Oralism and How it Affects the Development of the Deaf Child
Many Deaf individuals face a plethora of discrimination in a world in which they do not belong, a world which relies heavily on sound in order to communicate. These discriminations from the dictating majority of a non-Deaf world have created a form of education made in order to help Deaf individuals assimilate themselves into the “hearing world.” This method is called the oralist method. Both the oral method and the auditory method of teaching are made to teach Deaf individuals to speak as well as rely on hearing aids and lip reading in order to communicate with others, as opposed to signing. The purpose of the auditory and oral method of teaching is “to promote the academic and social inclusion of D/HH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing) pupils” into the non-Deaf world (Hadjikakou, Petridou, & Stylianou, 2008). This means the oralist method mostly promises Deaf individuals steady jobs and careers in a dominantly non-Deaf society. A mechanism for accomplishing the skills of speech is by not using signing at all, completely relying on the training of speaking. By focusing solely on speaking, those students should be exposed to the proper linguistics of English, both how to speak the words and to form accurate grammatical sentences. One must look at how the oralist method, which is still promoted by the non-Deaf majority, has affected Deaf children and their lives.

**Deaf Literacy**

One concern that stemmed early on in non-Deaf society was whether excessive use of signing and lack of English use would contribute to Deaf individuals becoming illiterate. Research has stated that through literacy “the Deaf person can share in the linguistic experiences of the society at large, since written language is not distorted by the
handicapped auditory sense” (Maxwell, 1985). However, whether a Deaf child was trained in oralism or relied mostly on signing as their main form of communication, it still remained that Deaf children of a certain age performed considerably lower on literacy tests than non-Deaf children. Massone and Baez tested the reasoning behind these test scores by researching the thought processes of Deaf children as they read text. Each child was given a picture along with a stream of text which corresponded with the picture. As the instructor asked each individual child the location of certain words, many children pointed to the picture as the word. Another observation was that a majority of the children were able to identify the meaning of the text simply by the picture and the actions the picture implied. It became obvious that the children relied mostly on the visual images to extract meaning as opposed to the text. Even those individual children that were able to extract meaning from the written text preferred to use the picture as the means of understanding what they were supposed to be reading (Massone & Baez, 2009).

While it was documented that some Deaf children do in fact have a hard time understanding written text and interpreting meaning from it, Marlon Kuntze explores a different definition of the word illiterate. Literacy is concerned with the ability to interpret information rather than read and write text. Deaf individuals are able to interpret signed information as well as tell stories with the use of visual expressions, such as changing body posture and the use of classifiers (hand representations for particular objects in action). Written text is seen as a digital form of communication. Writing takes out all the intonations, gestures, and facial expressions which belong in ASL’s linguistic toolbox (Kuntze, 2008).
Despite the different understanding of literacy, many institutions still regard the oralist method as a solution to illiteracy and the answer to help Deaf individuals understand written language. These methods “oversimplify the relationship between oral and written language, reinforcing ethnocentric and monocultural representations and ignoring the complexity of the dialectical process that occurs between the knowing subject and the written language as a specific object of knowledge” (Massone & Baez, 2009). The perception, in which knowledge of the written language relies on study of speech, returns to the idea that “language is at home in the audible, which, unlike the visible, is its natural medium of communication” (Zuckerkandl, 1973). Although the oralist method is able to teach Deaf individuals the format of the non-Deaf language of English, those Deaf subjects trained in oralism are not in fact “hearing.” This is possibly why Deaf individuals still find themselves frustrated “even if they speak clearly, because their lack of hearing makes it hard for them to know what is going on” (Maxwell, 1985). Sound has no meaning, and text lacks understanding, but the visual experience is capable of revealing many layers of meaning and interpretation for the Deaf.

Non-Deaf Parents vs. Deaf Children

One possibly consistent answer as to why the oralist method continues to prosper is the support from non-Deaf parents of Deaf children. Research states that “Some 90% of severely and profoundly Deaf children are born to hearing parents” (Marschark, 1993). One study researched non-Deaf parents’ satisfaction from the oral method of raising their Deaf children. 38.7% of the parents stated they were not always able to understand their children’s speech and frequently became frustrated. The parents were “expressing
dismay that they and their children did not share an easily understood, mutually accessible language” (Zaidman-Zait, 2008). At the same time, the desire of the parents for their children to communicate in English conflicted with their children’s desires. Many teachers of Deaf students were asked how the students preferred to communicate during school instruction. Most children preferred to use exclusively signing in their communication with teachers and Deaf children as opposed to a sign-supported language (signing which follows the linguistic structure of a spoken language) or spoken language (Hermans, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven, 2008).

*Induction of Signing with Oralism*

In an attempt to solve the problems that arise from the oralist method of teaching, many institutions have chosen to incorporate signing as a tool for communication and teaching. However, research claims that “the reading difficulties that Deaf children encounter are most likely related to delays in the acquisition of the spoken language” (Hermans, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven, 2007). While a great concern was that signing would in fact take away from the education of English to Deaf individuals, many institutions have found that signing may actually contribute to the success of students’ English skills.

In order to observe the process by which Deaf children learn English while using signing in their education, researchers studied 135 students in the Netherlands who participated in bilingual forms of education. In these classrooms signing was used as a tool for reading and understanding text. Researchers discovered that children first had to gain the concept of a word by associating the written text with the sign which represented
the word. After the sign was acknowledged, the student began to learn the spoken form of the word. However, the spoken form had yet to have meaning to the Deaf child. The next step was to relate the concept back to both the written text as well as the spoken word. Once the concept had been acknowledged, the student was able to relate the spoken word to the written word and vise versa (Hermans, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven, 2007).

To further explore the benefits of signing with speech training, a “speech only” form of learning vocabulary was put in comparison to a form of sign teaching to learn vocabulary. In the process of speech training without signing, children were asked to pronounce and acknowledge words based on pictures. In the signing process of teaching vocabulary, pictures were not used at all. Instead, students were asked to pronounce words based on the sign of the word. The students who studied vocabulary with relation to signing were able to recognize written words faster than those who were subject to relate written words to pictures (Hermans, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven, 2007).

Understanding of written vocabulary was based on understanding of the signing concept of the word, so a greater knowledge of signing promoted a larger written vocabulary (Hermans, Knoors, Ormel, & Verhoeven, 2008).

While signing with oralism has improved the oral language skills of many Deaf students, signing often becomes the ideal language for communication over spoken language. In the Netherlands, bilingual Deaf children who used both SLN (Sign Language of the Netherlands) and Dutch were studied as to their language skills and their choice of communication. The analysis discovered that all the children tested in the experiment had an acceptable level of vocabulary understanding. Although only one
child of the experiment was a native-signer, all children proved to have no delays in their signing capabilities. Test scores were proven exceptional in both language skills, proving the success of signing in the oralist method. However, the study discovered that signing was the preferred language, and the one which dominated interaction and communication (Klatter-Folmer, Hout, Kolen, & Verhoeven, 2006). Therefore, to claim signing in the oralist method helps promote spoken language in Deaf children is considerably false.

ToM Testing

A method of testing the cognitive capabilities of Deaf children is the “Theory of Mind” (ToM) test. ToM involves distinguishing the mental states of others from the self, such as beliefs, intentions, and desires. Theory of Mind tests are considered to be “fundamental for communication and social relationships, especially in understanding irony, jokes, and deception” (Meristo et al., 2007). ToM tests could compare the actual capabilities of the oralist method over the signing method of teaching when concerning the cognitive development of children.

In Italy, a study was conducted where native signers (people who are born using sign language as their first language) as well as late signers were given the ToM test for cognitive capabilities. Although native signers who were bilingual in both signing and Italian scored well, children who began signing later in life performed considerably lower than native signers as well as non-Deaf children. It was also shown that Deaf children who were exposed to sign language were better prepared to learn written text than those who were exposed to signing late in their lives. However, a liability remained in the study to which “instructors and interpreters may not have full competence in using a sign
language to communicate with children” (Meristo et al., 2007). Many teachers in oralist schools may have a knowledge of Italian Sign Language vocabulary, but fail to understand the syntax of the language. Therefore, non-native signing children are incapable of truly understanding or utilizing the language, which may possibly contribute to lower ToM scores (Meristo et al., 2007).

The same study was also conducted in Estonia and Sweden. In Sweden, Swedish Sign Language (SSL) programs are designed to provide non-Deaf parents with sign language skills to interact with their Deaf children and in order to support the child’s development. Each parent in the study used SSL as well as spoken Swedish with their children. In Estonia and Italy, most of the children who chose the oralist method did not involve themselves in Estonian Sign Language (ESL) or Italian Sign Language (LIS) and simply preferred speaking. Therefore, there were extreme differences in the results between the children who used signing as their primary language and those children who refused to sign. The children who were bilingual in both speaking and signing scored equal to those of non-Deaf children. The children of strictly the oralist method as well as the late signers performed significantly weaker (Meristo et al., 2007).

ToM testing has been used often to prove the inabilities of Deaf children. Previous studies using ToM testing have relied mostly on the test results of Deaf children in comparison with non-Deaf children, and concluding that Deaf children of non-Deaf parents have the same level of theory of mind as children with autism, putting them far behind the scores of non-Deaf peers. A recent study has shown “children who are Deaf, between the ages of 9 and 15 years, are fully capable of attributing mental states to others as well as to themselves” (Marschark, Green, Hindmarsh, & Walker 2000). The study
attributed high results in ToM testing for Deaf children which met the results of non-Deaf children. However, children between the ages of 4 and 5 show a lack of theories of mind, but a delay in learning in comparison with non-Deaf children has not been proven (Marschark, Green, Hindmarsh, & Walker 2000).

Studies involving ToM testing have also proven that reliance on hearing aids or Cochlear implants do not in fact alter the results of the tests. In fact, those children received results significantly low and matching those of late signers (Peterson, 2004). Meristo et al found:

The difficulties of children in such environments (oralism) mirror those shown by many Deaf children with cochlear implants, who display variable performance on ToM tasks and whose access to participation in conversation, once provided with implants, can remain impaired compared with that of hearing children. If the language environment is one that constantly demands that children work in a “Foreign” mode of communication, as is the case in an oralist school or even in a B/B school in which a sign language is not always used as a direct medium for instruction, such children’s expression of a ToM could be impaired even if tasks and test questions are presented in their native language (Meristo et al., 2007).

Although I understand the majority of this research specifically includes Deaf children who take part in bilingual education, and that bilingual education still supports
the oralist method of speech training which in turn is not supportive of Deaf culture, the following discoveries have proven the importance for signing to be present in a Deaf child’s life. Studies concerning bilingual education have shown the effort put into speech training in fact takes time away from learning important concepts that support the cognitive development of children. One may also note that many of the subjects of these tests became Deaf at a late age, and therefore were exposed to some spoken language before they were diagnosed with Deafness. More research must be made on children who are born Deaf to prove whether the oralist method does in fact benefit children or whether it takes away from their education.
Work Cited


The study was reported to explore the views of both Deaf and Hard-of-non-Deaf individuals who attend oral and auditory schools, as well as explore the views of the teachers and parents as well. This study is mostly focused on the inclusion of Deaf individuals into social environments, and was researched through a questionnaire. It was discovered that many of the students felt socially included. Deaf awareness also became more prominent in the non-Deaf children’s lives as well. This study is significant in displaying another perspective of the oralist method and the success of Deaf individuals incorporating themselves into a non-Deaf world.


The article focuses on the difference between sound and language. It states that sound does not stand alone but requires meaning and interpretation behind it in order to be heard. Sound thus creates communities in which people related to each other based on the similar sounds they hear. In the case of Deaf communities, these theories do not apply. In fact, Deaf communities tend to acquire a translocal community, to which they must travel beyond their home to discover like individuals. Non-Deaf communities stay within similar sounds and conform into similar groups. This represents the differences between ASL and English, and how Deaf individuals are incapable of ever actually incorporating themselves into a non-Deaf language.


The study shows the positive effects of signing in the process of teaching Deaf children to read. It observes the way in which adults learn a second language as opposed to Deaf children learning a second language. It acknowledges that there are in fact more steps to the process of learning to read for Deaf children, who must relate the text to the sign first
before relating the concept. This article specifically focuses on bilingual studies, which include both spoken language as well as reading. There are more processes for Deaf students because of the added step which involves relating the spoken word to the written word.


The study tested 87 children from the Netherlands in order to test the relationship between signing and written vocabulary. All the students in the experiment became Deaf at an early age and received instruction in signing each week. It was discovered that understanding of written vocabulary relied on the understanding of the signed representation of the word. Children first began to learn the concept of a written word by relating the text to the sign. Once they were able to acknowledge the concept, they were then able to relate that concept back to the written word.


The question of this article is this: What is the children's development in both languages with respect to linguistic complexity, language dominance, and interactional participation? It was discovered that linguistics skills in both languages were considerably high, that the dominant language used by most of the subjects was that of SLN, and that interaction relied mostly on the parents, but participation increased with the children over time. There were more promises for development in SLN rather than Dutch, considering SLN was the preferred language and even dominated that of parent-child interaction.


The article explores the concept of Sign Language literacy. It defines literacy as the ability to make inferences as opposed to the ability to read written language. It gives an example of a man who was severely dyslexic, it was too painful for him to read. He successfully complete college with high honors as a special student, in which material was read for him. However, he would be considered literate as far as his ability to make connections and organize his thoughts. This proves the ability to be literate without the actual use of reading and writing. Therefore, the literacy of ASL as a language must be separated from the concept of literacy through reading and writing.


A book on the psychology and perception of Deaf children, differentiating the thought processes of Deaf children from non-Deaf children. The outlook of the book is mostly
concerned with how Deaf children are “different” from non-Deaf children and evaluating
30 years of research that has questioned the way in which Deaf children develop and
mentally function.

mind in children who are Deaf. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied
Disciplines. 41* (8). 1067-1073

The article studied the significance of ToM testing in Deaf children and whether it proved
that the cognitive development of Deaf children delayed over that of non-Deaf children.
It was discovered that based on the results from the ToM testing, no delay can be proven.
Older Deaf children performed just as well as those children who were non-Deaf. Deaf
children who were much younger performed considerably lower, but the experiment
corrects assumptions that theory of mind did not develop in Deaf individuals until their
teenage years, having children from 9 to 15 perform similar to non-Deaf individuals.

Language Studies, 9*(4), 457-479

The focus is to discover the process in which Deaf children gain literacy skills and how
sign language is used to deconstruct the concepts of written text. It is considered that
Deaf children may be completely literate in their native sign language. However, despite
success in communication, written language will always be treated as a second language
to them. A study was taken to teach Deaf children who were fluent in sign language but
knew nothing of reading and writing. Within years, they were able to construct large
pieces of text. This research proves the ability to learn to read and write without the
actual use of spoken language, relying solely on sign language to determine meaning
behind text.

*Language in Society, 14*(2), 205-221

Analytical research studied what kinds of writing were used between Deaf individuals
and when Deaf individuals communicated with non-Deaf individuals. It was discovered
that Deaf adults use writing throughout their life for both social and instrumental reasons,
despite the fact a majority of Deaf individuals that leave regular schools have a literacy
around the 4th grade level. It seems that Deaf children born of Deaf parents live in the
same light, also using closed caption to watch television. However, Deaf children of
non-Deaf parents do not rely on writing so much for communication, possibly due to lack
of communication or the pressure of oralism put on Deaf children by non-Deaf parents.
It supports the idea that Deaf individuals are in fact literate, despite what educational
statistics may try to prove.

Language Access and Theory of Mind Reasoning: Evidence From Deaf Children in
Bilingual and Oralist Environments. *Developmental Psychology, 43*(5), 1156-1169
The article researches ToM testing in Deaf students that are late-signers in comparison to Deaf students who grew up signing. The study tested specifically Deaf children from Italy, Estonia and Sweden. The school programs in Italy involve both the Oralist method and sign teaching, but Estonia and Sweden often use the bilingual method of teaching. Therefore, tests and both regains acquire different results. Those bilingual students that were signers at an early age had higher ToM test scores than those who were strictly trained in the Oralist method or who began to sign at a later age.


The study observed the results of ToM testing in Deaf children with Cochlear implants and its comparison to the delay in children who are late signers. It also observes past research in the field of ToM testing, in which late signers performed considerably lower than native signers. A total of 52 children aged 4 to 12 years took the false belief ToM test, 26 of them oral Deaf in relation to Deaf children who were signed and oral trained. It discovered that the results of Deaf children with Cochlear implants were similar to the results of children who relied on hearing aids and children who were late signers.


The article researched parents of Deaf children with Cochlear implants. It surveyed there satisfaction with the implants and any drawbacks or complaints they have. The biggest concern of the parents was mostly the technological problems with the implants. The parents acknowledged concern over implant failure or the devices malfunctioning. In these cases the parents were unable to fix them as well as incapable of communicating with their children. They also felt frustrated by the limitations, to which the implants were to be turned off at night and absent from water. In these cases, parents were unable to communicate with their children for a period of time when the implants were off.


A series divided into volumes that deal with the external world and man. It delves specifically into the ideas and essence of music. He feels that music is not part of the physical world, but in fast part of the subjective world of feeling. Volume II exclusively separates feeling from music, in which Zuckerkandl works backwards in claiming what music is not in order to reach is conclusion. However, he states no particular thesis to his topic. His ideas have no relation to Deaf culture, for language does not exist in the physical world which is an audible essence in his perspective. Although he may not discuss ideas of Deaf-hood, his quotes are used often to express the ideology of the non-Deaf community and how they see Deaf individuals as “impaired”. His quotes are therefore proven false when explored and studied.