

SignWriting on the Path to Literacy A Research Project Proposal

In “Can the Linguistic Interdependence Theory Support A Bilingual-Bicultural Model of Literacy Education for Deaf Students?” by Connie Mayer and Gordon Wells (from *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 1:2 Spring 1996) the authors evaluate the arguments supporting bilingual-bicultural education of Deaf children as supported by Cummins’ Theory of Linguistic Interdependence. Cummins’ Theory proposes that the path to second language literacy lies either through spoken fluency with the second language, or through written fluency in the first language. His theory states that a learner cannot go from spoken language fluency in one language to written language fluency in a second language without one of those two bridges.

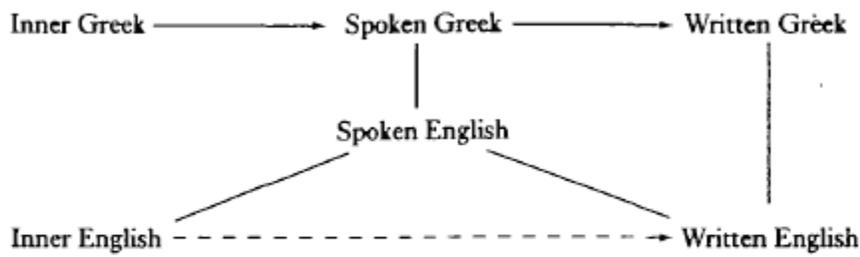


Figure 2. Bridging strategies available to a literate member of L1 learning to read and write English as L2 in phase 3: inner to written speech.

From Can the Linguistic Interdependence Theory Support A Bilingual-Bicultural Model of Literacy Education for Deaf Students? by Connie Mayer and Gordon Wells, *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 1:2 Spring 1996

The authors posit 5 reasons why Cummins’ Theory does not apply to English and ASL, and thus to bilingual education for Deaf children. Four of the five reasons stated could be reduced to the simple ‘fact’ that ASL does not have a written form. The answer to their question seems to be “No, because you can’t write ASL.”

What if ASL had a written form? The path to language literacy from ‘spoken’ Sign Language to spoken English is extremely difficult, if not impossible for most Deaf children, as evidenced by over a hundred years of dismal performance; students graduating with an average reading level of third to fourth grade. The only other path available would be from ‘spoken’ Sign to written Sign to written English. Is there a way to write Sign Language?

SignWriting is a writing system that has symbols for handshapes, facial expressions, movements, and contacts. An ASL poem, nearly impossible

to fully translate to English, can be written in ASL. Someone who doesn't know ASL, but knows this writing system, can "feel out" signs, just like a speaker of English can "sound out" unfamiliar words.

SignWriting is spreading to 40 countries because of the internet, with free and open SignPuddle dictionaries online. SignWriting is used in schools in Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Nicaragua, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. Signing-Deaf people learn to read and write both spoken and signed languages in the classroom, learning to compare the two languages. Reading scores, and Deaf people's self esteem, seem to be improving. Small research projects in several countries have shown this, but more research is needed.

The SignWriting Literacy Project has been used in the Albuquerque Public Schools since 1999 to teach young Deaf children to read and write. Deaf and hearing teachers at the Hodgkin Elementary School in Albuquerque, instruct their Deaf students, ages 5-12, to write ASL by hand and by computer.

A research project was conducted at the University of New Mexico proving that the student's self-esteem, at Hodgkin Elementary School, was improved, when they used SignWriting. Another research project conducted in Saudi Arabia studied three control groups at the School for Deaf Boys. The group that used SignWriting had the highest reading level scores in both spoken and signed Arabic.

Our Research:

After pretests using John's Reading Inventory and Fairview, we will teach SignWriting to the younger elementary students here at GSD (up to second grade.) We will encourage them to use it to express their thoughts and ideas, and monitor what they produce. We will add SignWriting components to their learning of reading, using Fairview, and other materials in written ASL.

At the end of the year, we will post-test with the Johns and Fairview to determine what progress has been made in English reading vocabulary and comprehension. We will ask a second grade class at AASD to pre- and post-test with Johns and Fairview as well, to use as a control group. We will also compare standardized testing results with the group exposed to SignWriting and the AASD group.

If possible, the research should be continued longer term to get a fuller picture of the academic impact of written ASL.

We theorize that SignWriting might create a “path to literacy.” Providing children a means to write their ‘native’ language, ASL, they could use that as a bridge to written English, as Cummins’ Interdependence Theory proposes for bilingual children.

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Jack and Jill
Using ASL Poetry to translate children’s nursery rhymes
Transcribed in SignWriting by Cherie Wren

