A DEAF ADULT LITERACY COLLECTIVE

Debra Aarons, University of Stellenbosch

Meryl Glaser, University of Cape Town

1 Introduction

In this paper, we present a description of an adult Deaf Literacy project in South Africa. The project is under the auspices of the Deaf Community of Cape Town, a grassroots organisation run by Deaf people to serve the needs of the historically disadvantaged Deaf. The literacy project is staffed by Deaf signers, paired with hearing support teachers. This pairing facilitates the use of a bilingual model of English literacy acquisition, in this case enabling the accessing of written English through the medium of South African Sign Language (SASL). There are currently five classes, each consisting of between 8 and 10 learners[1]. There are slightly more men than women; they have all attended schools for the deaf for at least 12 years and are almost all currently employed, albeit in jobs which are menial, and require less of them than they may be capable of. They grew up in hearing homes where the languages used were English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, but all prefer to use SASL as their primary language of communication. Reading levels are low, apparently ranging between first and fourth grade, even though the learners have attended residential schools for the Deaf for an average of 10 years.

Classes are conducted entirely in SASL. The Deaf teachers are not formally trained as teachers; however, they bring native fluency in SASL and have a higher level of literacy than the learners do. They are all respected leaders in the Deaf Community. The hearing support teachers also use SASL in the classroom, but bring native expertise in English to the classes. In addition, they provide *in situ* teacher training for their Deaf co-teachers, who run the classes.

As has happened worldwide, deaf education in South Africa was determined by a philosophy of oralism, which was notoriously unsuccessful (Aarons and Akach 1998, Aarons and Reynolds (in press), Reynolds 1995). The situation in South Africa, was, however, compounded by the policy of apartheid, which required that learners attended racially segregated schools that had a grossly unequal provision of resources (Aarons and Akach 1998, Aarons and Reynolds (in press), Penn and Reagan 1990). Thus, white schools were better provided for than black or so-called "coloured" schools, in terms of facilities, equipment, teachers, and books. This project draws adults who have completed their education at a Deaf school for "coloured" or mixed race pupils, as well as learners from rural black schools.

In the first part of the paper (section 2), we show some writing samples that the learners produced after watching a videotaped SASL story. (These particular writing samples were produced without any prior discussion or subsequent editing.) Then, in section 3, we categorise the learners' errors according to their type. In section 4, we show that, in fact, there is evidence of enough collective knowledge in the class as a whole for learners to jointly engage in editing activities. In the second part of the paper (sections 5-7), we detail the approach that is used in the adult literacy project, that is, collaborative reading and editing of English, using SASL as a medium of communication.

2   Writing samples

A videotaped SASL story was shown to the learners in the highest-level class. A translation of the story into English appears below.

> I'm going to tell you a story about Meryl riding a bicycle with her father. Last Monday she was riding with her father. They were so busy talking that she didn't see the railway track in front of her. She fell off her bicycle with a great impact. When she tried to stand up her leg was very sore. Can you imagine! Her father put her back on her bicycle and pushed her so she could go on riding. Her leg was very sore so an ambulance fetched her to take her to the hospital. Her pelvis was hurt. She is lying in the hospital with her whole leg bandaged. She is staying at

the Cape Town Mediclinic hospital. Shame, she has been lying in hospital for one week. Shame! I feel sorry for her, but it was her fault. Thank you.

We also provide a partial gloss of the story, with all the usual caveats, and perhaps some extra. This sort of gloss is intended as a guide only, and does not do justice to the non-manual expressions, morphological intensifiers, movement, rhythm, pace, or humour of the story.

The learners' written English versions of the signed story appear below.

Learner 1.

HELLO, I'M TELL YOU ABOUT MERYL. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT MERYL'S BICYCLE. SHE RIDE A BICYCLE WITH HER FATHER. LAST MONDAY SHE DIDN'T SEE THE RAILWAY, WHEN SHE'S TALKING TO HER FATHER. THEN ~~BOTH~~ SHE HAS FELLING OVER THE RAILWAY AND SHE HAS VERY PAINFUL ~~HER(PLAVES~~ SO SHE ASKED HER FATHER, "CAN YOU IDEA", PUT ME ON THE BICYCLE TO PUSH IT. SHE MUST RIDE TO GO. THEN AMBAULANS TO FETCH HER~~E~~ TO THE HOSPITAL. HOSPITAL IS MEDICAL AID. MERYL HAS VERY ~~SCORE~~ SORE AND HER ARM. SHE STAYED AT THE HOSPITAL FOR ONE WEEK. WE ~~SA~~ ARE SAYING TO MERYL, "VERY, VERY SHAME, SHAME. SO, SHE WORE A BANDAGE ON HER ARM. ~~BUT~~ BUT YOU ARE OWN FAULT.
THANK YOU, BYE.

Learner 2.

Hello,

I would like to tell the story about Meryl with her's father bicycle. Last Monday her father was riding the bicycle. They are talking and she couldn't see like the railway ~~station~~ track as she fell down very hard so when she get up. ~~An~~ her pelvic was very sore. Can you image that her father put on her bicycle ~~and pus~~..... The ambulance fetch to Meryl to the hospital. Her right arm was very sore and ~~banadge~~ bandage on it. She laid

in Cape Town by the hospital at Medic. Sorry to hear about Meryl. Ashame for Meryl to stay for 1 week. It is her fault.

Thank you

Learner 3.

HELLO   I WANT TO TELL YOU A STORY OF MERYL AND HER FATHER WITH THE BICECLES. LAST MONDAY THEY RIDE THE BICECLES AND TALKING BUT THEY NOT SEEING THE RAILWAY. THERE SHE FELL VERY HARD AND GET UP FELT SO SORE AND ~~CA~~ YOU CAN IMAGE. HER FATHER HELP TO PUT HER ON A BICECLE AND PUSH THE BICECLE BUT WAS SORE SHE FELT AND THE AMBULANCE FECTS HER AND GO TO THE HOSPITAL. HER PELVIS WAS SORE. IT'S LIKE SHE LIE IN THE HOSPITALE BUT SHE LIE ~~IN~~ WITH A BAND ON HER RIGHT LEG IN THE HOSPITALE IN CAPE TOWN MEDICLINIC. I FELT SAME FOR HER AND LIE FOR ONE WEEK   IN THE HOSPITALE. I FELT SORRY FOR HER IT WAS HER FAULT.

Learner 4.

Hello Merly

~~She~~ You story abous in ficty. Youre father long ~~twee~~ week on Monday to on the ficty. ~~You~~ She and father ~~talk~~ speak but do'nt see same on train ~~same~~ but she was sping fale to on ~~train~~ floor. She fale very hard hurt on right leg~~e~~. She ~~wand~~ wanted to ~~up~~ to stand up. OKAY! ~~fa~~ Father can put on ficty ~~to~~ but very hurt. ~~Dr~~ ~~ON~~ Docter fete to ~~M~~ she put to the abembes ~~on~~ in ~~hois~~ hopital. She lies like look peluyes on hopital. She lies on hopital. She lies stay ~~we~~ on one ~~wel~~ week ~~and~~ in Cape Town Med. Your sorry for but your ----- "Faith lang to you"

Learner 5.

HELLO MERYL. WHAT TELL STORY ABOUT MERYL. LAST MONDAY MERYL' AND FATHER TALKED BUT SHE CANNOT SEE THE RAIL. SHE FELL OVER THE BICYCLE AND HARD ON RAIL. WHEN SHE STAND UP AND PAIN SORE LEG. MERYL'S FATHER PUT HER'S BICYCLE THEN FATHER PUSH

HER'S BICYCLES BUT SHE STILL PAIN SORE LEG. THEN AMUBALACE
FETEH TO HER'S HOSPITAL.
DOCTOR PUT COVER ON LEG IN BED. SHE LAY IN BED HOSPITAL CAPE
TOWN SHE STAY AT HOSPITAL IN MEDICINCE CAPE TOWN SORRY MERYL
STAY AT HOSPITAL FOR ONE WEEK BUT YOUR FAULT.
THANK YOU

Learner 6.

Hello I ~~told~~ tell ~~story~~ a story about Meryl ~~& her father~~ about the bicycle with her father.
They talked ~~while~~ but she is nothing see the railway line. ~~The~~ Her bicycle knock it and
she fell very hard. So When she get up and ~~ve sore on~~ feel sore. Can you image that her
father lift up and put on the bicycle. He pushed her go on riding. She still sore and the
ambulance fetched her to the hospital. She got a sore pelvis ~~in~~ and lay in the hospital
with ~~her~~ the bandge over the leg ~~in the hospital~~ in MediClinic. Shame she lay ~~for one~~ in
the hospital for one week~~s~~ but it was her fault. Thank you.

Learner 7.

Hi I want to ~~tall~~ tell you the storry abut Marel. Marel and his father were taking and
they were racining a barickl and ~~Ma~~ she did not see the line and she foul down and hard
herslef.
So she try to get up but her father help to p~~o~~ush.
So the Ambluasic, came to get ~~him~~ her and pout him the the big hospel, called medcil
so she fool last week but shame poor Marel but it ~~him~~ her fart. (Thank you).

Learner 8.

Let me tell you the story about Meryl. ~~(She)~~ Last Monday she was cycling with her
father, they were talking and chatting a lot. They did not see the track like the train
track, so she fell hard. When she stood up from the bicycle, it was so sore, couldn't
stand up.
Can you imagine her father did put her back on bicycle and pushed her on. An
Ambulance came to fetch ~~(her)~~ and took her to hospital, her pelvis ~~was is~~ was very sore.

In hospital she is laying with her leg that covered with bandges At the hospital in Cape Town (*and it name Is*) Medic Clinic.

Shame, shame she must lay in hospital for one week, but it was her fault.

3   Error types found in learners' writing

An analysis of some of the more important writing errors reveals that they are of different category types. These are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but provided us with a rough guide as to the nature of the problems in the learners' writing. Each error has been tagged with the number of the learner's writing sample, for ease of reference.

(i)   Sign language transfer

2. **her father <u>put on</u> her bicycle** - SASL incorporates indirect objects in the verb

4. **<u>your</u> sorry for** – doesn't distinguish pronouns on the basis of placement

4. **to on floor** – transliteration of directional sign FALL

4. **OKAY!** – it's a SASL discourse marker

5. **What tell story about Meryl** – transliteration

5. **<u>Fell over</u> the bicycle** – transliteration

5.**Meryl's father put her's bicycle** – transliteration

5. **pain sore leg** – transliteration

5. **Doctor put cover on leg in bed** – transliteration

5. **She lay in bed hospital Cape Town** – transliteration

5. **Sorry Meryl stay at hospital for one week but your fault** – SASL stacks a number of clauses without any indications of embedding, direct speech, role shift, pronouns

6. **She <u>is nothing</u> see the railway line** – transliteration

6. **<u>So</u> when she get up** – does not mean "so" it's a discourse marker like OKAY

6. **Her father <u>lift up</u> and <u>put on</u> the bicycle** – SASL incorporates indirect objects in the verb

6. **He pushed <u>her go</u> on riding** – there are no infinitives in SASL

(ii)   Other spoken language transfer

    4. **ficty** -- fiets = bicycle in Afrikaans

    4. **lang** -- from verlang = to miss in Afrikaans

    4. **twee** -- from two in Afrikaans

    4. **sping fale** -- from spring = jump; val = fall in Afrikaans

    7. **his father** -- Xhosa does not make gender distinctions (nor does SASL)

    7. **came to get her and pout him --** Xhosa does not make gender distinctions (nor does SASL)

    8. **did put her back** -- Cape English

    8. **She is laying** -- Cape English

(iii)   Spelling – deaf, visual

    1. **AMBAULANS** for "ambulance"

    2. **banadge** for "bandage"

    4. **ficty** for "fiets/bicycle"

    4. **abembes** for "ambulance"

    4. **trian** for "train"

    4. **fete** for "fetch"

    4. **hois –hopital** for "hospital"

    5. **AMUBALACE** for "ambulance"

    6. **Image** for "imagine"

    7. **bandge** for "bandage"

    7. **herslef** for "herself"

    7. **Ambluasic** for "ambulance"

(iv)   Fingerspelling reception

    4. **Merly** for "Meryl"

    7. **Marel** for "Meryl"

4. **peluyes** for "pelvis"

5. **MEDICINC** for "Mediclinic"

7. **Medcil** for "Mediclinic"

(v)   Teaching induced

2. <u>**her's**</u> **father bicycle** – teaching of possession

2. **The ambulance fetch <u>to</u> Meryl <u>to</u> the hospital** – teaching of prepositions

4. **do'nt** – teaching of apostrophe for contractions

5. **Meryl's father put <u>her's</u> bicycle** – teaching of apostrophe for possession

5. <u>**her's**</u> **bicycles** – teaching of apostrophe for possession

(vi)   Second language

Variability

1. **I'm tell / she's talking /she ride/ she asked** – variable use of continuous aspect and the past tense

2. **Her father <u>was</u> riding the bicycle/ They <u>are</u> talking** – variable use of tense

3. **Last Monday they <u>ride</u> the bicecles and <u>talking</u> but they not <u>seeing</u> the railway. There she <u>fell</u>** – variability of aspect and tense

6. **The bicycle <u>knock</u> it and she <u>fell</u>** – tense

Other

4. **fete to she** for "the ambulance fetched her"

4. **lies <u>on</u> hopital** for "she is lying in hospital"

5. **Last Monday …she cannot** for "last Monday she could not"

5. **She fell over the bicycle and hard on rail** for "she fell off the bicycle and landed hard on the railway track"

5. **When she stand up <u>and</u> pain sore leg** for "when she stood up her leg was sore"

5. **Doctor put <u>cover</u> on leg** for "the doctor put a bandage on her leg"

5. **She stay <u>at</u> hospital** for "she will be staying in hospital"

6. **I tell a story** for "I am going to tell a story"

6. **Her bicycle knock it** for "her bicycle knocked into it"

6. **Fetch her to the hospital** for "took her to the hospital"

(vii) Hard of hearing writing

7. **Marel** for "Meryl"

7. **barickl** for "bicycle"

7. **foul** and **fool** for "fell"

7. **hard** for "hurt"

7. **poush** corrected to **push** and then **pout** left for "put"

7. **hospel** for "hospital"

7. **fart** for "fault"

7. **it** for "its"

8. **Her father did put her back on bicycle** – missing article

8. **Her leg that covered with bandages** – omission of unstressed functional material

4   Learners' collective knowledge

(i)   Grammatical knowledge

1. Use of apostrophe – possession and contraction

1. Use of direct speech – **We are saying to Meryl, "very, very shame, shame.**

6. Use of possessive pronoun – **her bicycle**

7. Complete use of continuous aspect

7. Correct use of auxiliary "be"

8. Use of past tense

8. Correct use of pronouns

8. Correct concord

8. Consistent tense usage

(ii)   Knowledge of writing conventions

       All the learners understand and can use the structure of narrative.

       All the learners know the concept of a written sentence.

       There is some use of inverted commas.

       The learners use capital letters, commas, exclamation marks and full stops.

5   The approach used in the literacy project

In order to redress the types of errors described above, and to utilise the collective knowledge of the group, we have adopted a Bilingual philosophy of Deaf education (Johnson, Liddell and Erting 1989; Pickersgill and Gregory 1998; Svartholm 1993, 1994, and 1995). The languages in question here are written English and SASL. SASL and English are given equal status in the classroom. The Deaf learners are made aware of the differences between the two languages. The major point that is highlighted is that SASL and English are different languages, and that SASL is not a representation of English in a visual mode. It is stressed that each language has its own structure, and ways of expressing concepts.

The philosophy of Bilingualism as applied in this project means that the learners arrive with SASL as their primary language and thereafter they learn written English as a second or third language according to the general principles used in teaching a second or foreign language (see, for example, Ellis 1994, and Gass and Selinker 1994). It is widely accepted that a successful way for learners to acquire a second language is through the medium of that language. However, in the case of the Deaf this is subject to a particular interpretation, as Deaf people cannot adequately access spoken language. English is both a spoken and a written language. So, for the Deaf exposure to English means exposure to written English and learning English means learning written English. All reading and writing activities are conducted in English, but face to face discussion and explanations happen in SASL. Thus, explanation of a particular word or grammatical structure of English is conducted in SASL. The approach we take is to use the learners' proficiency in SASL as a bridge to literacy in English and sometimes actually as a bootstrap into literacy.

Accordingly we have developed the following curriculum and methodology.

6   Curriculum

The curriculum that is used is learner driven. This entails that the learners select either general topics or specific tasks that are of interest and use to them in their daily lives. Topics that frequently recur are banking, transport, time, payment arrangements, and accounts, genetics as a cause of hearing loss, basic anatomy and physiology of the auditory system, and text telephones amongst others.

The curriculum is genre-based. This entails the manipulation of different sorts of text and discourse types. These include passport application forms, letters of invitation, personal and business letters, CVs, sales advertisements, replies to invitations, faxes, reading train timetables, credit applications, and life story narratives. The learners themselves choose which of these genres they are interested in learning more about.

7   Methodology

In each of the five classes, we have a group of Deaf learners, and one hearing and one Deaf teacher. Both teachers use SASL in the classroom. The teachers work collaboratively, doing joint preparation and marking[2]. The Deaf teacher usually initiates a discussion using SASL, while the hearing teacher is responsible for seeing that the learners are provided with the appropriate written English words or phrases when required.

7.1   Reading

For reading, the basic methodology is collaborative, in terms of the work that the learners do. Learners are given a piece of text relating to the current topic. They are asked to read silently. They are given certain guidelines for reading any sort of text. They look for clues as to what the text will contain; what sort of text it is; they look at the pictures, the captions, the

headings, and on the basis of this and a few key words, they are asked to predict what they think the text is going to be about. The teachers ask the learners for specific information, for which the learners scan the text. Although not all the learners can find all the relevant information, working collaboratively, they can usually piece together the general idea and main points of the text. Learners are encouraged to identify the words that they don't understand. Generally, the teachers provide a signed explanation of the word and written examples of the use of the word in a context. Commentary, discussion, explanation, and questions are all conducted in SASL. Learners are encouraged to answer one another's questions, and to offer their own thoughts and their own life experiences related to what is being read. Periodically, learners are prompted to use their dictionaries to check the meaning of a word[3].

7.2   Writing

In the literacy project, we practise two kinds of writing processes. The first is related to writing different authentic genres and the second is an editing process.

(i)   Authentic genres: Writing according to different formats and frames

In the case of texts that have conventional formats that are new to the learners, the teachers work with the students to jointly compose a model of the format, e.g., in the writing of CVs or business letters, or addressing envelopes. Once the learners understand the requirements of the format, they are asked to produce their own version of that particular text type. Learners then exchange papers with one another and collaboratively review one another's work. For instance, learners work together to try to figure out what information is required when filling in a particular form. Then they piece together the required information. In the case where learners cannot find the information, the teachers provide the information in SASL. Any additional English required is provided by the hearing support teacher.

In texts that do not have conventional formats, the learners write their own stories, and present them to the class for collaborative editing suggestions. Story writing is often embedded in

conventional formats, such as letter or journal writing. Teachers occasionally collect the finished tasks for record keeping purposes.

(ii)   The editing process

Learners write their own stories. They cover topics that have been suggested by other learners or the teachers. The stories are usually about life experiences of the learners. The writer signs the story to the group. Learners use SASL to collectively negotiate the intended meaning. Then the written story is chunked into meaning units with the help of the teachers. The learners and teachers use SASL to collectively edit the story chunk by chunk. They identify what is appropriate and what isn't, and then set about modifying the incorrect text, drawing on their collective knowledge.

The support teacher reminds learners of how English sentences begin, prompts them by showing where additional words, such as prepositions and articles are required, reminds them about tense in English, and points out where punctuation is required. Learners are reminded of aspects of English grammar that have previously been taught. In the case where learners do not know the rule, the teachers either explain it to them there and then or supply the structure and delay the explanation of the rule until later.

Our methodology does not focus on meaning and form at the same time. The Deaf teacher checks that the class understand and agree about the meaning of the story that is being told. This often involves a process of negotiation about both the content and the signed language.

Grammatical explanations usually occur outside the context of collaborative writing activities, but the teachers use the materials generated by the writing activities to illustrate the points being made. The teachers begin by asking the group, in SASL, what they know about a particular English structure. The group collaborate to build up the rule prompted by the teachers. Whatever does not emerge is finally supplied by the teachers.

Note that all explanations are conducted through the medium of SASL. However, since the content that is being focused on, is the correct, precise written structure of an English utterance, it is necessary often to refer to that utterance. In order to refer to the precise written structure of an English utterance, a signer has two possibilities: S/he may indicate or write the utterance in English, or may make use of a particular convention called "mention" (Searle 1975). Whilst communicating using SASL, the signer may quote or mention a written English utterance, indicating every English morpheme manually. The quoted utterance is embedded in a stream of grammatically correct SASL. This is equivalent to mentioning or quoting a language sample from one spoken language whilst speaking in another.

It is crucial to distinguish clearly between the use of this practice of mentioning or quoting tokens from the object/target language and the use of Manually Coded English as a medium of communication and instruction. We restrict the manual representation of English morphemes to its use as a device for mentioning English utterances. We do not consider Manually Coded English to be an appropriate medium of either communication or instruction, because it is not a natural human language; it is inefficient for the visual medium; it does not use the visuo-spatial medium to its full advantage; it is clumsy and awkward, difficult to produce and process; cannot be acquired naturally; and, in fact, is neither English, nor SASL.

The written form of a language has very strict conventions, which have to be learnt and used. Written language does not allow the same degree of variability as either spoken or signed languages do. Thus, the demands on learners of written English are stringent in terms of acceptability. However, the written form also affords learners the luxury of an additional step in the process of learning to write. Thus, the use of editing is enabled by certain properties of the written form/medium. Because working with the written form allows the learner to stop and think and edit the output, it provides an opportunity to learn and use its strict conventions. Thus, the use of editing in the writing process facilitates the movement from the primary language to the written language.

8   Conclusion

Whilst spoken languages and signed languages are primary communication forms, written language is a secondary communication form. Learning literacy is a matter of moving from a primary to a secondary communication form. For Deaf people, however, learning literacy is about of moving from one language to another and about moving from one modality to another as well as about moving from a primary to a secondary communication form.

In this paper, we have described an approach that may go some way to redressing the low level of literacy in Deaf adults. Using an approach that utilises the learners' existing knowledge of SASL and English, and that highlights the differences between these languages, may facilitate the development of their second language skills in written English.

NOTES

1   The project began in 1995 with one class held fortnightly in the evening. Subsequently, the project grew to three graded classes held weekly in the evening. As of 2001, there are five classes: three graded evening classes and two held in the mornings for unemployed Deaf learners.

2   The hearing and Deaf teachers meet weekly with the co-ordinator to review the previous weeks' classes and plan for the following class. Materials and activities are discussed relating to the topics that the learners have chosen.

3   These dictionaries are specifically designed for adult learners, to avoid the use of children's picture dictionaries or the far more complicated conventional dictionaries.

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