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READING AS A MEANS OF TEACHING LANGUAGE TO THE DEAF.[1]

"I would have a deaf child read books in order to learn the language, instead of learning the language in order to read books."

IT delights me to observe in America a gradual change from the scholastic method of teaching language to that which has been so properly called by Mr. Scott Hutton the "natural method." But there is one point in the natural method to which I would direct your attention.

When we study the methods by which languages are naturally acquired by hearing children, we observe that comprehension of the language always precedes a child's attempt to express ideas in that language, — he understands the language before he uses it; whereas, in our attempts to apply the natural method to the deaf, we try to make the child use the language before he understands it.

I was very much struck by the remark of Mr. Job Williams, that it is practice, practice, practice, that gives a perfect command of language; that *it is the frequency of repetition of words that impresses them upon the memory*. Now, what sort of repetition do we give to the hearing child? Will any member of this conference make the experiment? It is an interesting one. Take a book intended for children's use, and read it aloud. Test the speed of your reading, and you will find that two hundred words a minute is not a rapid rate.

A stenographer would say that one hundred and fifty words a minute is above the average rate of public speaking; but this is for language in which long words are of frequent occurrence, and where a deliberateness of utterance is employed that is uncommon in talking to children. Not only do short words predominate in our conversation with children, but mothers and nurses gabble at such express speed that a stenographer would probably give up in despair the attempt to transcribe the conversation. I am convinced from experiment that the average rate of nursery gossip exceeds two hundred words a minute. However, to be well within the mark, let us assume one hundred and fifty words as the average rate, and calculate upon this supposition the number of words presented to the ears of a hearing child in the course of a day. Let us suppose that if these words were concentrated into one continuous talk, without any pause, it would amount to a speech of four hours in length, and surely this is not an excessive assumption. One hundred and fifty words a minute amounts to nine thousand words an hour, or thirty-six thousand words in four hours. This means that we shower at the ears of the hearing child no less than thirty-six thousand words a day; and, as the whole vocabulary we use in talking to children hardly exceeds three hundred words, this means a very great daily repetition.

We not only talk to a child at the rate of thirty-six thousand words a day, but we do this for three hundred and sixty-five days in the year (we do not stop on Sundays); and we do this for two years at least before we expect the child to turn round and talk to us. If, then, we attempt to apply to the deaf the natural method of learning language, what sort of repetition of words to the eye should we give the deaf child before we exact from him any great efforts at English composition? In the natural method of learning language, *comprehension always precedes expression*. But in our schools for the deaf this process is generally reversed. For example: in our sign-institutions a story is told in signs, and pupils who know little or nothing of the English language are required to go through the drudgery of writing out the story in words. Would not the converse process be more natural and profitable? Even in schools where the sign-language is not employed, action-writing is largely resorted to. For example: a teacher will take a book from a pupil, open it, pretend to read it, then close it and lay it upon the table. She then asks her class to express in English words what she has done.

While this plan furnishes an admirable exercise in composition for older pupils, it is surely out of place with pupils who cannot understandingly read an ordinary book. It reverses the process of nature, which demands that comprehension shall precede expression; that *a child must understand a language before he uses it*.

Now, we know perfectly well that if we can repeat words to the eyes of deaf children with any thing like the frequency and clearness with which we present them to the ears of the hearing, the deaf will come to master the language by the same natural process that produces comprehension in the hearing child. The great difficulty is how to do this. The speed of writing, even at a scribble, hardly exceeds thirty words a minute. The speed of the manual alphabet can be made to approximate one hundred words a minute, but very few teachers exceed an average speed of eighty words per minute. It is obvious, then, that the teacher cannot, by his own exertions, even approximate to the speed of speech.

Is there no hope, then, for the deaf child? Must the acquisition of English always be to him a long and laborious task? Must he acquire imperfectly, after years of labor, a language which is mastered by the hearing infant before he is four years of age, and which foreigners, commencing at the age when the deaf child enters school, acquire in a few months? I do not think so. I think that there is hope for the deaf child by the adoption of a plan that can be ingrafted on any system of instruction.

Though the speed at which we write is limited to about thirty words a minute, the speed at which we read is very different, especially when the words are presented in print so that the letters are clear and unambiguous. I gave an interesting novel the other

[1] An address delivered before the sixth national conference of superintendents and principals of institutions for the deaf (Gallaudet meeting), held at the Mississippi Institution, Jackson, Miss., April 14-17, 1888, by Alexander Graham Bell.