



RESEARCH AT GALLAUDET

A Publication of the Gallaudet Research Institute at Gallaudet University z Spring/Summer 2001

Conference Announcement:

Dictionaries and the Standardization of Languages: An International Conference

**November 7-8, 2001,
Gallaudet University Kellogg Conference Center
Washington, D.C.**

Gallaudet University Press Institute, the educational division of Gallaudet University Press, will sponsor the international conference "Dictionaries and the Standardization of Languages" on November 7 and 8, 2001, at the Gallaudet University Kellogg Conference Center in Washington, D.C. Noted scholars from a number of related disciplines will discuss dictionary-making from various perspectives, including field linguistics, dialect variation, semantics, advances in technology, and signed languages.

Featured speakers will include:

- ! **Simon Winchester**, author of the bestselling book, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*
- ! **Charles Fillmore**, University of California, Berkeley
- ! **Sherman Wilcox**, University of New Mexico
- ! **Trude Schermer**, Nederlands Gebarentrum
- ! **Ceil Lucas**, Gallaudet University
- ! **Fernando Capovilla**, University of Sao Paulo
- ! **Trevor Johnston**, University of New Castle

Panel discussions will include:

- ! **The Gallaudet Dictionary of American Sign Language**
- ! **Issues in the Development of National Sign Language Dictionaries**
- ! **Issues in Lexicography and Semantics**

Conference Registration Fee: \$115

For registration and hotel information contact Jennie Julock, Gallaudet University Press, phone: (202) 651-5488 (V/TTY); fax: (202) 651-5489; e-mail: jennifer.julock@gallaudet.edu. For other information, see the following website: dictionaries.gallaudet.edu.

Editor's Commentary

High Stakes Testing and Deaf Students: Some Research Perspectives

By Robert Clover Johnson

This newsletter typically features deafness-related research projects, reports, and conferences, but the dilemma facing educators of deaf and hard of hearing students as statewide competency tests are increasingly administered nationwide seems to merit special comment. If the ever-widening reach of statewide testing proceeds as forecast, students—deaf and hearing alike—who perform below certain "cut levels" on these tests may actually be held back a grade or allowed to complete high school without a standard diploma. These tests, in other words, are indeed "high stakes." In some states, even IEP (Individualized Education Plan) diplomas for special education students are at risk of being eliminated, meaning some students may leave high school with nothing to show for their efforts, even if they stay in school through their senior year. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing reports in its Spring 2000 newsletter, *FairTest Examiner*, that large numbers of low-scoring students in at least one populous state are dropping out of school because they feel it is unlikely they will ever be able to pass these tests.

The current national movement for statewide testing can be traced back to the 1983 government report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which concluded that American students were falling behind students from other nations on numerous educational measures. The



Robert C. Johnson

Continued on next page

report advocated that standardized tests be used as a mechanism for assessing how students were learning broadly agreed-upon educational goals and for making teachers and school administrators accountable for student success or failure. In 1989, the accountability movement and the trend toward statewide testing were reinforced at an education summit called *America 2000: An Education Strategy*. In 1999, President Clinton urged passage of an Education Accountability Act to make federal support of school systems contingent on satisfactory student performance on state tests.

President George W. Bush is now promoting similar legislation.

Statewide tests, which are intended to measure student achievement uniformly and objectively, are seen by many as the best way to determine what needs to be done to increase students' educational levels. The tests could theoretically help educators of deaf and hard of hearing students identify where curricular and pedagogical changes are needed. But since it is already well known that the majority of deaf students tend to have difficulties with reading and writing that have proved difficult to remedy, it strikes me—a long-time observer of this field—as excessively punitive for states to use these tests as the sole measure for graduation. This practice could have a devastating impact on these young people's academic and employment prospects. In the words of Ed Corbett, President of the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, "Deaf and hard of hearing students are [being] placed in positions of vulnerability unparalleled by those of the general school population." Corbett (2000) goes on to describe the current use of state tests as "accountability run amuck."

Since the testing situation, state by state and nationwide, is very much in flux, I have had some difficulty



formulating a coherent picture of what is happening or a clear-cut reaction grounded in research. This essay, therefore, might best be taken as an assemblage of preliminary, personal thoughts concerning an extremely challenging chapter in the history of deaf education.

The Persistence of Low Achievement

In spite of many profound changes that have occurred since the 1960s in the ways deaf and hard of hearing children are taught and in the kinds of educational placements they receive, average results for these students on standardized tests have not risen significantly. Stanford Achievement Test results, compiled periodically by the Gallaudet Research Institute, have changed little over the years. On reading comprehension, while there is a great deal of variability among these students, average scores of 18-year-olds remain below the fourth grade level. It would not be surprising, therefore, if many deaf and hard of hearing students did not fare well on state competency tests.

Standardized tests tend to be designed in ways that favor test-takers with a grasp of the subtle nuances of spoken language. On the reading comprehension portion of such tests, for example, where students read passages, then select among multiple choice items intended to check comprehension, test designers deliberately include distractor items that may be correct in all but a single word or phrase. These items are presented without context and often contain idiomatic expressions that may puzzle a bright deaf student. Although many deaf students manage to become proficient readers in spite of the disadvantage of not having heard spoken English, educators have yet to formulate educational procedures that predictably yield these exceptional results. Hearing students clearly have an advantage in having listened to and grasped the spoken form of many of the phrases and expressions that are represented in written form on standardized tests.



A broad sample of deaf and hard of hearing students' performances on state tests has so far been difficult to obtain. The few results I have learned about, however, appear to suggest that deaf students indeed will have problems. In one state, for instance, where obtaining a high school diploma is now contingent on passing an 8th grade test sometime before graduating from high school, only 34 percent of students identified by test administrators as "hearing impaired" passed the test in 1998. The same state is now considering raising its graduation requirement from passing an 8th to passing a 10th grade test, a change that would likely further reduce the already low percentage of deaf and hard of hearing students passing the test.

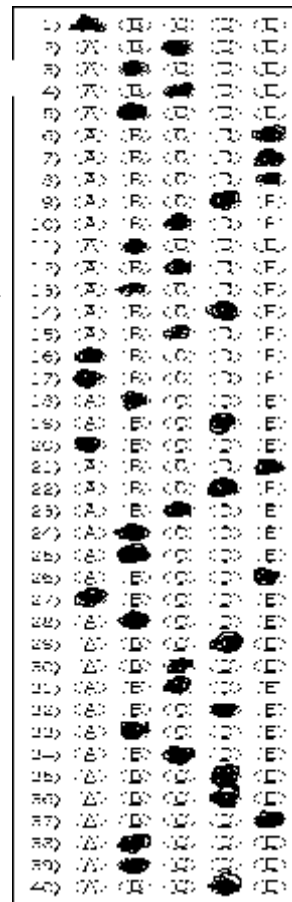
Avenues Toward Higher Expectations?

Performance IQ test results suggest that deaf students' aptitude for learning covers a range from low to high that is very similar to that of hearing children. The question of long standing for educators

has been how to take full advantage of this intellectual potential. One possible benefit of the fact that deaf and hard of hearing students are now facing the same assessment as their hearing peers could be that the search for more effective ways of tapping this potential may be more widely and urgently pursued.

There are several promising approaches, in fact, that have rarely been tried uniformly and consistently, let alone fully implemented in the U.S. on a large scale. In "Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education" (1989), researchers at Gallaudet argued that what was missing in deaf education was the use of a first language for deaf students that was fully accessible visually: American Sign Language. Early fluency in ASL, the authors contended, could put deaf children developmentally on a par with hearing children. This fluency could provide a cognitive and linguistic base upon which English as a second language could be taught visually through comparisons and contrasts with ASL.

There are a few programs trying this approach, but the data on testing results for these children are not sufficient to allow for a definitive evaluation of their effectiveness. Nevertheless, there may be cause for optimism in the fact that teachers in some of these programs believe their deaf students are so fully engaged intellectually by this approach that they may ultimately "achieve at rates comparable to their hearing



Research at Gallaudet is available free of charge. Address inquiries to *Research at Gallaudet*, Gallaudet Research Institute, Gallaudet University, 800 Florida Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002-3660. Phone: (202) 651-5995 (V/TTY). Contributing to this issue were Deborah Witsken, 2000-2001 Walter Ross Fellowship recipient, and Robert Clover Johnson, Editor. (Illustrations on pages 2-6 were also created by Robert C. Johnson.) Thanks are due to François Grosjean for the picture of himself. Special thanks are due to Cathryn Carroll, editor of *Odyssey*, Judith Mounty, co-chair of the National Task Force on Equity in Testing Deaf Persons, Michael Karchmer, director of the Gallaudet Research Institute, and Oscar Cohen, Kevin Keane, and Adrienne Robins of the Lexington School for the Deaf for advice and feedback concerning aspects of the article on high stakes testing in this issue. Comments on articles are welcomed by the editor and may be sent by e-mail to Robert.C.Johnson@gallaudet.edu.

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Senior Research Editor

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counterparts” (see R.C. Johnson, 1999, for discussion).

Another educational approach that has received increased study in recent years is Cued Speech, introduced in the 1960s by Dr. Orin Cornett, then at Gallaudet. Cued Speech consists of a set of handshapes produced by a speaker so that similar-

looking mouth movements accompanying different speech sounds—such as “B” and “P”—can be visually discriminated by a person reading the speaker’s lips. Numerous small studies of deaf students educated by teachers who use Cued Speech and whose parents use Cued Speech at home suggest that this approach does provide exposure to English usage that helps students recognize and understand printed English vocabulary, idioms, and syntactic structures. One implication of this research is that deaf students who are taught English through Cued Speech may be better able to grasp the nuances of the English used on standardized tests (Coryell, 2001). In theory, Cued Speech and ASL could be used in concert with each other in a bilingual educational environment, but I know of no program explicitly attempting such a marriage.

Another approach to teaching deaf students that shows considerable promise is the mediated learning, cognitive strategies approach. In this approach, teachers work closely with students to develop cognitive skills that will help the students adapt to a broad spectrum of academic and work challenges. Students are taught to reason, draw inferences, analyze, and think in response to carefully planned educational experiences. Because this approach relies on continual assessment of students to gauge where more learning is needed, it is well attuned to the testing environment now being implemented by state governments. At the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York this approach has been used for over a decade. Reading comprehension levels have been significantly higher among students who participated in the program from elementary through high school levels

than among students who entered the program after elementary school (Lexington School for the Deaf, 2000).

Programs based on such approaches tend to bring out enormous reserves of inventiveness and optimism among teachers, parents, and students. This spirit, combined with daily vigilance in the search for more effective ways of teaching deaf and hard of hearing students, may indeed prove helpful as students prepare for wave after wave of standardized tests in the years ahead. Hard work, optimism, and effective learning strategies will also surely help prepare students for the challenges of postsecondary education and careers.

Fairness Issues from a Holistic Perspective

Back in 1988, during his tenure as Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf Studies at Gallaudet, Dr. Harlan Lane (author of *When the Mind Hears*) gave a presentation in which he offered a startling debating point. He said that since deaf people can flourish in signing environments but have great difficulty learning and fluently using English, perhaps they should not be compelled to devote too much of their energy to struggling with English. Lane argued on behalf of a pluralistic society in which deaf people would be allowed to be different.

Granted that the audience at that presentation consisted primarily of educators of the deaf and highly successful, literate deaf professionals, my own perception was that few agreed with Lane that English was unimportant to deaf people.

In fact, few people would disagree with the notion that deaf and hard of hearing students, in spite of their varying degrees of ability or inability to hear spoken English, need to find ways to develop as much mastery of English as possible. In America, most curricular material is presented in English texts and the scope of life for anyone lacking facility in English is significantly narrowed. It is largely for these reasons that in a recent letter to the editor



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“This basic contradiction between the deaf individual’s social identity, constructed, in part, out of the need for community with others who share fundamentally similar experiences and can communicate them, and the deaf individual’s personal identity, resulting, in part, from the physical and emotional bonds between parents and children, very often manifests itself as

State tests might well play a valuable role if used strictly for diagnostic and prescriptive purposes. But unfortunately they are being used in increasing numbers of states as the primary or even sole measure of students' achievements in school, leading to grade retention and withholding of diplomas to students who do not perform well on the tests. Educators of deaf and hard of hearing students are increasingly joining forces with other groups who believe that such use of testing is unfair and discriminatory to many students. These organizations include the National Education Association, the National Parent Teacher Association, the American Educational Research Association, and such vocal advocacy groups as the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. At Gallaudet University the National Task Force on Equity in Testing Deaf Persons has begun to plan for a national conference, to be held in 2002, to address concerns related to testing and deaf students.

Although members of the National Task Force do not agree on every issue, some generalizations about their views can be made. Most are concerned about the growing tendency of educational programs to devote too much time to preparation for end-of-year testing, elevating the importance of test score results in an atmosphere of anxious preparation that is counterproductive to creativity and optimal learning. Supported by position papers of many of the above-named organizations, the Task Force advocates that decisions regarding advancement in school and granting of diplomas take into account students' grades and portfolios of materials showing progress in meeting school assignments, as well as test results. At minimum, Task Force members state, deaf students should be granted signed interpretation of all audible events when tests are administered. Most Task Force members also believe that deaf students should be allowed to ask for extra time in taking the tests if it is believed that a student generally processes English text more slowly than other students.

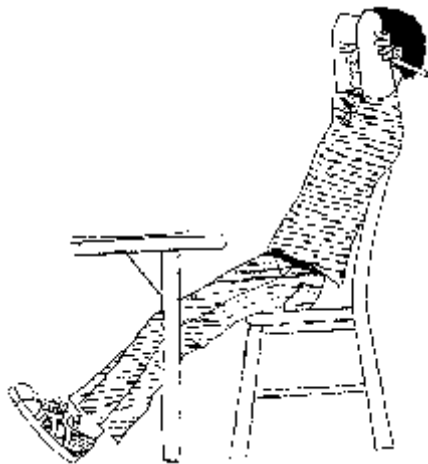
The most difficult issue Task Force members are wrestling with, however, may be the problems deaf students tend to have with the English used in multiple choice testing. Some Task Force members would prefer to modify the nature of the tests themselves, providing, for example, more richly contextualized and unambiguously written multiple choice items.

Dr. David Martin, the retiring chair of the Gallaudet Task Force, reports that he looks forward to inviting test designers, politicians, school administrators, and special interest presenters to the 2002 national conference so that conflicting perspectives can be constructively debated (Task Force, 2001). This newsletter will announce details of the conference once a definite venue has been established.

A slightly revised version of this article is appearing simultaneously in the summer issue of *Odyssey*, a publication of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center.

A Final Thought

In 2002, Deaf Way II will occur in Washington, D.C. Thousands of deaf people from many nations will come to our nation's capital to discuss the struggles and celebrate the achievements of deaf people. The year 2002 is also the year in which many states are planning to make statewide competency tests mandatory for all students. I would urge that as we gear up for the testing due to occur that year, we also keep in mind that many of the social and linguistic skills important to deaf students are not measured by standardized tests. I hope that some time in deaf students' busy schedules can be allowed for the development of sign language skills, for creative expression in the visual and dramatic arts, for sports, and for all the activities generally associated with youth and the pursuit of happiness.



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<http://gri.gallaudet.edu/Assessment/testequity.html>

François Grosjean Discusses Linguistic and Cultural Rights of Deaf Children

By Debbie Witsken, 2000-2001 Walter Ross Fellow

On March 1, 2001, Dr. François Grosjean returned to Gallaudet University for the first time in twenty-six years to present on "The Right of the Deaf Child to Grow up Bilingual and Bicultural." Grosjean is a professor of psycholinguistics and director of the Language and Speech Processing Laboratory at Neuchatel University in Neuchatel, Switzerland. He has taught at the University of Paris, France, and Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. He is well-known among linguists and the deaf community for the book *Recent Perspectives on American Sign Language* which he co-edited with Harlan Lane, and his book, *Life with Two Languages* which deals with bilingualism among deaf people. An article bearing the same title as this presentation appears in the most recent issue of *Sign Language Studies*. Grosjean's lecture, sponsored by the GRI and the "Signs of Literacy Research Project," attracted students, faculty, and staff from many disciplines who packed the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School auditorium.

Grosjean began his presentation by dispelling some of the myths about bilinguals. He pointed out that, contrary to popular opinion, there are many more bilinguals in the world than monolinguals, that bilinguals are rarely fluent in both of their languages, and that bilinguals do not necessarily have to be bicultural. Grosjean dismissed the notion that bilingualism has negative effects on the child, and refuted the idea that allowing deaf children to sign will be a disservice to them when, in fact, "bilingual skills will help deaf children develop fully; linguistically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially."

According to Grosjean, in many ways language plays a crucial role in deaf children's development and thus it is critical that deaf children have full access to language as early as possible. Deaf children need this access to a natural language in order to communicate fully with their parents and family members, thus establishing important social and personal bonds. Language also plays a significant role in the development of cognitive abilities

such as

reasoning skills and processing of abstract concepts. Finally, deaf children's early language exposure significantly impacts their acquisition of world knowledge, which in turn facilitates language comprehension, their

ability to interact with the surrounding world, both deaf and hearing, and their acculturation into both the Deaf and hearing world.



François Grosjean

Given these factors, it is easy to see how both sign language and oral language will play an important role in the deaf child's development. Early exposure to sign language can allow very early communication with the family if the family learns sign language. It

also stimulates linguistic, cognitive, and social development and can prevent later language-related problems. Early sign language exposure assists in the acquisition of knowledge about the world, facilitates the development of knowledge of the spoken language by providing a language base that facilitates comprehension of a second language, and allows the child to acculturate into the Deaf world. Similarly, by learning the spoken language, through written language or through a spoken modality, if possible, deaf children learn the language of the hearing world and of the child's family, which most often is hearing. The child also acquires the language needed for academic success and professional use. Based on these concepts, Grosjean states, "The deaf child must be allowed to grow up bilingual and bicultural as early as possible."

Grosjean's presentation emphasized the importance of early acquisition of a natural language to trigger what he referred to as the "human language capacity" to develop communicative, cognitive, and social skills, plus the beginnings of world knowledge. Grosjean made it clear that he believed sign language was the most natural first language for deaf children, commenting, "The problem with waiting to give sign language to a deaf child is that there is no guarantee that oral language input will be sufficient to trigger these vital linguistic and cognitive developments."

Following his presentation, Grosjean responded to audience questions. One audience member asked Grosjean to comment on the capability of hearing teachers with limited signing skills to serve as good sign language role models for deaf children. Grosjean responded that bilingual deaf students need role models from both the deaf and the hearing world. He also stated that he "wouldn't throw stones at a hearing person who teaches deaf students because that person bridges the gap between the two languages and cultures." Other audience questions ranged from topics related to deaf bilinguals in European society and educational systems to patterns of bilingual language acquisition among children of deaf adults.

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