

Deaf Education in Italy: Formulating Methods to Increase Literacy  
Among the Deaf Population

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What is it like to "hear" a hand?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be a small child,  
In a school, in a room void of sound --  
With a teacher who talks and talks and talks;  
And then when she does come around to you,  
She expects you to know what she's said?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

Or the teacher thinks that to make you smart,  
You must first learn how to talk with your voice;  
So mumbo-jumbo with hands on your face  
For hours and hours without patience or end,  
Until out comes a faint resembling sound?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be curious,  
To thirst for knowledge you can call your own,  
With an inner desire that's set on fire --  
And you ask a brother, sister, or friend  
Who looks in answer and says, "Never Mind"?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What it is like in a corner to stand,  
Though there's nothing you've done really wrong,  
Other than try to make use of your hands  
To a silent peer to communicate  
A thought that comes to your mind all at once?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be shouted at  
When one thinks that will help you to hear;

Or misunderstand the words of a friend  
Who is trying to make a joke clear,  
And you don't get the point because he's failed?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be laughed in the face  
When you try to repeat what is said;  
Just to make sure that you've understood,  
And you find that the words were misread --  
And you want to cry out, "Please help me, friend"?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to have to depend  
Upon one who can hear to phone a friend;  
Or place a call to a business firm  
And be forced to share what's personal, and,  
Then find that your message wasn't made clear?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to be deaf and alone  
In the company of those who can hear --  
And you only guess as you go along,  
For no one's there with a helping hand,  
As you try to keep up with words and song?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like on the road of life  
To meet with a stranger who opens his mouth --  
And speaks out a line at a rapid pace;  
And you can't understand the look in his face  
Because it is new and you're lost in the race?  
You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to comprehend  
Some nimble fingers that paint the scene,  
And make you smile and feel serene,  
With the "spoken word" of the moving hand  
That makes you part of the word at large?

You have to be deaf to understand.

What is it like to "hear" a hand?

Yes, you have to be deaf to understand.

-Willard Madsen, 1971

### **Abstract**

This thesis sets out to examine the ways in which using an all sign language approach can help increase literacy among Deaf children in an enrichment setting in Italy. The children are fifth grade students mainstreamed at the local elementary school in a mostly oral education program with a little Total Communication instruction from an assistant. By working with no more than two children at any given time in an after-school setting, proven literacy methods for hearing students are used along with other new methods in an effort to increase the level of literacy in the children participating in the study. While neither child is a native sign language user, the sign language is still the most easy to use and best understood language for instruction for the children. Aside from using games and activities to activate the children's interest in learning the workings of the written language, other techniques involving all forms of literacy are used with mixed success. In the end, the most effective lessons were the ones in which the pace of the lesson was tailored especially for the students delivered in a modified Total Communication approach by using the written language simultaneously with sign language instruction. By illustrating the differences between the two languages throughout our lessons, the children were able to better understand the written language without using the oral language for instruction.

### **Background**

Being Deaf in Italy, as in almost any other country, poses many challenges for communication, education, and establishing oneself in the workplace. Most people in the society do not know the sign language, making communication difficult, similar to a foreigner visiting a far away land. Many times, this society virtually requires the Deaf population to also learn how to communicate using the oral language if they want to be a part of that

country's society, rather than being an outcast. In many cases, Deaf people who are native signers of their country's sign language, whether it is France, Italy, or the United States, often learn the oral and written language in addition to the sign language. This population of native signers is comprised mostly of Deaf people who are born to Deaf parents whose primary means of communication is sign language.

For native signers, acquiring the oral and written language is not nearly as difficult as it is for a second group of Deaf children, those being non-native signers of their home language. Instead, these are often Deaf children born to hearing parents, parents who are not native signers of the sign language that the family uses to various degrees in the home, but instead native speakers of the oral language. This difference presents quite a problem for the Deaf child, who is often linguistically deprived as a child during important periods of language development. Since the child cannot hear or can hear only very little of what the parents are saying, the child cannot develop the oral language. At the same time, since the parents often do not know the sign language, they cannot offer their child any strong linguistic input during the most important years of language development in children.

It is this group of linguistically deprived children that then go on to have even more trouble upon entering school, being developmentally behind many of their classmates. This deficit only continues throughout the child's entire education, as this problem is further compounded by the fact that most schools in many countries do not offer comprehensive assistance to try and address the child's varied learning needs and abilities. Instead, schools often treat these children as though they will perform and learn at the same

capacity as hearing children, mainstreaming them into regular 25 person classrooms. The Deaf children, who either do not understand or do to varying degrees which could be very low degrees, of what is being said by the teacher, depending on hearing aides or cochlear implants, are expected to understand everything that is being said and discussed in the class by way of lip reading, which is no easy feat. Lip reading in Italian however, seems to be easier than in English, as there seems to be greater lip movement and protrusion in Italian (personal observation). Stephen Anderson (professor at Yale) also observed that Italian seems to move the lips more than English. Regardless, many, many sounds still have a similar shape on the lips, making it not the most efficient system for understanding a language.

In Italy, as in many other countries, Deaf people are virtually required to learn how to communicate using the oral native language. Society dictates that if you want to be a member of the society, let alone just perform basic tasks such as going to the grocery store, you must be able to communicate using the oral language. Because of this heavy emphasis on learning the oral language, Deaf people are assimilated into the hearing culture as they cannot use their native sign language to communicate with anyone besides other Deaf signers. Since the emphasis on learning the oral language is so high, Deaf children are mainstreamed into schools with hearing children in the hope that they will learn the oral language from their peers.

In the Duprè Elementary school I observed in Siena, Italy, the dominant approach for educating the Deaf children is an oral approach with Deaf children mainstreamed into regular classrooms. This approach seemed to be the model present in schools across the entire country, as there were only three schools for the Deaf. Furthermore, two out of the three schools

for the Deaf, both located in northern Italy in Padua and Turin, were schools that use a predominantly oral approach, despite the entire school population being Deaf children. These schools used an approach known as Total Communication, in which iconic, pantomime, and imitative signs are used, along with spoken Italian, lip reading, writing on the board, and facial expressions. In this approach, no formal sign language is used for teaching and communicating with the teachers. The reasoning behind this approach at these schools was that the schools felt it was important for Deaf children to communicate verbally for better integration into mainstream society, along with the problem that many advanced, subject-specific vocabulary words do not exist in the sign language. Most of the teachers with a subject-specialization have never followed a course in Italian Sign Language (LIS), and when many new teachers were hired who came to the school not knowing any LIS, many of the students protested their classes.

The school for the Deaf in Rome was very different from those in Padua and Turin. While the other two schools were solely high schools, the school in Rome, which was three to five times larger than the other schools, also served as an elementary and middle school for Deaf children. Furthermore, the school in Rome used the sign language in addition to the oral language for instruction and communication.

In schools where Deaf children were mainstreamed into classes with hearing children, Deaf children occasionally had an assistant either join them in the classroom during their regular lessons, or pull them out of the room so they could work on remedial lessons in a varied number of subjects. When the assistant is present, s/he often employs the bi-bi approach (bilingual-bicultural approach), incorporating LIS and spoken Italian simultaneously.

The assistant plays a unique role when working with Deaf children who are not native signers. Often, basic communication can prove to be very difficult for these students, whether it be in the oral or the sign language. The oral language is difficult for the child to understand for many reasons, and the sign language is sometimes difficult because in many cases the child never saw or communicated with a native signer or a person with native signing abilities. The child learns very few signs at home, known as Homesign, in which a family establishes specific signs with their own significance, many times unrelated to the official sign language. Additionally students learn Signed Italian, which is just a direct translation of everything being said in Italian with a corresponding sign. For example:

"Quel ragazzo e' intelligente" (Standard Italian)

QUELLO RAGAZZO ESSERE-3-sg INTELLIGENTE (Signed Italian, where the verbal morphemes are indicated)

HIM INTELLIGENTE RAGAZZO HIM (LIS, where the copula doesn't even occur and the word order differs)

"That young man is intelligent" (Standard English)

Signed Italian is not sign language, as it differs from LIS in syntax and vocabulary, along with fingerspelling out agreement and other morphemes which do not even occur in LIS. Signed Italian is also not how spoken Italian is normally constructed, showing that Signed Italian is actually not a language at all, but instead just a cross between the two languages, making a very cumbersome and difficult to understand sentence. Hence, the assistant has another job of teaching two languages (Italian and LIS) while trying to teach history, math, and science at the same time.

While the assistant is present, the Deaf child is able to learn at a fairly quick pace, being able to see the connections between both the oral and the sign languages, along with the written language as well, whether it be through a reading or writing exercise. This time is extremely valuable for the child, as he is able to fully understand what ideas are being communicated in the current lesson or work on much needed remedial work for lessons that he may have missed or did not understand. Unfortunately there are two problems with this intervention. First, while the assistant will usually sign everything that she is saying to the child, the child often responds (and is expected to respond) in the oral language, as that is the element that is most heavily emphasized for Deaf children at school. The second problem is the vast amount of time that there is no assistance available to the student. In the school I observed, the assistant was available to work with each student only eight hours per week out of 32 hours of class time, meaning that for 75% of the time the child is in class, he or she has no assistance and has to rely solely on lip reading and catching as many phrases as possible.

The heavy emphasis on learning the oral language often leaves regular classroom teachers unable to assist Deaf children in the regular classroom, as they do not know the sign language and there is sometimes trouble either understanding the child or being understood. The teacher is also not often even aware of the child's special needs, as in the case of the school I observed. There, the Deaf child's desk is placed to the side of the teacher's desk, facing toward the door to the room. This would normally not seem to be a problem, despite the fact that there is often a gaggle of students around the teacher's desk, waiting for her to correct their work or



ask her a question, constantly causing a distraction for the Deaf student. However, when the teacher lectures, which she often does as her main mode of teaching, she stands behind her desk and faces out toward the class with the Deaf student looking at the side of her face trying to lip read but not being very successful. On other occasions, the teacher stands in front of her desk facing the class such that the Deaf child could not even see her face, making lip reading an impossibility, further decreasing learning and comprehension.

For the lessons that I conducted with the Deaf children, I exclusively used LIS as mode of instruction and communication, even though I was not a native signer and still learning LIS at an intermediate level. Despite the children in my lessons being raised as oral individuals, they still struggle a great deal with understanding everything being said in the oral language. One child in particular has had little experience with any language, and seeing that he was Deaf, the sign language seemed the logical choice. For the more oral child, sign language was still a better choice for instruction, as many fine points in the oral and written language are discussed, sometimes many distinctions that even the best lipreading oral children would not understand the difference between. As the ability in the sign language grows for these Deaf children, their attraction to it and use of it grows as well.

## **Literature Review**

### **Deaf Culture and Literacy**

Markowicz and Padden (1997) examine the relationship between hearing and Deaf culture and those who are Deaf but are essentially a part of the hearing culture. The authors study a group of Deaf students who

entered Gallaudet University, a school for the Deaf, as their first school specifically designed for the Deaf. These children, born to hearing parents, essentially grew up in a hearing world, learning to speak with their family and attending a public school in which they were mainstreamed with hearing students. Their educational setting virtually required them to learn how to speak and understand spoken English, especially for having friends, most of which were hearing children. Upon entering Gallaudet, these students did not seem to know how to act, creating many social errors that were deemed unacceptable by the current students at the university. One of these new students at the university, upon trying to speak to another student to ask for information, was told, "you do not use the oral language here." This is after these children had been raised their entire lives learning how to speak and ways to perfect their speech to communicate in society. These same children were then essentially branded in the Deaf community if they were accepted in the Deaf culture at all. The students at the university treated these oral individuals as if they were fully hearing students, either using spoken English and sign in communication or not using sign at all, whereas sign language was strictly the mode of communication between the other members of the community. This was certainly a contradiction for these oral members of the Deaf community, as they were scolded for using the oral language but at the same time were often mistreated by the members of the community as they are spoken to orally. At times these oral students were treated specially because they had such a good command of the spoken language along with a fair amount of knowledge of the hearing culture, with many students asking them questions about hearing people. However, these questions occurred in private, usually in the dormitory, and as soon as their

dorm mates saw these oral students out in public, they mistreated them in the same way as everyone else, either completely ignoring them or not allowing them to be a part of their community. Seeing that the Deaf community is such a small, tight-knit community, risking exclusion often put these students in limbo such that they could not be members of the Deaf community and they could not use the sign language with members of the hearing community either.

The struggle of when and how to use sign language is not only a problem for college-age students, but for younger students as well. Ramsey and Padden (1998) examine how American Deaf children engage in literacy activities based on their abilities to exploit ASL. The authors studied a residential school for Deaf children where many students resided at the school along with others who commuted each day. The class that the authors studied was rather large for a residential school with 12 students in the class, whereas most elementary classrooms have four to eight students. As most Deaf children are born to hearing parents, most of the children at the school were "newcomers" to signing since ASL was not their native language. And while some students began their education in an elementary residential school, many other students left public elementary schools for residential middle schools or even waited until high school to attend a residential school. Aside from observing the key literacy events, including signed classroom discussion and writing, Ramsey and Padden took special interest in a young boy who was new to the class and new to the sign language as well. The students who had been in the residential setting had more experience as signers and made unconscious physical arrangements to ease participation in class discussions, such as moving the desks into a circle

so that everyone could see every part of the discussion, along with making sure that their vision was not blocked between the teacher and the student signing and making sure the teacher could see them when they signed. These same students were also able to pick up on when the teacher was about to ask a question based on the format of her lesson along with monitoring an ongoing discourse with the teacher while initiating and conducting multiple conversations with their peers at the same time. A newcomer, Danny, did not fit as well into this classroom format. Instead of needing brief, focused periods of help during a writing activity, Danny required prolonged assistance from his teachers, which at first was attributed to his lack of understanding ASL. However, it was not Danny's inability to understand ASL only but his inability to follow signed discourse in the classroom setting. Danny would raise his hand when the teacher was not looking and then turn his attention away from a discussion and not know who was speaking or understand the appropriate time to interject with a question. Further complications were also evident in Danny's writing, as he was unable to elicit successful help from his teacher on the simple spelling of a word in English. The authors concluded that access to literacy knowledge and opportunities for orchestrating literacy skills into practices are lost if students cannot participate in activities, as was evident in Danny's case.

While both of the previous examples involve Deaf children in schools for the Deaf, many Deaf children are mainstreamed into regular public schools with hearing children. Charrow and Wilbur (1975) make the argument that the Deaf child is a Linguistic Minority, in much the same sense as Mexican-American, Chinese-American, and other non-native English speakers in the classroom. As the authors point out, 90 percent of Deaf

children are born to hearing parents, which makes identity with the Deaf community even more difficult as the community is often not easily accessible to these children. The authors argue that Deaf children do have a language comparable to the hearing population in regards to intelligence and the ability to conceptualize and reason. The difference between the two groups lies in educational attainment, and that of Deaf children is far below that of hearing children. While these Deaf children learn English in school, often in remedial settings, it is taught using the oral method where the students have to lip read what the speaker is saying. This is extremely difficult to do, as the best lip readers can only "read" about 40 percent of what a speaker is saying (p. 356). Other schools use the Total Communication approach, which utilizes the oral language and Signed Exact English or Manual English but not the sign language. When these Deaf children are then tested on college entrance exams, their performance often resembles those of foreign students than those of native speakers of English. The authors conclude with a recommendation that most Deaf people, including Deaf children, are not and realistically cannot be fully participating and benefiting members of the hearing community. But if these semi-oral children cannot be a part of the hearing community and they are sometimes rejected from the Deaf community, what community can these children turn to for acceptance?

Qualls-Mitchell (2002) attempts to address reading difficulties not only in the group of Deaf children, but in the more specific group of Deaf minority children. Not only do these students have difficulty of trying to learn in a hearing environment, but at the same time have other issues that need to be addressed in the curriculum and the classroom. For this group of

children, the use of pictures becomes much more important in helping the child learn the oral and written language. The authors give an example of an African-American Deaf student trying to explain to his white teachers a problem that he had with his hair that morning. Not only could the child not effectively communicate what he was saying using the oral language, the teachers did not understand what the issue was or why he was explaining something so strange and foreign to them. Because of this large difference culturally and in linguistic abilities, many Deaf minority students do not learn the essentials in school. This concept is illustrated by the fact that while 48% of white Deaf students graduating from high school cannot read at a fourth grade reading level, almost 80% of black and hispanic Deaf students cannot. The authors recommend that by using signs and multicultural literature, Deaf children can develop an understanding of their literacy heritage, which would help increase reading rates among Deaf children.

Ramsey and Padden (1993) examine this relationship between Deaf culture and literacy and ways to increase literacy through cultural empowerment. The authors use a broad definition of literacy, not only incorporating reading and writing but effective communication as a whole. The parents play a particularly important role, and the ways in which they talk about and practice reading and writing themselves often greatly effect the development of a child's literacy. While the average high school Deaf student is labeled as barely functionally literate, many Deaf adults become proficient readers and writers when they want to learn for a specific purpose, such as captioned TV or TDD messages. The authors suggest that an approach that focuses on the social and cultural worlds of Deaf children could actively engage these children in reading and writing activities.

Other authors have suggested the use of symbols and movement as a way to reinforce literacy for Deaf children. Block and Campbell (2001) strongly emphasize the teaching of the oral language through nontraditional techniques. While the authors encourage the use of sign language, they know that children will not understand all of the words in a normal phrase of written or spoken English. The authors instead encourage the use of symbolism, which utilizes visual processing, pattern conceptualization, and movement translation using poster boards with signs, words, and other symbols. The students are then encouraged to connect the symbolic elements to the written word(s) that are associated with the symbols. After significant practice, the students could then combine symbols and their creative writing skills to create their own movement sequences, which could eventually be written as whole stories. This process is not only engaging but fun as it encourages students to use multiple pathways for communication and writing literacies.

The learning that takes place in the classroom, whether it is in a school for the Deaf or in a mainstream public school, must be meaningful for the Deaf child, or he will not be interested or engaged. Vygotsky (1978) presented a new theory based on the interaction of learning and development in children. His theory, the Zone of Proximal development, examines not only the relationship between learning and development but also the specific features of this relationship in the school setting for children. Vygotsky proposes at least two developmental levels in children, with the first being the actual developmental level. The actual developmental level is the level at which a child's mental functions have been established as a result of completed developmental cycles. This first

developmental level is often determined by tests of mental ability that we give children along with any other task we ask children to complete on their own. However, in many cases this is not the limit of a child's actual development. Children have a second higher level of development, which allows them to learn at a level higher than their actual level of development with the help of a teacher, parent, or more capable peer. The capability of children with even the same level of mental development often vary to a high degree under a teacher's guidance. In this respect, these children are not mentally the same age at all, and require a different course of learning and instruction. The difference between the child's mental age, determined by independent problem solving, and the age at which the child can problem solve under the guidance of the teacher, other adult, or peers is the zone of proximal development. This idea of a social learning perspective sets human learning apart from that of other animals. Human learning presupposes a specific nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them rather than independent study. This new idea of learning rejects many previous developmental theorists idea of learning and development. This new notion that developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes and that developmental process lags behind the learning process was a novel idea at the time of its presentation but is generally accepted as truth today.

### **Language and Reading Development**

The acquisition and use of fingerspelling among Deaf children is one of the most powerful tools Deaf children can have when trying to learn the written language. Padden (1986) explains that fingerspelling is not an independent language system, but instead is a representation of some other



system, similar to writing. While fingerspelling resembles the written language, ASL signers fingerspell often and rapidly in regular conversations. Most fingerspelled words are English nouns or proper nouns, such as names. It is names that young children often learn to fingerspell first, either their own or that of their siblings. Early fingerspelling attempts often show interaction with writing as Deaf children explore ways in which fingerspelling can be connected with making print. Children will often attend to the physical properties of fingerspelling as they attempt to write characters for the individual hand configurations. However, the discovery that hand configurations correspond to alphabetic characters comes relatively late for Deaf children. The author offers two explanations for the special difficulties of connecting fingerspelling and writing. First, Deaf children have comparatively less exposure to fingerspelling than to signed material. Fingerspelling is made up disproportionately of nouns, and verbs rarely appear. Second, most Deaf children cannot figure out spelling from fingerspelling itself, but they must instead begin to learn about written English in order to increase their fingerspelled vocabulary. Padden concludes that much of what takes place in language learning is not merely learning the primary language, but its interactions with other language systems in the environment.

Padden and Hanson (2000) go on to discuss the relation of phonology in word learning in Deaf and hearing children. The authors discuss the main difference in phonological coding of words in hearing and Deaf children. Hearing children use their phonological awareness and visual and orthographic awareness to develop an effective and efficient reading process, and the earlier that hearing children can develop this awareness,

the more likely they are to develop good reading skills. Deafness, however, inhibits the development of a phonological code. On a test of serial recall for printed letters, Deaf children recalled fewer rhyming words than nonrhyming words. Visual processing is not rich or detailed enough to aid in memory. While it may seem that developing any reading abilities at all would seem an impossibility, profoundly Deaf people are still able to become skillful readers, although as hearing loss increases, reading difficulty increases. This is because Deaf people use a phonology that is post-lexical, not pre-lexical in contrast to hearing people, as demonstrated in short-term memory reading tasks. The need for phonological information arises in the case of reading complex material that the reader may be unfamiliar with. The authors also further comment on the strange correlation between native signing ability of ASL and reading achievement in English, as children of Deaf parents were more likely to be better readers. However, the languages share neither phonological features nor a syntax, and early language experience is crucial, but not sufficient for reading ability. Reading ability needs to be cultivated by parents and other adults in the form of prereading and reading activities, where ASL simply serves as a "platform" from which reading development can be launched. The argument the authors propose is that fingerspelling is a mediating tool that provides a platform for the development of rudimentary phonological coding, allowing a signer to develop a "speech surrogate." Deaf adults often mouth words phonemically while fingerspelling them in orthographic form. Children learn the value of the use and comprehension of fingerspelling at an early age, even though younger children may have trouble writing the words in print and in fact fingerspell words with simpler movement units. This evidence shows that early

fingerspelling use by Deaf children demonstrates the fact that they are sensitive to movements in fingerspelled words before they are aware of the association of such words to print. However, this effect would not be found in another population of Deaf children, particularly those raised orally.

Along with fingerspelling, general knowledge of the signed language is a recurring theme in reading development in Deaf children. Wilbur (2005) stresses the use of the natural sign language in the early education of Deaf children when the aim is to develop literacy, academic, and social skills. The author, like many others, states that early learning of sign language benefits language learning, cognitive and memory development, and overall socioeducational performance, which can be used to improve reading and writing by providing a necessary language base. While knowledge of a sign language is invaluable, other factors also contribute to educational success with Deaf children, including access to grade-level material, a supportive adult in the Deaf community that interacts with the family, and a sign language as a central focus. For the child to develop age-appropriate communication, the language environment must be child-oriented, providing what the child needs, not the adults. While this emphasis on the sign language may worry some about the development of speech, there is no evidence to support the idea that the early use of sign language interferes with the development of speech abilities. Furthermore, the speech that a child learns can often be without meaning, as it is possible to produce speech without understanding what one is saying. The author reports that Deaf users of American Sign Language (ASL) were superior in reading and general achievement compared to non-ASL users. This is because learning to read requires an already developed language base, and if non-ASL users do not

have that base in the oral language, then they will not be able to learn to read as easily. While the author explains the importance of the use of a natural sign language, she does recognize the place of signing the exact oral language when teaching areas such as English syntax. Furthermore, since most sign languages use other grammatical methods for function words and morphemes, these signs are often invented when signing the oral language, and it is fine to use these signs when teaching the oral language to Deaf children. The authors finally comments upon the impossibility to sign and speak at the same time, as there are too many differences between the two languages. This finding calls into question the effectiveness of Total and Simultaneous Communication environments:

Padden and Ramsey (1998) also examine the role of American Sign Language (ASL) in the development of reading in Deaf children. While the authors do agree that there is a relationship between ASL competence and reading ability, they argue that the relationship does not develop "naturally" but must be cultivated. Previous research has shown that as a group Deaf adolescents of Deaf parents performed somewhat better on a reading comprehension test than those students in Total Communication (TC). It is hypothesized that ASL proficiency was a predictor not of either reading or writing proficiency, but rather of the development of a language was the best predictor. One suggestion is that the environment in which Deaf children of Deaf parents (DCDPs) provide their children, including earlier and longer exposure to schooling and reading development, contributes to a better command of the language. The authors look at two specific language skills that might co-vary with ASL and reading skill: fingerspelling and initialized signs. The authors examined two schools: a residential school for

the Deaf, which used a bilingual approach, and a public school, which used Total Communication. The authors found that as ASL skills increase, fingerspelling skills are likely to increase as well. Weaker signing students struggled interpreting even shorter fingerspelled words. Skill on the initialized sign task was highly correlated with performance on the fingerspelling task, suggesting they are related to each other. Elementary readers were then examined for their reading abilities, and two patterns emerged: one of "attacking and analyzing words" and a second of "seeking meaning." Reading to a student in the TC class meant mapping individuals' signs onto print words and morphemes, attempting to represent each English morpheme with a sign. When the student then tried to retell his story using sign, the result not only failed to relate to the print story but to any meaningful story at all. A student in the bilingual classroom, on the other hand, was focused on seeking meaning, being able to exploit the relationship between ASL and English. Once children are able to exploit this connection, they are much closer to discovering what reading actually is all about.

Many other authors call into question the same issue of the relationship between sign language skill and reading ability and literacy. Strong and Prinz (2000) question whether sign language proficiency and reading and writing literacy can be considered analogous to the relation between first and second spoken language skills. According to Cummins's linguistic interdependence theory, all languages share a common underlying proficiency and cognitive and academic skills acquired in the first language will transfer to related skills in a second language. Opponents to this theory state that this cannot be applied to sign languages because they do not have a written form and that Deaf learners have no access to the auditory-oral

channel which deprives them of inner speech. While the development of external (social) speech precedes the development of inner speech, written speech emerges only after the development of the latter. These authors, like many of the other authors, reach the same conclusion: sign language skill is significantly related to oral and written literacy. At the same time they make another interesting conclusion: children of Deaf mothers outperform children with hearing mothers in both sign and oral language literacy. While the authors found a positive correlation between sign and written literacy for Deaf children of Deaf parents, they argue that this correlation is not only due to this effect. However, the authors do not make any other concrete suggestions as to what else contributes to the correlation between sign and written literacy.

Hoffmeister's (2000) research covers a similar topic area. Because 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, the use of a native sign language as a model for the first language is rare. However, in order for a child to learn to read and write (in this case a second language), there must be development of a social speech system, an inner speech according to Hoffmeister, in addition to some way for these to relate to written text in the first language. The author also examines the role of the manually coded oral language in the sign language, such as artificial lexical units *the, a, an,* and the verb *to be*. He finds that children who better knew the natural sign language could clearly transfer their understanding of the syntactic structure from one language to another, especially when the written form was also manually coded in the sign language. This research demonstrates the importance of incorporating lexical items in the written language into

the sign language as a way to ease the transfer from one language to another.

Padden and Ramsey (2000) nicely tie together much of the research that has been conducted on the relationship between the sign language and reading ability. While we know that Deaf children do not, at least not effectively, use sounding out strategies that might help them learn how to read, the sign language is still not officially targeted as a language of instruction for Deaf children in many school settings. Although Deaf parents often contribute to their Deaf child's learning of a natural language early on, Deaf parents are also more likely to detect Deafness in their child earlier and seek out additional resources, such as schooling for Deaf children, to help their child since they had a similar experience themselves. The average age of detection of Deafness in turn influences the average age of enrollment in educational programs for Deaf children. For reading development, the authors found that the better readers are able to form associations between elements of a signed language, such as morphology, to elements of a written language, such as orthography, as they acquire the ability to read. Additionally, the authors observed teaching practices in a residential school for the Deaf that they saw as beneficial for the students. One such practice was when teachers repeated words, phrases, and sentences as a means of making their signing clear and accessible to their students. The teachers practice this technique because the demands of signing in visual environments are often very great, where visual information is rapid and vulnerable to misinterpretation. Finally though, at the end of the article, the authors point out that there are Deaf children of oral parents who do not sign who, nevertheless, are reported to succeed at

reading, and that signing Deaf adults who are skilled readers can perform phonological analysis on written words even though they cannot hear or speak intelligibly. These findings demonstrate that although it may be more of a challenge for Deaf people to learn how to read, they can achieve the same level of literacy as hearing people given the right education and support.

### **Case Study: Emmanuele**

One child whom I spent a great deal of time with is Emmanuele, a ten-year-old fifth grader in the local elementary school in Siena, the city where I spent a semester abroad. Emmanuele, a Deaf child born to a hearing family, has faced many challenges since his early childhood. Emmanuele was born in Sicily, in a town next to Palermo, the capital of the region. Southern Italy, with Sicily in particular, is a much poorer and more economically deprived region than the rest of Italy, and this seemed to be a major factor in Emmanuele's development.

Emmanuele's parents were not aware of his Deafness until he entered school at the age of five. It was at this time that Emmanuele was diagnosed as Deaf and received a hearing aid for each ear. Prior to this time, Emmanuele had never seen a single sign, and very little of the oral language actually made its way into his understanding. Essentially, Emmanuele was completely linguistically deprived up to the age of five when he entered school.

However, upon his entrance to school, he did not receive much help in trying to catch up on lost language learning time. Instead, Emmanuele was placed into a classroom of children with special needs. These children's needs differed as widely as the color spectrum, with attention deficit children, hyperactive children, Deaf children, and physically disabled



children. Because the school district of Palermo has little money for education, let alone for children with special needs, all of these children were lumped into a classroom of 25 students and treated as though they should all learn together at whatever pace the teacher chose. It goes without saying that there is no possible way that one teacher could properly address the needs of all 25 students, and hence, many students were left behind with no assistance at all. Additional linguistic input orally, let alone visually with a sign language, was completely out of question for Emmanuele. Instead, he had to rely solely on his oral interactions with his parents, trying for the first time to help him understand the oral language with the minimal audio input he was receiving.

Needless to say, Emmanuele's reading and writing literacy greatly suffered as he had had next to no linguistic input for the first five years of his life. The challenges that lay ahead in learning how to read and write seemed overwhelming at best for him at the time, and it promised to be a long, difficult road ahead for him.

When I met Emmanuele for the first time, he was at a beginner's sign language class at the local institute for the Deaf with his mother. His mother had a growing understanding of how difficult it still was to communicate with her son, and that it would somewhat lessen the burden a little on the both of them if she could learn a little of the sign language to help improve communications with her son. It was at this class that I was able to establish a relationship with Emmanuele, his mother, and eventually his entire family, observing him in his classroom at school and working on private lessons with him.

While Emmanuele's mother is interested in helping to communicate more effectively with him using sign language, Emmanuele's father has no desire to learn it. Furthermore, Emmanuele's father personally spoke to me about the importance of Emmanuele being able to speak and understand oral language in society, and he feels it is his job to help Emmanuele by only using the oral language with him, making sure Emmanuele focuses on his lips while he speaks.

### **Case Study: Donatella**

Donatella, on the other hand, has a very different background and is at a very different stage in her academic development compared with Emmanuele, even though she is about the same age and in the same grade level as Emmanuele (eleven years old, 5<sup>th</sup> grade). Donatella was diagnosed as being Deaf very early in her childhood, and this early diagnosis enabled Donatella to receive hearing aids at a young age along with a fair amount of speech therapy very early in her childhood. Her family, just as Emmanuele's family, is all hearing, and her parents do not know any sign language. Her mother is also not interested in learning sign language, which was brought up in a heated debate between her and Emmanuele's mother, who has a new found understanding for the importance of sign language. Donatella's mother feels much the same as Emmanuele's father: that learning the oral language is important if she wants to succeed in society. Because of her mother's attitude and strong willingness to help Donatella, the girl has developed extremely good oral skills for a Deaf child of her age, and she uses the oral language as her primary form of communication. Since Donatella seems to be able to lip read well and can make many of the sounds in the oral language well, her parents have felt that she never needed to learn the sign language.

The only exposure to the sign language that Donatella has is through school, where her assistant will occasionally use sign language when she is working privately with her.

Donatella also has a good command of the written language. She is on her grade level for reading and writing in Italian, and she has a good understanding of many of the rules of Italian grammar. She knows all of the irregular verbs in Italian, along with many of the different tenses and many of the finer points of the grammar, including indefinite and definite articles and prepositions. She is also very responsive to any questions that I have and often likes to demonstrate her expert knowledge of the language.

## **The Lessons**

### **Lesson 1**

For the first lesson, and for subsequent lessons, I started off with a literacy-based game as a way to show the children that the lessons were going to be both fun and educational. For most of the lessons, I had both Emmanuele and Donatella together, and since they were on two completely different levels, I used this lesson as a way to gauge the children's abilities and decide how to formulate future lessons to accommodate both of their different levels. For this lesson, and for all lessons, I wanted to use an approach that I knew both children would understand and be comfortable with, so all of my instruction and communication with them was in sign language. While the children certainly appreciated this, they often responded to me using the oral language, but I encouraged them to use sign for communications because I felt it was important for their own identity, even if this form of response was not highly regarded in their regular classrooms.

The game involved the children cutting out eight different letters I had written at the top of a piece of paper. The children could then rearrange the letters and make as many words as they could using as many letters as they wanted, but they could not use the same letter twice, so that they could see the word spelled out in its entirety in front of them. The children then wrote their words and created a list on a piece of paper. This game was apparently extremely exciting for Emmanuele and Donatella, as they were making words left and right and having a great time with it.

After letting the children work for ten minutes, time was called and we then went through the list of words they created, with them writing

their lists on the board. Donatella had at least twenty words on her list, and

Emmanuele also had a sizeable number of words. This turned out to be more

of a learning moment for me than for the children, as their knowledge of

smaller, more uncommon words is much vaster than mine. After going

through each list of words, we had quite an exhaustive list, many words I

had never heard of before. Fortunately, the children's assistant from

school was also there in the class, and she validated all of the words there

because I did not think I would find them all in a dictionary. She also

showed the children the sign for each word on the list and explained the

significance of each word in sign language. For example, Emmanuele wrote:

Sia

(present tense, singular, subjunctive)

for the verb "Sapere" (to know). This example gave me the perfect chance to explain the differences in verb tenses between LIS and the oral/written

language. In LIS, there are only three tenses, the present, which is

indicated by a sign directly in front of the body; the past, indicated with a

sign going behind the shoulder; and the future, indicated by sign extending outward in front of the body.

For an exercise, I then had the children think of different verb tenses in the oral language, and we then classified these verbs within one of the three main types of verb tense in LIS. This provided an excellent review of the many verb tenses in the oral language along with comparing them to the sign language, allowing the children to connect some of the tenses to a sign when they read one in a book.

For the next activity, I wrote a series of sentences on the board with a blank in place of the indefinite article, and the children then came up and filled in the blank with the correct article. For this activity and for all activities I conducted with the children, I not only wrote on the board, but I explained the instructions in LIS along with signing everything I wrote on the board; so the children saw how one would translate between the sign and written language.

Unfortunately, indefinite articles are much more difficult in Italian than they are in English, where we only have "a," and "an." Italian actually has four different indefinite articles:

Un (masculine, singular)

Uno (masculine, singular, used before all clusters or affricates that involve [s] or [z], before the sound [j], [ps] and [pn])

Una (feminine, singular)

Un' (feminine, singular, used before a vowel)

Donatella was especially quick to volunteer the answer for each sentence well before Emmanuele, and she often informed him when he wrote the incorrect article. After we practiced with a series of sentences, the

children then created the rules for using indefinite articles, and they created a table on their sheet of the different possibilities and when to use them. Since I was teaching the written language, in the writing of the rule for "uno," I defined its use in terms of written letters: sC, z, ps, pn, and y. After completing the table, I gave them some written examples, which they moved through extremely quickly and effortlessly, leading me to believe that this was a simple exercise for them.

The next activity addressed a similar issue in the oral and written language, the use of definite articles. English is quite simple, using only the word "the," while Italian has many different articles, actually allomorphs, depending on gender, the initial sounds, which, for us, had to be expressed in terms of initial letters of the following word, and whether it is singular or plural. The different articles are:

il (masculine, singular)

lo (masculine, singular, same distribution with regard to what follows for

"uno")

l' (masculine/feminine, singular, use before a vowel)

la (feminine, singular)

i (masculine, plural)

gli (masculine, plural, same distribution with regard to what follows for "uno")

le (feminine, plural)

To introduce the lesson, I started off with the singular articles, again writing and signing sentences on the board and having the children complete the sentences with the proper articles. I then simply changed the nouns from singular to plural and asked them how the article would then change,

and they would correct it accordingly. While this seemed relatively easy for both Emmanuele and Donatella, I then asked Emmanuele his reasoning behind using "lo" or "l," which he had a difficult time explaining. When I would give him examples of his theory that did not work or intentionally show him incorrectly used definite articles, he quickly identified them as being incorrect and was able to supply the correct article.

After Emmanuele and Donatella completed the examples on the board and were asked their reasoning behind their usage of each definite article, they once again formulated the rules of use for each article and wrote them in on a chart. Interestingly, Donatella made a few errors in regards to which article to use, but after reviewing the sentences on the board, she quickly understood her mistake, which I think was caused simply by moving too quickly through the exercise. After practicing some more sentences and matching articles to their respective nouns, which both Emmanuele and Donatella did quite well, we finished up our first lesson together rather painlessly.

### **Analysis of Lesson 1**

One of the most unique qualities of this lesson and future lessons with the children was the fact that I did not have all of the answers to every question the children asked. This aspect created a dynamic between us; the lessons were not an all-knowing teacher and knowledge desiring learners, but instead we were a group of learners all meeting together specializing in different areas to teach each other something and learn together. Often, when I would not know the answer, I would ask the children what they thought the answer might be, and then we would all look up the information in a book or check with another resource, such as a certified teacher of

Italian, in search of the answer. Aside from this, there were also many times when I would spell words wrong, intentionally or not, and the children often took to proofreading every worksheet I gave them, finding it a fun task to "find the errors of the teacher." This mutual understanding that we were all learning together further lessened everyone's fears of making a mistake in the class. In this class, it was perfectly acceptable and often expected that we would all make mistakes, and that they proved to be valuable learning experiences for everyone.

The idea of everyone learning from each other was especially prevalent in the very first activity, creating words from the eight letters I provided. This activity, which I took from Morton Botel's class on forming and reforming a reading, writing and literacy curriculum for (hearing) elementary students, was designed to expose students to the phonics of words in an unconventional manner. Rather than using pictures and having students continuously write and repeat the sounds contained within a word, this activity allowed the students to instead create their own words from the sounds, or letters, provided. My goal for this lesson was to see if the students used phonological clues to construct words, or rather just created words from their memory of reading stories and their own writing. For this task, the children were extremely creative, thinking of words in the most complex irregular verb tenses, which was demonstrative of the children's reading ability since they would not have seen these words in the sign language previously. The children must have remembered reading or seeing these words before but maybe did not completely understand their meaning, as they would sometimes question the meaning of words they suggested themselves.



Teaching the definite and indefinite articles also proved a challenge. One of the most difficult aspects was determining how I could either correct the children's errors or help them realize that they had an error somewhere and encourage them to self-correct. For example, when I introduced the definite articles and had the children fill in the correct article, they often did this without error. The problem came in when I asked for their reasoning behind why they chose a specific article in each instance. For this, the children did not give solid, unbreakable theories, but they easily pointed out sentences that had the incorrect article. While this theory testing was an excellent way of developing the children's thought patterns and I know they knew the difference between what was right and what was wrong, I am still not sure if they understood the reasoning behind why certain articles always go with certain nouns. Unfortunately, I could not think of another way to address this problem with the children while they were there, so I left them with their theory that worked.

The theory that we formed was still not perfect, as the children soon discovered. There are words in Italian that for all intents and purposes would normally be considered feminine, such as *problema* (problem, masculine, singular), since it ends in *a*, which was the main indicator of femininity of a word we had established. This word, however, was an exception, as it was masculine and took the masculine article *il*. Because this word was an exception, it made the children's theory incorrect, and while I tried to explain that this was an exception they had to memorize, they were still confused by the gender of this and other similar words. Due to the exceptional nature of these words, I could not offer the children any more reasoning behind the different gender of the words, and I felt I left them

with a good amount of confusion on this topic. Furthermore, there are many nouns that end in -e, and they can be either masculine or feminine, with equal distribution. It seems that when it comes to gender assignment of nouns, memorization is the name of the game in Italian.

This first introductory lesson with the children raised many issues and problems with Deaf education, and in particular, teaching the written language. The first major challenge was the enormous difference between the two languages. The syntax of the written language is very different from that of the sign language, and knowing the intricate rules proves very difficult for Deaf children to learn because it is not utilized in regular, everyday conversations in sign. Furthermore, since I had decided to conduct all of the lessons solely in the sign language, the language that the children are most comfortable with, I was essentially teaching the children a new language using a different one. This format of teaching would be equal to teaching a speaker of English how to speak Spanish but only using English for instruction. However, it was more complicated than that. To use the language of what I was teaching would prove difficult for these children because they did not have the capability of actually hearing the language, or had a very reduced version of it, which is, of course, the problem for children in the oral approach. These children often missed the articles or often lip read a different word in the oral language, as the articles often blend together with other words very easily (for a discussion of these blends, or portmanteaus, please see the second lesson). The children also often tried and memorize everything that they saw on the lips without understanding the reasoning why it was actually spoken. This was consistent

with what I have observed elsewhere with Deaf children in either oral or bi-bi settings.

Although the learning or reviewing of indefinite and definite articles seemed to not be the most difficult task for Emmanuele and Donatella, these are often difficult for Deaf children to understand. There are so many different articles and exceptions for nouns that one has to spend a considerable amount of time studying the language before completely understanding their usage even if one is hearing. An even greater problem for studying the written language is the large number of words that do not exist in the sign language, with definite and indefinite articles being examples of this. Because there is no sign for these articles or other words, Deaf children's only exposure to these items is through the oral or written language. Due to the lack of these words in the sign language, it was difficult to teach them with an all sign teaching approach. Instead, I relied a great deal on the written language for this exercise, writing out all of the articles and the rules the children suggested. To further emphasize the use of the articles, when I had the children sign me their responses for completing the sentences on the board, I had them fingerspell the article. While this was slightly difficult and not natural in the sign language, I feel that overall this approach worked extremely well and the children learned a considerable amount from this lesson.

## Lesson 2

For this lesson, I once again had both Emmanuele and Donatella, and I started off with a game. The game entailed me signing a phrase and the children had to write the phrase on the board. The trick was that each phrase had a definite or indefinite article which the children had to be sure

was included in their sentence. I kept the phrases simple as the main objective was to see if Emmanuele and Donatella could correctly use the articles in each phrase. The children seemed to have a lot of fun doing this (as they seemed to for every lesson we had) as I had them write their phrases on the whiteboards at the front of the room (there is just something about writing on the board that children love).

We then reviewed the phrases, and the children did a phenomenal job of placing the correct articles in each phrase. As we were going over the phrases however, we encountered other issues that I was able to turn into "teachable moments" for the children. For example, Donatella wrote:

dov'è

(dov'= "where," interrogative)

(è= "be" 3rd person singular, present, indicative)

on her paper for one of her interrogatives, which means *where is*. This is

the contracted form of the regular:

dove è

(dove= "where," interrogative)

and either form is correct in the written language. Emmanuele wrote the uncontracted form, and when he saw Donatella's contracted form, he questioned it and thought it was wrong. I saw this as an opportunity for Donatella to teach Emmanuele about the uses of the contraction, and why she chose to use it in her sentence. I also pointed out that when Emmanuele is reading a passage, he may see the contracted form of the interrogative and verb, and he could then identify its meaning.

When we reviewed the phrases, we further compared the written language to the sign language, pointing out the differences between the two,

such as sentence structure, verb formation, and the subject indicated in each phrase. We also pointed out how the person of the subject is indicated in the verb in the written language via agreement inflection but that we needed to indicate the person separately in sign language.

The next topic covered was that of possessives, which I thought were going to be relatively easy for the children since they are used in the sign language. However, a definite article is used prior to the possessive in most cases, with there of course being exceptions. To introduce the lesson, I picked up objects in the room, and had the children write down the phrases on the board based on who I was assigning ownership of each object to.

While the children seemed to understand the use of possessives and the definite article while using examples and writing them on the board, when it came to summarizing everything into a theory, the children struggled once again. The main cause of confusion seemed to be the difference between singular and plural possessives, but a little more practice appeared to clean things up. Because possessives in Italian agree with the noun they possess in number and gender and thus, do not reflect the number or gender of the referent of the possessive, learning the exact formulation for describing the possession of something is often a very difficult task. This system is complicated for anyone, hearing or Deaf, to learn in a second language, unless their first language utilizes the same system, which is clearly not the case for Emmanuele and Donatella.

Once again, one of the hardest parts of the lesson was trying to explain the exception to the theories we created. This was the case when the possessives referred to singular family members. In this case, one does not use an article before the possessive. Donatella seemed to have

understood this strange exception, while Emmanuele seemed to struggle with it. To help ease confusion, we used examples with Emmanuele's brother, sister, and mom, whom we called in from the other room to show the relation between the four of them and to practice sentences of this nature.

The children then worked on examples that I had prepared for them. Upon reviewing them as a class, I discovered many errors in the possessive used in each sentence. Often, the children did not have the possessive agreeing in gender and number with the possessed noun either explicitly or implicitly in the phrase. To reinforce the person, after I had the children orally complete the sentences, I had them sign the sentence as well, as

there was a greater emphasis on the person in the sign language, and making the text-to-sign connection seemed to considerably help the children.

After the introduction to possessives, we did a brief review of definite and indefinite articles, which seemed to cause some confusion among the children. For Emmanuele, he wanted to use definite articles for all of the phrases, even though there were some phrases that clearly dictated the use of an indefinite article only. After we reviewed the phrases, with the children signing their responses and highlighting the definite or indefinite article by fingerspelling its place in the sentence, Emmanuele seemed to have a better handle on when to use indefinite versus definite articles.

The final topic of this lesson was prepositions, which are quite complicated in Italian primarily because they often combine with the article that follows, creating a new combination that is often pronounced and spelled differently, known as portmanteaus. For example:

Di (of) + il (the) = del (of the)

In (in) + il (the) = nel (in the)

(While these portmanteaus are morphologically analyzable as such, I am not claiming this is a phonological analysis.)

For an introduction to this topic, I wrote a series of phrases on the board in which I did not combine the preposition and the definite article, and I asked the children what was wrong with the phrases. Emmanuele and Donatella both offered to correct the phrases, and I had them sign the phrase while fingerspelling the preposition/article combination. We then created a giant table with all of the prepositions and all of the articles they combine with, and while we started to fill in the first row together, it turned more into a race of the children trying to fill in all of the prepositions first. After completing the tables, we all signed the spellings of each preposition together before it was time for the children to leave.

### **Analysis of Lesson 2**

For this lesson, I was certainly more familiar with the children, their abilities, and my lesson activities. I also had much more confidence teaching this lesson after seeing how well the first lesson had went, and this was clearly reflected in the children, given the high caliber of excitement they had for the lesson. The mothers of the children, who stayed in the room with the children for the first lesson, were absent for this lesson, making it much more easy to conduct the lesson without having to answer their questions, along with me feeling less worried about making mistakes in front of them. This more relaxed atmosphere clearly shone through as the children had an immense amount of fun and learned a lot of useful tools for the written language, even though it was not the most exciting material. Although it was rather mundane and boring material for learning and

reviewing, the children's combined energy kept us all going throughout the lesson.

Starting the lesson with a game again turned out to be an excellent decision, as this set a really positive tone for the entire lesson. The game served as an excellent review mechanism, making sure that the children would not forget the material covered in the previous lesson. I made it my goal to make sure that the game either reviewed material from the previous lesson or, as the number of lessons increased, incorporated material from numerous previous lessons.

The game also allowed the children further exposure to the sign language in instruction. We were able to highlight the differences once again between the sign and the written language, and the game actually served as a "translation task" for the children. The children were translating from what I was signing to the written language, which required a fair amount of work given the major differences discussed earlier. I felt that by highlighting the differences between the two languages as much as possible, the children would be able to more clearly see the finer points of the written language, hopefully better committing them to memory.

Another aspect of the lesson that the children seemed to really enjoy was when I would make mistakes in my writing, whether they were intentional or unintentional. In the case of the prepositions being uncombined with the articles, I made an intentional mistake that I wanted the children to correct. Of course, there were also other mistakes, most commonly spelling, on my activities that I prepared for them or when I was writing on the board, and the children always corrected these with a smile. This aspect of the class, where everyone makes mistakes, further showed



the children that I was by far not perfect in my Italian, and that the children could in many cases play "teacher" in the class, since we were all learners in our learning community. By giving the children the opportunity to teach me or each other built their confidence at the same time as their knowledge base, and showed that everyone was a teacher.

Teaching the prepositions posed a problem similar to that of teaching the articles in that they do not exist in the sign language. For example, a sentence in the written language:

"Sono cresciuto a Roma"

(Sono= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, present tense, indicative; cresciuto= "grow up," past tense, indicative; a= in; Roma= Rome)

"I grew up in Rome"

would look like this in the sign language:

IO-CRESCERE-ROMA-IO

where there is a lack of the preposition "a" in the sign language.

Furthermore, in the written example:

"L'albero era sotto la luna"

(L'= the; albero= tree; era= "be" 3<sup>rd</sup> person, past tense, indicative; sotto= under/below; la=the; luna= moon)

"The tree was under the moon"

appears as such in the sign language:

PASSATO-LUNAI-ALBEROj

where the spatial location of i is above the spatial location of j, hence defeating the purpose of using "sotto" in the sign language.

When the prepositions were further complicated by the combination with a definite article, the lesson turned into something that could only be taught

well through writing, so I relied much more on the written language for this part of the lesson, resorting to fingerspelling some of the combinations when necessary. One of the main points that greatly helped in the teaching of the prepositions was the children's undying enthusiasm for the material, which I had yet to try and understand. Regardless, the children were effectively learning the written language and having fun doing it at the same time!

Although attitude is irrelevant in first language acquisition, attitude makes a world of a difference in learning a second language, which clearly benefited the children in the amount of material they learned, along with how well they learned it.

### **Lesson 3**

This third lesson was a private lesson with just Emmanuele, and I decided to review a topic that I was pretty sure Donatella already had a good handle on, irregular verbs in the present tense. Since Donatella already knew these verbs well, she would not feel as if she had missed something when she returned. When I was observing Emmanuele in his regular classroom at school, I noticed that he was having trouble writing in the present tense some of the irregular verbs, and since I did not think it would be that difficult a lesson for him, I decided that a quick review of the main verbs with him alone would prove beneficial for him.

I first devised a list of ten of the most frequently used irregular verbs and listed the six possible subjects for each verb. The sheet was then just a matter of filling in the appropriate form of each verb, which I thought should not be that difficult, and it was relatively easy for the first four verbs on the sheet:

"Avere" (have, infinitive)

"Adare" (go, infinitive)

"Essere" (be, infinitive)

"Volere" (want, infinitive)

Certainly, these verbs are among the most commonly used in the language, no doubt in both the oral and the sign. For these verbs, I had no doubt that Emmanuele often saw them in print while reading or heard/lip read them so many times in conversation that he was very familiar with all of the different forms of each verb.

We then reached another very commonly used verb:

"Potere" (be able to, infinitive)

For this verb, I thought that Emmanuele would have relatively little trouble, given that this verb was very frequently used. This was not the case. After correctly writing the first person singular form of the verb, Emmanuele seemed lost and did not know where to go from there. Since this activity was meant to be just a warm up and used as a reference sheet for the exercises, I had little in the way prepared to help realize the correct form of the verb in the second person singular. While I tried to sign examples using the verb in a phrase, I quickly realized that this would be of no help at all seeing that the sign language does not have different verb forms. In the end, I ended up using the oral language to say the verb in a sentence and then followed it up with fingerspelling the verb form.

This problem of not knowing the second person singular form for *potere* continued for all of the other forms of the verb, and also continued for all the other irregular verbs. For these, I felt I could do little more than saying the verb in the oral language and then fingerspelling the form for him.

After finishing our chart of the verb forms, I then had numerous examples in which Emmanuele could use the different verbs to complete each phrase. This task, similar to completing the verb chart, proved to be very difficult for him, especially in trying to identify the correct form of each verb. In other instances, Emmanuele did not even figure out the subject of the sentence, such as when I used a person's name or a group of people. After much struggle and misunderstanding and my attempts at clarification, we made it through the phrases I had planned when it was time to go.

### **Analysis of Lesson 3**

I saw this lesson as an excellent chance to give Emmanuele one-on-one attention, as I feel that was the way that he learned best, which is the case with almost any child you meet. I also viewed this as an excellent opportunity to help catch Emmanuele up on some of the areas that I was hesitant to cover with both him and Donatella present, as she was noticeably further ahead in her learning than he was. Working solely with Emmanuele allowed us to go at a slower pace, making sure that he completely understood everything before we moved on.

After having this individual lesson with just Emmanuele, I realized how varied the dynamics of our group lessons are when Donatella was present. Because Donatella was ahead of Emmanuele, she often had the answer before Emmanuele did, and she was not afraid to share it with everyone, giving Emmanuele the answer before he had a chance to figure it out on his own. When they were working individually, Emmanuele always acted as if he needed to rush through the assignment to finish it in the same amount of time as Donatella, causing him to make many foolish errors in his

work. Although there seem to be many negative side effects to having Donatella together with Emmanuele because of their different developmental levels, it often benefited them both as Donatella could take the role of teacher and help Emmanuele better understand something that he made a mistake on (Vygotsky 1978). Because of both the positive and negative benefits of group and individual learning, I believed that a mixture of both was often the best approach, giving each child the amount of individual time necessary to ensure understanding while at the same time having plenty of peer interaction, building their learning through social interactions.

The subject of this lesson was present tense of irregular verbs. I thought this topic would be rather easy and a good review for Emmanuele seeing that these verbs appear everywhere in the oral and written language. I did forget however, that the different forms of each verb are not represented in the sign language, but the subject is instead designated by a sign signaling the subject involved. For example, a conjugation of an irregular verb would look like this in the written language:

*Avere* "to have"

Ho ("have" 1<sup>st</sup> person, singular, present, indicative)

Hai ("have" 2<sup>nd</sup> person, singular, present, indicative)

Ha ("have" 3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular, present, indicative)

Abbiamo ("have" 1<sup>st</sup> person, plural, present, indicative)

Avete ("have" 2<sup>nd</sup> person, plural, present, indicative)

Hanno ("have" 3<sup>rd</sup> person, plural, present, indicative)

Clearly there is very little relationship between the conjugated forms of the verb and the infinitive form in speech. In writing, the relationship is even

more tenuous because you have a written 'h,' which is not heard in the oral language but does pop up in a seemingly random way in the written language. In the sign language, one only needs to know the uninflected form because the subject is indicated by another sign and not by agreement on the verb. In the oral and written language, the subject need not be stated as a separate entity since it is incorporated into the verb agreement morpheme. With this being a large difference between the sign and the written language, there was no doubt why Emmanuele was confused trying to determine all the different verb forms.

Every verb changes forms for each subject (that is, the agreement morpheme is phonetically robust, and we hear the person and number of the subject). Many verbs are regular verbs that follow a regular pattern based on the conjugation class of the verb, which is reflected in the stem vowel seen in the infinitive ending of the verb. However, given the large number of commonly used irregular verbs, learning and memorizing each individual form can be a very challenging task, especially for the Deaf child who does not use these different forms in his or her everyday speech. Even though this topic was a challenge for Emmanuele, his lack of knowledge of these verbs in a very basic form made me very sad, realizing how far behind he was from other children his age. Most children learned these verb forms in first or second grade at the latest, and Emmanuele did not know them at the end of fifth grade going in to sixth grade. These verbs are essential for communicating the most basic ideas in the written and oral language, and I could only hope that he would be able to identify them more easily in context or think of them while he was writing a composition.

A major concern for me while Emmanuele was trying to fill in the different forms of each verb was how little help I could offer him. Since I expected him to know all of these, I had little supplementary material at hand or knowledge in the way of helping him. I could not have used the written language in this case, as it would have simply given Emmanuele the verb form without having him really think about it. And while I was using the sign language all along to communicate and instruct Emmanuele, here is one point where the sign language failed me, as there was no possible way he could have figured out the oral or written form of a particular verb since there is no differentiation in LIS. This left me with the worst option of all: using the oral language. I regretted using the oral language then and I still regret that I used it now, as it just seemed so unnatural for Emmanuele to be expected to try and understand what I was saying. Regardless, I used the form of each verb when he was stuck on in a sentence, highlighting the verb. Emmanuele then repeated the verb, and then he and I fingerspelled it together to make sure we had it correct.

I wish I had used a different method for trying to help Emmanuele with the verb forms he did not know, but I could not think of another way I should have done it. What could I have done differently but still drive home his understanding of the unique verb forms? This question was persistent throughout all of my future lessons with different verb tenses, particularly because there is nothing in the sign language even remotely analogous to the verbal agreement morphemes in the oral language. Often, the location of the starting and ending points varies based on who is the agent and who is the recipient in the sign language, but here location is a spatial anchor of reference. Location does not indicate the properties of the referent, such

as singular or plural, first, second, or third person. Agreement in the oral language is purely a morphological and syntactic phenomenon, leaving very little to say semantically about agreement, which was why resorted to fingerspelling the verbs for Emmanuele.

One other slightly sad point occurred while Emmanuele was working on the sentences, filling in the correct form of each verb. The problem Emmanuele had was that he could not identify the subject of many of the sentences I had written, even though it was often clear in the writing. This task proved most challenging when a person's name was used as the subject. Emmanuele could not connect that this required the third person singular verb form, and he would often insert the first person singular form instead. Why this part of the exercise was a problem and why Emmanuele used the first person singular form confused me. Did he use the "I" form of the verb when in doubt because that was what he was most familiar with, always using it for himself when writing or speaking? And why did a proper noun in place of a subject marker such as "he" confuse him so much? A person's name is often referred to in the sign language while signing, but does Emmanuele not represent that person's name with the third person in the sign language?

#### **Lesson 4**

This class, like all of the previous classes, began with a game. This game served as a review of the prepositions we had already covered. For the game, I fingerspelled a definite article and a preposition, and the children wrote down the combined word the two created. They seemed to have no trouble doing this, and it was a fun start to the class.

I then wanted to continue work on the prepositions since we did not cover them in as much detail as I would have liked. I also wanted to review



other areas we worked on so far to ensure a thorough understanding of all the finer points. For continuing work on the prepositions, I had the children help me complete the table of prepositions as they combine with the different articles, and then complete some sample sentences with the prepositions missing. On the exercises, the children moved through them extremely quickly. Emmanuele must not have read the instructions or did not pay careful enough attention as he was working because as he filled in many of the phrases, he just wrote the article or the preposition. I reminded him to pay close attention to the phrases and determine both pieces he needed to complete each phrase. He then raced back to his seat and filled in another answer, although not always the correct one. I then came back to the subject of possessives for the singular person, and quickly reviewed them before introducing possessives for more than one person. For this, as in previous lessons with possessives, I used props and people around the room to create phrases which I signed and then the children wrote on the board. After working out some other phrases, we signed them to each other and fingerspelled the articles before the possessive if necessary.

#### **Analysis of Lesson 4**

This lesson, which served primarily as review, turned out to be beneficial for both Emmanuele and Donatella. In the sign language, many signs, phrases, and whole responses in conversations are repeated to ensure understanding of the person you are communicating with. This same format, of repeating material already covered in previous lessons, also seems to be beneficial and even expected with the children. The technique of repetition is also not only restricted to helping Deaf children learn certain material;

this is universal for all students learning any topic, whether it is English, Italian, science, math, or history.

One of the glaring problems that alarmed me during this lesson was just how fast the children tried to finish their work. Granted, most of the material we covered was review, still they often speeded through as if they did not need to give the work any thought. With Emmanuele, he tried to finish the work as fast as he could, and he would often either forget to write the article or the preposition that was meant to be used in a given phrase. I was not sure if he was doing this to try and match the speed of Donatella, if he just did not read the instructions, or he did not understand what was expected of him, because he made many mistakes that he should not have made. I felt that since the children were moving so quickly through the lessons, when they did not complete something correctly, they did not understand why the way they wrote it was wrong and instead just wanted to change it to the "right answer" as quickly as they could. I felt that since Emmanuele was trying to match Donatella's speed, he did not realize the importance of using the article and the preposition together in each case.

The children seemed to understand the plural-person possessives very well, with little trouble in our group examples and in the written exercises. The plural-person possessives were very easy to represent in the sign language as there is a specific sign for each one, which made teaching them much easier than other concepts not represented in the sign language, which certainly showed in the children's excellent understanding of them.

Overall, this review lesson served as a good place to revisit all of the finer points of the oral and written Italian language, which provided an excellent base for future lessons in verb tenses and more complicated

phrases. Having the basic tools in each phrase seemed to be the best place to start for these children.

### Lesson 5

This was another lesson with just Emmanuele, as Donatella was home sick with a fever. The game we first played was a review of the present progressive verb tense, which looks like this:

Sto parlando

(Sto= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, present tense, indicative; parlando= "talking" gerund, indicative)

"I am talking"

Since the present progressive was the first official verb tense that I taught the children, I was not quite sure how to go about it. Since this verb tense served in an experimental role, I decided to rely mostly on the written language for instruction, writing the verb tense on the verb and asking the children to identify it while I explained its significance in sign language.

Using what I learned from teaching the present progressive tense, I began teaching the past participle to Emmanuele. The past participle follows the auxiliary verb "avere" or "essere" in any tense. The perfect aspect is the most commonly used form for expressing completed actions in the past, and Emmanuele has had some exposure to this in his regular class. Because Emmanuele had previous exposure to this verb form, I decided to sign some phrases, indicating the sign for PAST at the beginning of each sentence, and then have Emmanuele write the phrase on the board. Doing this, Emmanuele did something really interesting:

Estavo lavorando.

(Estavo= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person, singular, imperfect, indicative; lavorando= "working," gerund, indicative)

"I was working."

Emmanuele used the present progressive model (using "Stare" + gerund verb) using the imperfect tense of "stare" ("be" infinitive) and then using the gerund ending. The funny thing was that this was an actual verb form, the past progressive, which signified a continuous past action, but I do not even think that Emmanuele had any idea that he was using a different, correct form!

We then reviewed the present tense of the verbs "avere" and "essere," which were required as part of the present participle construction. We then tried to hash out the formula necessary for using the present participle, which was quite a challenge, even though Emmanuele knew how to use the verb form correctly. I then tried to change how I wrote the skeleton for the formula, and he still did not understand. Finally, I used sign language for further explanation, after which Emmanuele seemed to understand what I was asking of him.

We then began the huge task of trying to identify all of the irregular present participle verbs, of which there were plenty. I had a feeling that these would be difficult for Emmanuele as the present tense irregular verbs posed quite a challenge for him, and I was right. After we identified all of the irregular verbs, we tried some exercises using them, which we did together because Emmanuele did not seem to be able to fully grasp the concept of using the correct verb form.

**Analysis of Lesson 5**

The absence of Donatella at this lesson certainly proved to be advantageous once again for Emmanuele, as he was significantly further behind Donatella in basic concepts in the written language. At the same time, I specially tailored the lesson to fit his needs and not worry about going slow for Donatella or too fast for Emmanuele, or Emmanuele race through his work like he was doing previously.

I also discovered that teaching verb forms in the written language is extremely difficult using just the sign language, particularly because the Deaf child may have no concept of what different verb forms even are, seeing as there is no correlation whatsoever to the sign language. In sign language, there are three ways to indicate time frames: the past, by using a sign at the beginning of the phrase to indicate how long ago something happened in the past; the present, which is just regular signing in front of the body; and the future, indicated by a sign moving away from the body to show how far away something is, which, like the past, occurs at the beginning of the phrase. By using these three signs, signers never have to worry about changing their verbs while they are signing, whereas in the oral and written language, they have to consciously think which verb form is appropriate in each context, given that there are close to 20 different verb forms to indicate time in Italian.

Due to the difficult nature of teaching verb forms, I learned that the best way to expose the children to them was through the use of plenty of examples, especially those in the written form. Also, for Emmanuele, making the connection between the written and the sign language, showing him both forms, was helpful. Another principle that I have carried over from previous lessons was the use of repetition in examples, in exercises, and in review. It

almost always benefited Emmanuele by reviewing examples we had just completed a second time, having him summarize everything in the sign language.

Another technique that I tried during this lesson was working side-by-side with Emmanuele on a set of exercises. In this case, I served as the "more knowledgeable peer" that Vygotsky (1978) often describes in his theory of learning, the Zone of Proximal Development. Emmanuele had the opportunity to work on something that he would normally not be able to complete on his own, but since I was there to help guide and work with him, he was able to accomplish this otherwise difficult task. This more difficult

level, according to Vygotsky, is where real learning occurs.

When Emmanuele was working independently, I also tried not to

interfere, allowing him to make mistakes on his work before we would review

the entire exercise together. With this approach, I felt that Emmanuele

could realize on his own what he did wrong and better learn from it, seeing

that the way he did it was not the best way to go about a certain problem.

In this format, Emmanuele was not told the right way to do something, which

he may or may not remember, but he saw the wrong way and knew not to do

it that way again.

## Lesson 6

Today was another lesson with just Emmanuele, which gave us the opportunity to further work on the present participle verb form. To review the irregular verbs in a fun way from the previous lesson, we played a simple review game where I signed a verb and Emmanuele wrote down its present participle form.

For the next activity, I decided Emmanuele was ready for something more advanced, so I offered him a reading, which was a conversation between two people about their vacations last summer. Since the conversation topic was about completed actions in the past, all of the verbs were in the present participle form, which we highlighted throughout the reading. Emmanuele and I first signed the conversation together; he took the role of one person and I the other. I then gave Emmanuele a list of questions I prepared based on the reading for him to answer. Despite having signed the conversation already, Emmanuele relied heavily on re-readings of the article to find the answers. Additionally, Emmanuele often confused the destinations with the different people, matching the wrong place with the wrong person. After we reviewed the reading a second time, I had Emmanuele rewrite his responses. Through all of this, Emmanuele did quite well using the present participle in his answers. Once he had all of his answers, I had him retell me the story in his own words using the answers he provided.

I then tried another new, interactive activity with Emmanuele: we tried a conversation set in the past. I would sign a phrase of something I did at some point in the past, and he wrote what I signed using the present participle, and then he would sign something and I wrote it. We then exchanged papers and got to correct each other's work. When I reviewed Emmanuele's work, I noticed two mistakes that he repeated in most of the phrases he wrote:

1. He often forgot to use the present tense of "avere" or "essere" before the verb with the present participle.

2. He often used the wrong form of the verb in his phrases, mostly using the "I" form in the phrases where he should have used the "you" form, since he was not writing about what he did yesterday, but what I did instead.

Upon reviewing Emmanuele's work and asking him why he used certain subjects and why he did not use a different one, he did not understand the difference in what I was pointing out. For example, when I signed

MIRIAM E IO

he should have written:

Miriam e tu

or

Miriam e Joe

on his paper since he was describing the story of other people and not himself. In this case, he should have used the *voi* ("you all" 2<sup>nd</sup> person, plural) form of the verb "essere," but instead he used the *noi* ("we" 1<sup>st</sup> person, plural) form of the verb since he interpreted it as involving himself.

We then arrived at the issue of transitive verbs in Italian and using them with the present participle. In the case of the present participle, transitive verbs always use the auxiliary verb "essere" and place the reflexive pronoun before the auxiliary verb, that is, in proclitic position. I then used examples of the transitive verb *svegliarsi* ("to wake up" infinitive, reflexive):

Mi sono svegliato

(Mi= 1<sup>st</sup> person singular reflexive pronoun; sono= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person, singular, present, indicative; svegliato= "wake up" past participle)

"I woke up."



(This verb does not have a regular transitive interpretation, but instead has an inchoative reading, or a change of state reading in "waking up.")

Emmanuele and I then thought of different people and we used them to try all of the possible subjects for the verb. As with previous verbs, I signed a phrase using a reflexive verb, such as the verb "lavarsi" ("to wash oneself" infinitive, reflexive) in the perfect aspect and had Emmanuele write the phrase on the board using "essere" and the reflexive pronoun. After we had the chance to practice a few of these verbs, it was time for Emmanuele to depart for the day.

### **Analysis of Lesson 6**

This lesson introduced some new activities to Emmanuele, which allowed him to apply what he had learned to real world situations. The reading passage I gave Emmanuele was the first of its kind that he had seen, and it helped him not only understand the written word but also see the flow of a normal oral conversation at the same time without the difficulty of having to lip read it. By having an oral conversation in print and then signing the same conversation, Emmanuele was able to easily point out the syntactic differences between the two languages. Interestingly, even though we signed the conversation together, Emmanuele did not seem to comprehend, which caused him to have to look back repeatedly at the written conversation to answer the questions.

One of Emmanuele's most interesting responses was when we tried writing our own conversation, going from the sign to the written language. While I used the first person subject to describe what I did previously, Emmanuele did not account for the change in perspective when he was writing about what I did. Instead of writing "Tu" or "Joe" for the subject,

he used the first person "Io" in his phrases. When I read his responses, it read like he was saying that he did all of my activities previously, rather than designating another person. I am not sure if Emmanuele could not make the transition between subjects or he did not realize he was even making the mistake.

Emmanuele's confusion of the subjects of each sentence when he wrote what he saw may have had something to do with how he used sign language and how he was being educated. In school, Emmanuele often did not use the sign language when he did sign, but instead he used Signed Exact Italian, which is quite different from the actual sign language. The

difference between the two forms caused Emmanuele to sometimes not understand the characteristics of the sign language. One such instance of Emmanuele not understanding how the sign language worked was evident in how he signed phrases in the perfect aspect. Rather than using a sign to indicate the past and then simply using the sign for the verb as in LIS, Emmanuele signed the subject, signed the present tense of the verb "avere" or "essere," made the sign to indicate the past, and then signed the next verb. Doing this was much more confusing, having to do many more signs than are actually necessary. This expanded method signs the spoken language word for word.

I believed that this method of signing exact Italian not only comes from Emmanuele's formal schooling but from his family at the same time, which heavily emphasized that he used the spoken language with them. Emmanuele's father placed especially heavy emphasis on the spoken language, and since his parents were not native signers, they did not easily understand the natural sign language. Because Emmanuele's goal was to try

and communicate as easily as possible with his family and essentially the hearing world, his schooling and his environment was conditioning him to not learn the natural sign language, but instead learn how to sign exact Italian. Since Signed Exact Italian is not a natural language, it is much more difficult for Emmanuele to learn since it is not easily acquired naturally. Signed Exact Italian creates further difficulties for Emmanuele as he continues to try and obtain as much valuable linguistic input as possible.

### Lesson 7

To start off this lesson, Emmanuele did a brief review of reflexive verbs in the present perfect aspect. Normally this would have been considered the "game" activity that we played at the beginning of the lesson, but since it was not officially planned as that, it took off in a different direction. I planned to just sign the phrases and have Emmanuele write them down, but it turned into each of us signing phrases for the other person to write, which turned out to be more fun and interactive for the both of us.

After the game, I gave Emmanuele a worksheet with the verbs missing to give him more practice with the perfect aspect. This exercise proved quite simple for him, as he only made a few mistakes with the irregular verbs. The funny thing was Emmanuele still got really excited when he would correctly answer a phrase, even though he was the only one there and I felt that this was not extremely difficult material for him. Granted, the enthusiasm certainly never hurt during the lessons!

The next activity I tried with Emmanuele was a little more daring. I gave Emmanuele a letter one would send to his friends with the verbs missing, and he would fill in the verbs in the perfect aspect using the list of

verbs at the bottom of the page. I did the first sentence together with him so that he would understand how the activity would work, but after doing the second sentence with him, I could tell that he still did not completely understand. The activity appeared too difficult for him to complete on his own as he could not decide which verb belonged on which blank, even though I explained to him that some verbs could go in multiple places. Regardless, Emmanuele still wrote verbs in phrases that made sense that he ended up erasing and putting in other verbs, only to erase them again. I could clearly see Emmanuele become frustrated with the task, so before he reached his quitting point, I intervened, helping him on some of the phrases so that he

would not give up. We then continued with some more examples of the reflexive verbs in the perfect aspect, but we did not limit our discussion to only what he or I did in the previous week. Instead, we talked about famous individuals and groups of people, along with other plural-person subjects. This activity was fundamentally similar to the letter to a friend we tried before, as there were phrases that required the correct reflexive verb to be filled in from a list at the bottom of the page. As Emmanuele read through the phrases, he again expressed confusion over the choice of different verbs for each sentence. I once again tried to show him that multiple answers worked, but this advice seemed to go unheeded as he continued to struggle throughout the exercise.

### **Analysis of Lesson 7**

Emmanuele's confusion during the new activities in this lesson was the result of a demand for a higher level of thinking and comprehension of the written language. The game provided a nice introduction as it not only

reviewed material from previous lessons, but introduced the material for the topic of the lesson, which gave him a warm-up. During the game, for the phrases I wrote from Emmanuele's signing, I would intentionally insert errors into my writing for Emmanuele to correct. As before, Emmanuele loved to find errors that I made, where he was the teacher and corrected me the student on silly spelling errors or larger content errors, of which he was being instructed in. In an effort to try and help Emmanuele identify errors, I was hoping to have Emmanuele recognize what was wrong and not make those mistakes in his own writing. This technique of identifying the errors worked to a certain degree, as Emmanuele did not seem to make the same mistakes that he corrected in my sentences.

While Emmanuele wrote down the phrases that I signed, he once again made the subject error, making himself the subject of the sentences rather than me. In the game however, I could not tell if this was a critical error or not, as he wrote exactly what I signed. Because I did not explicitly say to write the sentences according to his perspective, what he wrote was technically correct, writing exactly what he had seen. The idea of perspective is not only confusing in the sign language, but in the oral language as well. Even though I pointed at myself to indicate myself as the subject, I would have used a verb in the "Io" form if I had spoken the phrase, still requiring Emmanuele to change from the first person to the second or third person. Interestingly though, when I pointed at him, designating him as the subject, he wrote the phrase:

"Mi sono lavato alle 7:30"

(Mi= 1<sup>st</sup> person singular reflexive pronoun; sono= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person, singular, present, indicative; lavato= "wash" past participle; alle= "at")

"I washed myself at 7:30."

Emmanuele understood the subject in this phrase, himself, and yet he used the same subject when I talked about what I had done. Certainly he had some confusion about when to use which subject still, or maybe he just thought that the first person form was always acceptable since that seems to be his preferred form, the one he used most often; I believed it was the form that he is most familiar with, which is why he uses it so frequently.

The fill-in-the-blank reading comprehension activities I gave him during this lesson further showed Emmanuele's need for more work in the area of written comprehension. Even though this was the first lesson in

which I gave Emmanuele a formal reading and had him complete it, I do not feel that it was unusually hard or difficult for his level. Granted, this activity was more difficult than previous activities in which Emmanuele had isolated sentences in which he could easily fill in a verb. This activity required a continuous, logical flow, in which certain formations and answers would affect future ones, requiring foresight or the need to go back and recheck his work.

The format of this activity, in which Emmanuele had to complete an entire passage with words, was very similar to the format used in many reading classrooms in the United States, along with many standardized tests. The format of the activity was designed not only to increase the child's comprehension but prepare him for the standardized tests in reading at the same time. Many of Emmanuele's classmates were not exposed to this variety of reading comprehension, which may reflect negatively on their scores in reading comprehension on tests that use this format. By having exposed Emmanuele to this format prior to the test, he stands a better

chance of doing well on it given his familiarity with the format and its expectations.

Finally, while this was a difficult activity, Vygotsky (1978) would fully support this approach, as Emmanuele was once again in his zone of proximal development. By working with me, a more capable peer, Emmanuele was able to conquer a task that he would not have been able to complete on his own. The objective of this task was to try and increase Emmanuele's reading comprehension as much as possible using real-world reading selections. As almost everything in the written language that Emmanuele will encounter in his life, it will not appear in isolated sentences, but instead in a large, paragraph form or passage. I felt that Emmanuele had moved up to this level, as he was ready to encounter more difficult passages even if it was with my assistance.

### **Lesson 8**

For this lesson, I had planned to start off with a game in which I would sign a phrase with a verb missing and the children could complete the phrase with the correct verb. Unfortunately, this idea proved much more difficult to try and implement in real-life. After realizing the complexity and confusion of the game, I decided to sign phrases and had the children write them using the perfect aspect.

Donatella was present for this lesson, and she picked up right away on using the perfect aspect in her phrases that she wrote. Of course, Donatella had just a few errors, when she used "avere" in place of "essere" for the auxiliary verb. This choice between "essere" and "avere" can be confusing as there are instances where one verb would normally be used but the other one is actually used. Unfortunately, the use of the auxiliary verb

is not highly predictable; transitive verbs normally use "avere" as an auxiliary verb, but reflexive verbs use "essere," while intransitive verbs can also use "avere" or "essere" for an auxiliary verb. Donatella also made just a few minor errors using the reflexive verbs in the past participle, while Emmanuele did an impeccable job, clearly remembering everything from the previous lessons. At the end of the game, Emmanuele had all twelve of his phrases correct, which was absolutely amazing for him. Donatella also did very well; she only confused the subject of the sentence, often making an error in plurality (using the plural subject when in fact only one person was signed).

The second activity involved open-ended sentences, in which I started sentences by writing about a point of time in the past and the children had to complete the sentence with what they did then. Some examples included:

Tre giorni fa  
(Tre= "three"; giorni= "days"; fa= "ago")

"Three days ago"

Ieri ("yesterday")

"Yesterday"

Natale scorso (Natale= "Christmas"; scorso= "last")

"Last Christmas"

For this activity, the children wrote their responses rather quickly. They seemed to have no problem with this, as they made no errors in their responses.

Our next activity was more of a scavenger hunt. I gave each child a section of the newspaper and had them search for all the verbs in the tenses we had already learned. The children circled the verbs and then



wrote them on the board and we reviewed them together, both in the way they were written and their infinitive.

The final activity was by far the most advanced activity I had yet planned for the children. I proposed a free writing assignment to the children, allowing them to write about anything they wanted as long as it happened in the past. I told them they could write about themselves, other people, or make up an entire story and use fictional characters. Emmanuele jumped right into this activity, and he wrote for a solid twenty minutes before it was time for him to go. Donatella, on the other hand, started off writing pretty well but then stopped after a few sentences and did not write anymore. She then sat idle for about fifteen minutes while both Emmanuele and I were writing our stories. For the last few minutes, I wanted to engage Donatella in some sort of writing activity, so I started to write some phrases with the verb missing and had her fill them in using the perfect aspect. To make it interesting and fun, I told her we should write goofy, funny phrases, which she seemed to like the idea of, which we did for about five minutes until they both left for the day.

### **Analysis of Lesson 8**

The game started off very roughly, as I thought the children would be able to clearly understand what I was signing even though I was not using the verb. Verbs though, are extremely important to understanding a phrase in the sign language, and my phrases looked very strange, even to me when I knew which sign I had dropped. Additionally, in the phrases the children did understand, there were many possible answers that they could have filled in, which made it much more difficult to review and correct in the end. To

simplify, I used a typical game format that I knew had worked well in a previous lesson, simply signing a phrase and having the children write it.

This lesson saw the dynamics change between Emmanuele, Donatella, and myself. Normally, Donatella often helps Emmanuele when he is stuck or confused, but in this case, it was Emmanuele who came to Donatella's rescue, helping her in the instances that she did not understand. Although I expected Emmanuele to have some patience and offer Donatella some guidance, he instead seemed to gain an air of superiority, feeling that he was better than Donatella since he knew what he was doing. When I saw this, I took Emmanuele to the side and told him he should teach Donatella the correct way to use the present participle, not just point out all of her errors on her paper. Once I told Emmanuele this, he became a much better teacher as he gave Donatella explanations why certain things were written in a certain way. This little "teaching moment," which occurred right in the middle of the game, took quite a bit of time, but it allowed Emmanuele to review what he had learned while sharing his knowledge with others, which turned the game more into an entire review lesson than just an opening activity, which was fine.

Emmanuele's excellent knowledge of the proper use of the perfect aspect clearly demonstrated all of the hard work he had put into better understanding how, when, and why to use the past participle. Emmanuele's well-versed knowledge not only impressed me but also impressed himself at the same time, as he clearly felt much more confident in himself not only knowing that he understood the proper verb form but that he could also explain it to others as well.

The second activity, completion of the open ended questions, was rather easy as all of the children's responses could refer to just themselves, using the first-person singular verb form for virtually all of their answers. Even in the responses in which they included their families, they used the correct verb form, which was very impressive. The activity did seem to go by really quickly because often the children used the same verb over and over again, saying

Sono andato. . .

(Sono= "be" 1<sup>st</sup> person, singular, present, indicative; andato= "go" singular, masculine, present perfect)

"I went. . ."

The newspaper activity was met with moderate success, as I tried to

select articles with enough verbs in the perfect aspect. However, given the

large number of different verb forms in Italian, this was a difficult task, as

many different verb forms are used in a single article. There were enough

verbs for the children to at least find a few familiar to them, and we were able to briefly discuss these and how they were used in the newspaper.

While this did not go over quite as well as I had hoped, I thought of writing a newspaper article of my own and having the children identify the verbs in that. However, the children would lose the authentic text experience that they had with the newspaper.

For the writing activity, I had to figure out a way to motivate Donatella to write, as I was curious to see how well she did write knowing that she understood many important rules of the written language. Perhaps the assignment that I gave her was just too open ended for her; maybe she needed an exciting prompt or another way to stimulate her writing.

For the next writing assignment, I could plan something that would hopefully open up her writing abilities. I was also thinking that Donatella was self-conscious of her writing, that she was afraid that she did not write well and was afraid to let others see her writing. If this was the case, I could find a way to have Donatella keep a journal for herself and she could choose to share it with me or not. By giving her the option to keep a private writing log, she would feel less pressured to impress someone with her writing, and it would come more naturally. If Donatella is writing, I would allow her to write whatever she would want.

At the same time, I was very impressed to see Emmanuele take up his pen and write so well for such a sustained period. I expected him to procrastinate or fool around or find some reason to delay starting on the assignment, but instead he started right in on it and did not stop until it was time to go. Overall, Emmanuele had one of his best classes yet, as everything just seemed to come so easily to him, which was certainly helped by all of the previous lessons. His boost in confidence was clearly shown in his work too!

## Lesson 9

For today's lesson, I had a game planned to once again review and hopefully wrap up our study of the past participle. While the game went really well, Donatella still seemed to have a little trouble on the form of the verb, but after a quick review she seemed to have no trouble, I felt that she may have been slightly confused about the instructions as she demonstrated a fine understanding afterwards.

After the game, I began an introduction to the imperfect verb tense, a completely new area for Emmanuele and certainly one not as well

understood by Donatella. Both children have read passages where the imperfect tense was used, but they may have not recognized the special significance of this form, possibly just understanding the meaning of the verb in the present tense. We began our work on the imperfect by first writing the form of the verb on the board, and I asked the children to identify it, which they did without any problem. When I asked the children to then write the imperfect for the other verb endings, they did so without any trouble.

After covering the form of the imperfect, we then discussed the instances in which one uses the imperfect versus the past participle. To do this, the children and I became actors, reenacting major events, our lives; or whatever came to mind. After we demonstrated a certain action, the children then wrote what the correct corresponding phrase in the written language on the board, using either the imperfect or the past participle.

Once we acted out a fair number of examples, we decided together which were the correct instances in which to use the imperfect tense and wrote those rules on the board. To reinforce memorization of the form of the imperfect, I gave the children some written activities that simply asked them to use the correct form of the imperfect in sentences set in the past in which the imperfect would normally be used.

### **Analysis of Lesson 9**

As a native speaker of English, the imperfect verb tense was a very strange tense for me to try and wrap my mind around. At the same time, it was equally difficult for signers to try and understand the concept of multiple ways to express events in the past based on a certain set of rules. Regardless, since the children had some exposure through reading to this

verb tense already, the form of it was not extremely difficult for them to master.

Despite knowing the imperfect exists still leaves the problem of when is the appropriate time to use the verb tense in writing. The main instances in which one uses the imperfect tense are:

1. To describe activities those have gone on continuously in the past
2. To describe many activities that occurred at the same time
3. To describe a previous state of things

This verb tense can certainly be confused with the past participle, as the past participle is used more often in Italian. Trying to teach the difference between the two verb tenses and the cases in which the imperfect is used was no easy task using sign language, as there is essentially no differentiation between the two in LIS. Because of this difficulty, a little creativity had to be employed. Rather than just using the sign language, I led the children in an activity that had them up and out of their seats and using gesture and mime to communicate ideas, which they had a good time with. We then signed the action that one of us just completed, and wrote it on the board using the correct tense. By expressing our thought three different ways, the children were able to connect the written imperfect to the sign language to the activity they did.

Unfortunately, for this lesson and other lessons in the past, it involved a lot of writing tasks for the children and me signing a lot of phrases. This lesson and other lessons had to be set up in this manner because if I asked the children to sign back to me their response, I would have no way of telling if they used the imperfect or past participle since there is no distinction in the sign language. When it came to review the

written work that the children had completed individually, it would have been frivolous for me to ask the children to sign their responses to me because I would not have been able to check their understanding. However, to facilitate interaction between us, I did have the children sign some of the phrases and then fingerspell the verb that they used so that we all knew how the imperfect was used. While this was certainly not normal practice in the sign language, I wanted to further the children's involvement in reviewing the tense while not resorting to using the oral language.

### Lesson 10

Today's lesson was once again only with Emmanuele, which was perfect since Emmanuele had never used the imperfect tense previously, allowing him to learn it right from the beginning. To start off the lesson, we reviewed the verb endings by each writing the set for one type of verb (-are, -ere, -ire), with a few errors on my list for him to correct.

I then asked Emmanuele "When are the instances in which we use the imperfect tense?" to which he gave me a long and confusing explanation. To help alleviate his confusion, I signed a few of the phrases we used in the previous class that defined our rules for when to use the imperfect. Using the same phrases, I asked Emmanuele to write the rules for using the imperfect, which he did well. I then signed a few more phrases for him to write in the imperfect, which he also did without error.

We then tried a "now vs. then" activity, where I signed an action of something I was currently doing and Emmanuele wrote the phrase in the past using the imperfect. To take this to the next level, I did an activity that required me to have done a different activity in the past, which Emmanuele

had to figure out and then write it in the past, which he did moderately well given the difficulty of the task.

The next activity involved a paragraph with verbs missing, which required him to fill in the correct verb in the imperfect tense using the sequential pictures that accompanied the text. We started off doing this together, and when I asked Emmanuele if he wanted to proceed on his own, he said that he wanted to continue working together, as he seemed still confused by the task. While we were working on the sentences, I told Emmanuele that there was not only one correct verb for each blank, but he still struggled with putting each verb in its exact place. The activity did not have a list of verbs at the end which he could use, which I noticed was part of his frustration with the task. Since he was frustrated, he began to struggle quite a bit, and since I did not see him benefiting any from this activity in the current way he was working, I stopped him after he attempted to do a little on his own and moved on to the next activity.

We then reviewed the differences between the imperfect and the past participle and instances in which to use each through a series of phrases in which Emmanuele had to decide. I then tried a written activity in which he had to write the correct verb tense, which seemed to cause him more of a struggle than the apparently simpler translation from sign to the written language exercises. Emmanuele seemed to struggle the most when I asked for his reasoning behind why he chose a specific verb tense, as he had difficulty explaining himself. Whenever I questioned one of his choices, whether it was right or wrong, he would automatically think he was wrong and change his response to the other verb form, even though many of the times he was correct.



For the final activity, I had him fill in the correct verb forms in a popular Italian song for children, which utilized both the imperfect and the present tenses. Since Emmanuele could not listen to the song to understand which tense to use in each case, this became an activity of him trying to understand the context in which each verb tense would be used. Even though he probably had never heard the song before (or understood it if he did, just hearing noise), he did really well, only using the present tense in one paragraph that should have been the imperfect.

### Analysis of Lesson 10

Emmanuele's explanation of when to use the imperfect tense was certainly baffling. I did not know if this was because he could not articulate what he was thinking or if he did not really know when to use the imperfect. I believe it was more the former, as he seemed to be able to understand the appropriateness of the situations of each of the examples of imperfect phrases I signed. Unfortunately, Emmanuele's failure to communicate his ideas effectively was certainly a problem and continued to be a problem, as he seemed to have a good understanding of the material but he lacked the proper equipment to communicate his knowledge effectively. Since he has been raised to vocalize all of his responses all the time, he usually reverts to this oral language when asked a question. However, because he was unable to effectively answer my question since we did not verbalize the rules we established for the imperfect the previous lesson, he was not sure how exactly to state them. At the same time, because Emmanuele's sign was not his strongest area, he also did not feel he could effectively communicate his ideas through the visual medium either. This dilemma left Emmanuele with all of his wonderful ideas and no one to share them with, which could

certainly lead to problems in furthering his development in the classroom as he progresses through school.

Unfortunately, during this lesson I had another failure with an activity. As I knew from the past, having paragraphs in which Emmanuele had to fill in the missing verbs with any of his own choosing proved ineffective. However, I thought it worth a try once again, and it was unsuccessful. Emmanuele could not understand the concept of having more than one correct answer for the exercise and having him generate verbs on his own added to the difficulty. Because I could not think of a way for him to get any additional benefit out of the activity or completing it without

having me hover over him and tell him all of the verbs to use, I decided to just scrap the activity rather than spend any more unnecessary time on it. I still did not completely understand why Emmanuele struggled such a great deal with the free-response fill in the blank activities. My main belief was that he has been conditioned in school to get everything perfectly correct, at least from what I have observed in his interactions with his assistant at the school. Because she harps on every fine point of his grammar, Emmanuele probably thought that there was only one right way to complete any sort of activity or only one right way to write Italian. While I have tried to dispel this thinking of his, I am not sure that this was something that can be easily changed about a person, as most schools in Italy aim for more consistency across students. Students get the idea that answers are yes or no, and that there is often no room for discussion.

Emmanuele's uncertainty while completing the written activity on the differences between the past participle and the imperfect seemed to also carry over from his school environment, and the desire to have the right

answer. While he was working, I kept questioning him because I wanted to see if he actually knew why certain verb tenses belonged in certain phrases or if he was just guessing where they went. Having him understand the reasoning behind the use of each tense was the key to the lesson, and if he was just rushing through it and making lucky guesses, he was not grasping the main objective of the activity.

The final activity, filling in the missing words of the song, was a strange choice for Emmanuele upon reflection. Because he could not rely on the oral language to hear the song, this was certainly a much more difficult than necessary task for Emmanuele. Despite its difficulty, Emmanuele still did amazing well on it because he did something that all good readers do- he used context clues in the song in order to use the correct verb tenses. By reading through the song, Emmanuele could find words that signaled to the reader that the singer was talking about what he did when he was a child, which would prompt the use of the imperfect tense. Later in the song, the singer says that he was all grown up now, and that he was doing certain activities as an adult, so Emmanuele used the present tense. Because Emmanuele's reading skills were so well developed, he was able to take a seemingly difficult activity for someone of his background and figure out how exactly it should sound, which demonstrated the amazing progress he had made throughout these lessons.

### **Conclusion**

Many different approaches and techniques were attempted in the many lessons I conducted with both Emmanuele and Donatella. However, a few positive points stand out. First, having lessons specifically tailored to a child's developmental level of learning, in which he/she could learn with the

help of another peer or adult, allowed learning to happen at a much more rapid pace. Second, having activities that were actively stimulating and exciting for the children not only garnered their interest in the topic area, but allowed for a much more positive learning environment as a whole. Third, allowing the children the possibility to make mistakes and then turn their mistakes into learning experiences gave the children the chance to take risks while constructing their own learning exercises. Finally, having the lessons communicated entirely in the sign language with written material for virtually everything I said provided the children with two separate avenues for learning and comprehending the lessons. By using both the sign and

written language, the children were able to make connections between the two languages while at the same time they were able to distinguish important differences that made each language unique.

Although many of these recommendations seem logical and would be appropriate for use in schools with Deaf children, they are often not incorporated into the education of the Deaf. In Italy, there are only three schools for the Deaf in the entire country. What is even more disturbing is that two of these schools do not use the sign language as the method of instruction in their schools. Instead, these schools also use a Total Communication approach in which the oral language is the primary language used, and is only supplemented by occasional isolated signs and gestures. Despite the entire school being full of Deaf children whose most accessible language is the sign language, no instruction is conducted in sign. Even though the classes are extremely small, with an average of five to six children in each class, the students must focus on the lips and not the hands of the teacher. This pedagogical standing is just another part of the

influence of the hearing culture over the lives of the Deaf. The hearing society highly values the spoken language and does not have respect for the sign language. Because of the great importance of learning how to speak in the hearing society, the Deaf students must resign themselves from their own culture and abide by the practices of the hearing culture and learn how to listen with their eyes, reading another person's lips, and speak with their mouths whenever they go to class.

While I was teaching the lessons with the children, one of the mothers approached me one day with one of her child's notebooks. Inside, she showed me what her child's assistant had done. Her child had written notes and definitions of vocabulary words he was studying for his religion class. Above single words or clusters of words were written other words. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that these other words were simplified versions of what the child had originally written. Apparently, the assistant did not think that the child could understand what he had written, so rather than teaching him the new vocabulary, she instead wrote an easier translation of what he wrote so that he could understand. As the mother looked at me, she had tears in her eyes, and she asked me to promise her to never, ever "dumb" down the words I would use with her son. If her son was ever to get beyond the infamous fourth grade reading level by the time he is to graduate, he cannot be still relying on words that a first grader would know. If we want to increase the levels of literacy among the Deaf population, we cannot continue on our current educational trajectory that we are currently on. We cannot keep expecting Deaf people to learn our oral language, allowing drills in vocalizing to be prevalent over other important subject areas. We cannot provide the minimal amount of assistance that we

do now to aid Deaf children in our schools. And we most certainly cannot decrease the level of teaching and instruction that Deaf children are currently receiving. We need to give Deaf children the appropriate amount of assistance and guidance while continuously pushing them to further reach for their goals and have the chance to succeed and become productive, actively contributing members of our entire society.

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