magna Carta for Disabled Persons or Republic Act 7277 ensures deaf people’s adequate access to quality education. Deaf education has been in existence in the Philippines for almost a century with the establishment of the Insular School for the Deaf and Blind now called the Philippine School for the Deaf in 1907. Many schools for the deaf and special education centers have been established ever since.

The Department of Education has two basic documents that govern the practice of deaf education in the country: the first document is the *Policies and Guidelines for Special Education* (SPED Division, 1997) which anchors Philippine deaf education on the philosophy of Total Communication and states that the medium of instruction should be Filipino Sign Language. The second document is the *Handbook of Special Education* (SPED Division, 1997) which recommends the use of Total Communication

as “most advisable for ... teaching the hearing impaired starting in grade three with English as medium of instruction” (p.54).

Filipino Deaf leaders bemoan the low literacy levels of the deaf, which affect their educational achievement and ultimately their employability (PDRC and PFD, 2004). Initial findings on the literacy of sixth grade Filipino Deaf students indicate very poor performance in reading and English diagnostic tests (PDRC, in process). In countries such as the United States, the average reading levels range from third to sixth grade (Easterbrooks, 1999) while in Sweden and Denmark, deaf students read at levels comparable to their hearing age-mates (Mahshie, 1995). The dismal performance of Filipino students warrants an analysis of the Philippine deaf education policies and practices.

Inconsistencies within policies and between policy and practice exist. The *Policies and Guidelines of Special Education* states that Filipino Sign Language should be the medium of instruction while the *Handbook on Special Education* recommends English as the medium of instruction beginning Grade 3. Both documents are clear in stating that the practice of deaf education will adopt the Total Communication philosophy.

Total Communication prescribes the use of one or several modes of communication to teach the deaf child – this could be manual, oral, auditory, and/or written, depending on his/her needs. Teachers are expected to use the communication method(s) most appropriate for the child’s level of development (Solit, Taylor & Bednarczyk, 1992 cited in Hawkins and Brawner, 1997). In practice, total communication is often interpreted as a simultaneous communication or the practice of speaking and signing in English at the same time. Studies report that this simultaneous use of speech and sign is the most commonly used form of instruction and communication in schools (Schidroth and Hotto, 1993 cited in Easterbrook, 1998; Kaplan, 1996 cited in Hawkins and Brawner, 1997). A survey of Filipino public and private school teachers by the National Sign Language Committee reveals that majority or approximately 88 percent interpret Total Communication as simultaneous communication or sign supported speech. (NSLC, in progress). Instead of using Filipino Sign Language as medium of instruction, Signing Exact English is used. Signing Exact English is an artificial language, which is a signed representation of the English language. It is used as an intermediary code for learning the printed/written symbols of English.

Combining signing and speech can be problematic and requires adjustment. Signs can be omitted or shortened to match the pace of speech. Wilbur and Petersen (1998) explain that

“Although it is possible to provide a relatively accurate sign-for-word match between SE (signed English) and spoken English, the number of syllables in the two modalities, and the concomitant metrical pattern, are extremely unlikely to match. Theoretically, simultaneous speaking and signing involves the same number of words in each modality in that they are both coding English. However, there are numerous mismatches in the number of forms produced because SE frequently requires a separate sign for spoken English suffixes.”

Wilbur and Petersen’s study compares the sign productions of those who know American Sign Language (ASL), which is a natural sign language, and those who only know Simultaneous Communication using Manually Coded English. Their findings reveal that

both groups omitted several word categories. Those who used simultaneous communication omitted more word categories than those who knew ASL. According to Mallery-Ruganis and Fischer (1991 cited in Wilbur and Petersen, 1998), the main issue is not the deletion of signs but its effect on the meaning of the message. Impermissible are deletions that distort the meaning of the message in an effort to create less distorted speech. Wilcox (1989, cited in Easterbrook, 1999) refers to the same complication -- that the nature of the spoken and visual modes of communication may cause both signers and/or speakers to change their messages to accommodate either mode. Johnson, Liddell and Erting (1989) report that Sign Supported Speech is not fully comprehensible to the deaf while Mayer and Lowenbraun (1990 cited in Easterbrooks, 1999) claim that researchers do not agree on the effectiveness of the use of manually coded English in promoting better literacy. Based on the reported literacy performance of sixth grade Filipino deaf students, the current practice of using Signing Exact English and Simultaneous Communication seemingly has not created a positive impact on their reading performance.

The bilingual-bicultural (bi-bi) approach, which began in Sweden and Denmark, presents a plausible solution to the Philippine deaf education dilemma. This approach is based on a cultural model of deafness instead of a medical/pathological one. It emphasizes that Deaf people are capable individuals, hence the approach focuses on enabling Deaf children to communicate effectively in both the national sign language and in the written language of the majority and empowering them to function in both the Deaf community and the majority culture (Baker, 1997). Mahshie (1995) reports that 55 percent of the students in Denmark are reading at age-appropriate levels. In Sweden, deaf children go past the fourth grade plateau. Professionals in both countries attribute this success to the deaf children's early access to language and to the early intervention services afforded them. In bi-bi programs, deaf students use their natural sign language to discuss the features of spoken language. In the process, they acquire literacy in the language of the majority.

Research shows that there is a strong relationship between conversation-based forms and text-based forms of language whether they be spoken language such as oral English or natural sign language such as American Sign Language (Paul, 1997, Geers & Moog, 1989, Strong & Prinz, 1997 cited in Easterbrooks, 1999). Trybus and Jensema (1978 cited in Evans, 2004) note that deaf children with deaf parents consistently score higher in English reading tests compared to deaf children with hearing parents. However, only 10 percent of deaf individuals have deaf parents. This lends credence to the importance of providing deaf children early access to a first, conversational language and the role of Deaf adults in helping young deaf children acquire a first language.

Filipino deaf children face a unique linguistic situation (Bustos, 1999). An investigation of the modes of communication in homes of deaf children and their hearing families shows that they use gestures and homemade signs with speech when communicating with the deaf family member. Home signs, which are highly idiosyncratic in nature, do not comprise a language. It is only through the introduction of formal sign language that families experience and achieve a level of precision and accuracy to the references made during conversations.

To adopt the bilingual-bicultural approach, fluent users of Filipino Sign Language (FSL) are needed in deaf classrooms. Unfortunately for many hearing teachers of the Deaf, FSL is a third or a fourth language learned and this affects their fluency. Aside from this, there are very few training programs that offer FSL classes. These reasons

could explain the expediency of using simultaneous communication and signed English and the resistance of some teachers to adopt FSL as medium of instruction. The Department of Education should look into involving Deaf teachers and teaching assistants who can serve as role models for young deaf children while providing comprehensible input during classes.

An incidental benefit of FSL is for teachers and interpreters who use simultaneous communication. In the study of Wilbur and Petersen (1998) on sign productions, those who know natural sign language make more learned decisions regarding permissible omissions, and can compensate by using non-manual marking and other devices to ensure effective message transmission. Teachers and interpreters who opt to use simultaneous communication can improve their signed English skills through their knowledge of FSL. Regardless of teaching philosophy and approach, learning FSL can enrich the quality of Philippine deaf education.

### **Synthesis of the deaf and hearing perspectives**

The task of providing Deaf people adequate access to quality education is not limited to physical access to schools but includes, more importantly, access to information within the classroom. Research and personal experience question the comprehensibility of simultaneous communication using signed English. It is crucial to review existing Deaf education policies and guidelines and streamline policy and practice. To significantly impact Deaf literacy levels and educational achievement, there is a need to use Filipino Sign Language, the natural sign language of the community as medium of instruction in deaf classrooms. The bilingual-bicultural model shows promise as a workable model in raising Deaf literacy.

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