Some thoughts on bilinguality and equity

Robert E. Johnson, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.
robert.e.johnson@gallaudet.edu
How Can We Convince Immigrants to Learn English? Even though they are able to live here without it.

by: Donna Poisl

Everyone in the world knows that **English is the language spoken in the U.S.** and most immigrants are prepared to learn it. But when they arrive, many of them (especially Spanish speaking) find signs and other information in their own language and quickly realize that they don't have to learn more than a few words of English.
It is completely understandable why they are reluctant to learn it. Learning a new language is hard, if people don't have to do it, they probably won't. But these people also won't ever be fully integrated into our society. In the past, the first thing new immigrants did was learn English. They had to know English to work and drive and shop. When everyone in the country speaks the same language, even with an accent, the country is much more united than ours is now.

Now they can live in their own little communities, watch TV, listen to the radio, read a newspaper, shop, work and even drive without speaking ANY English. They can get government forms in their own language and almost all offices and departments have interpreters available for them.
• Many new residents know almost nothing about this country they live in. Without understanding the language, they don’t have much opportunity to learn about the culture. They don’t learn the laws or their rights or responsibilities and very often end up in trouble because of it. **They live here the same way they did in their home country and when they are within their little enclaves they are sometimes perpetuating the same problems that they were trying to get away from.**
How are bilingualism and bilinguality imagined by such authors?

- **Monolingualism:**
  - normal condition
  - a unifying feature of nation
- **bilingualism**
  - problematic: hinders acquisition of English
  - divisive deviation from the norm
  - threatens nationhood
A conversation with a surgeon
A conversation with a surgeon

- The implant is a not a hearing device but is a language acquisition device.
- ASL inhibits the acquisition of English speech
- With implants, the child will have a better opportunity to acquire useful language skills that will integrate him or her into the mainstream community
First Theme

• ASL inhibits the acquisition of English speech
The “single-glass” concept of bilinguality

Language is contained in a single glass in the head and there is only one such glass.

Picture of the single language glass in my head.
The “glass” of most hearing Americans

English
The “glass” of a (supposed) monolingual user of American Sign Language
• The idea of the “single glass” says that languages compete with each other for space in the glass.
• Thus, people believe that ASL will displace English.
ASL

English
More ASL will replace more English
• Interestingly this notion only applies to adventitious bilinguals, not to volitional bilinguals
But this is not how it really works

• Languages don’t compete for space in a single glass.
• We actually have one glass for each language we know
Every one of us has plenty of empty glasses

Bob’s head
• Does using another language make it difficult to learn English?
### U.S. Census:


(Rounded parenthetical %ages are mine)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All speakers &gt;age 5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English only</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaks Eng very well</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>9 (63)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... well</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3 (23)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... not well</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>2 (12)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... not at all</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>0 (2)</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Knowing other languages doesn’t damage one’s English.
• In fact, there is ample evidence that having two languages gives a child cognitive advantages.
Second Theme

• With implants, children will have a better opportunity to acquire useful spoken language skills that will integrate them into the mainstream community
Deaf people do not have easy access to spoken languages

• Because they do not hear well, they can’t acquire a spoken language easily by listening to speech and can’t communicate freely and easily in social situations that demand that they listen to speech to grasp meaning.
• This is largely true of all the people we mean by the word “deaf,”
• This includes many of those with some usable level of hearing, whether it is the result of their life circumstances or the result of surgery.
- Although a small percentage of deaf people have benefited from adaptive technologies or from surgery, these approaches have not been universally or even widely successful in providing sufficient access to auditory signals.

- Thus, the largest part of the population of deaf people continues to use visual signals as their primary form of sensory processing of the world.

- This is not a loss. It is an adaptive gain.
## Functional Hearing Ability of Severe to Profound Implantees


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children with implants</th>
<th>Functional Hearing Ability</th>
<th>Cochlear Implant Use for Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functions Normally</td>
<td>Ceased or Never Used</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently Using</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly Limited</td>
<td>Ceased or Never Used</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently Using</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severely Limited</td>
<td>Ceased or Never Used</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently Using</td>
<td>1375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Functional Hearing</td>
<td>Ceased or Never Used</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently Using</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What this has to do with equity

• If we insist on a speech-only educational model, the bulk of deaf children will not have access to equal educational opportunity
Linguistic assumptions of the modern classroom

• adults and children share a language
• it is assumed that teachers and children are able to communicate in the same language
• necessary for academic discourse
Linguistic assumptions of the modern classroom

- direct communication between adults and children
Linguistic assumptions of the modern classroom

- direct communication between children and other children
Situations that do not permit these fundamentals of design create inequities for children.
If the signal of the teacher is not accessible, the content is not accessible, and the child’s education will suffer.
So the critical and perpetual question is:

• Given that functional access to speech is dramatically less than universal,

• and that ASL in the classroom actually permits direct interaction between participants:

• Is speech more important than access to educational content?
Annual Surveys of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children & Youth

1992-93 (N=663)
- 86% White
- 4% Black/African American
- 1% Hispanic
- 5% Other or Not Reported

1995-96 (N=1345)
- 80% White
- 4% Black/African American
- 3% Hispanic
- 1% Other or Not Reported

2000-01 (N=2565)
- 70% White
- 8% Black/African American
- 3% Hispanic
- 7% Other or Not Reported

2001-02 (N=2940)
- 65% White
- 15% Black/African American
- 5% Hispanic
- 4% Other or Not Reported

2002-03 (N=3189)
- 65% White
- 17% Black/African American
- 5% Hispanic
- 4% Other or Not Reported
Allen, Thomas E. 2000
Parents’ Perceptions and Experiences with their Children’s Cochlear Implants: A Report of the Results of the Survey of Parents of Pediatric Cochlear Implantees

• 65 - 86% of implantees are White, non-Hispanic

• 57% of implantees have household incomes over $50,000

• 96% still using implant
### Allen: Frequency of Interaction with Hearing Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1-4 years</th>
<th>5-7 years</th>
<th>8-11 years</th>
<th>12+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly often</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At almost all</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How I looked when I started talking about this topic