

Total Communication: Panacea or Placebo?

An Address Before
The FIFTH PAN PACIFIC CONFERENCE
of the
International Society for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled
2 -- 7 November 1975
Singapore

by
Carl A. Argila
De La Salle College
Manila
Philippines

ABSTRACT

Total Communication, as a philosophy for education of the deaf, has been described as both panacea and placebo, depending on what side of the educational fence you are on. This address attempts to describe exactly what is Total Communication and its implications for education of the deaf.

Distinguished members of the International Society for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled and honored delegates to this Fifth Pan Pacific Conference, it is indeed a great honor and pleasure for me to be with you today. Though I am an educator, not a rehabilitation worker, I would like to talk to you today about an area of rehabilitation with which I am quite closely involved -- making deaf persons useful, effective members of society.

Though statistics in our region are quite difficult to obtain -- and sometimes even more difficult to believe, I think that we would all agree that deafness is a major cause of disability in our region. We would probably all agree, too, that hearing handicaps outnumber all other handicaps combined. In the Philippines, though there has never been a census of the deaf population, we estimate that there are probably about 200,000 deaf individuals -- and this may well be a very conservative estimate.

No country in our region is immune from deafness -- both developed and under-developed alike have large deaf populations. And there is one universal characteristic of the deaf in our region -- and that is that our deaf adults today are not able to integrate into the mainstream of society; are not able to partake of their rich cultural heritages; are not able to contribute to the development of themselves and their countries because they have not been given the basic tools necessary to integrate into society. Many of you, I know, are educators. But I must say frankly that you and I as educators have done a very poor job in educating our deaf if we look at our deaf adults today. Indeed, the very fact that we are participating in a rehabilitation conference is an indictment against us, for I feel very strongly that if the deaf are provided

with a basic education commensurate with their abilities, and on a par with their hearing peers, there would be no need for their participation in rehabilitation programs. The deaf can do anything that hearing people can do -- except hear. BUT THEY MUST BE GIVEN PROPER EDUCATION. And this leads us into educational philosophies of which I will talk about today.

Before I continue, however, I would like to clarify two matters. First, when I use the word "deaf" I am talking about individuals with a bilateral hearing loss in the speech range so profound as to preclude their communicating by means of spoken language even with the aid of electronic amplification and further more the onset of this hearing loss must have been at birth, or before the acquisition of language so as to preclude learning language in the usual manner. The problems of severely hard of hearing individuals (i.e. those for which electronic amplification can compensate for their hearing loss) and deafened individuals (i.e. those who lost their hearing after the acquisition of language) are so different from the problems of the deaf as to be completely outside the scope of my talk today. I do not want to delve into this more deeply, but let me say that many times children of low IQ, even at moron levels, out-perform children of very high IQ in our schools for the deaf today, simply because the former have substantial residual hearing and the latter do not. It is a great injustice to our deaf children to penalize them academically because they do not have the residual hearing necessary to succeed in many of our schools for the deaf today. It is even more unjust to put a severely hard of hearing child on a pedestal as a show-piece and call him deaf, when in actuality he is not.

The second matter I would like to clarify is this. I am an educator -- true. But I would hope that I can gain your attention, not because I am an educator, but because I am a parent. I have a deaf son -- and I most sincerely hope that my deaf son will not grow up to be like the vast majority of deaf adults we see around us today. We have in the Philippines, for example, one quite large school for the deaf. A recent study of the ten year graduates of this school showed that they have less than a grade two literacy level -- that is less than the level of functional literacy. It is no wonder that the vast majority of deaf adults in our country can only find employment in the most menial of jobs, if even they can find employment at all. Though, again, I do not wish to depart too radically from my subject, but let me just mention that it is appalling to see the very large number of educators of the deaf in our region who are neither deaf nor have deaf children and who in most cases have never even had any contact with deaf adults -- the product of their schools! I have mentioned our own national school for the deaf in the Philippines -- my travels through Southeast Asia indicate to me that our school in the Philippines is not much worse than any other school for the deaf in our region. I think that the situation would be vastly different if teachers in these schools had deaf children.

What I want for my deaf child is simple -- equality of education and opportunity with his hearing peers. Accomplishing this is easier said than done. To be equal, my child must be a part of his society -- not isolated in a cultural minority group as so many deaf people are. But the essence of social assimilation, indeed the core of culture

is communication. My child will be equal if he is a part -- and he can be a part only if he can communicate. All of us, I'm certain, agree that deafness is such a debilitating handicap precisely because it strikes at the individual's link with society -- his ability to communicate. All of us would agree, too, that the primary task in educating a deaf child is to give him communication, i.e. the ability to "link up" with his society. The goal is clear -- the means of accomplishing that goal is not.

What has been most damaging to education of the deaf over the past hundred years is the schism which has been developed between opposing groups in search of this same goal. Historically, the Braidwoods and other British educators of the deaf developed an educational method which emphasized only speech and lip-reading as means of communication and instruction for the deaf. De l'Epée in France devised a manual method for instruction of the deaf and the schism was born. The "oralists" and the "manualists" exported their respective systems to other lands and most of us have adopted the system of our former colonial masters.

In order to evaluate these opposing systems we must understand something of the psychology of deafness. Hearing persons, as well as deafened and severely hard of hearing individuals, "think" in what we call aural images -- i.e. sounds in the subconscious. We think in a small voice, some call it our "ego". But the fact is that our competence in language stems from using it constantly as the vehicle of conscious thought. Obviously deaf individuals cannot develop this vehicle having been denied the ability to even develop a concept of "aural images". Deaf persons think in "visual images". And the key to establishing language in a deaf individual is to provide him with a "visual symbol system" which can represent the language. Obviously pictures of objects, though adequate for many nouns and verbs, are

inadequate for words like "love", "color", "as", etc. Printed words can serve as visual symbols, but deaf infants are unable to utilize printed words which, after all, are the written form of a language which they do not yet possess. The "oralist" advocates the use of lip movements as the vehicle for language use and development, in addition, of course, to the previous symbols. Aside from the fact that deaf infants cannot distinguish between the fine differences in lip movements, mathematical studies of lip reading have shown that lip movements, alone, do not uniquely convey meanings of words -- i.e. there is a great deal of ambiguity in lip-reading which can be resolved only by prior knowledge of the language, as well as context, gestures, etc.

The "manualist" goes one step further; in addition to the previous symbols, he advocates the use of "signs" constructed with the fingers, hands and arms. The use of manual signs for conveying language is indeed very natural for the deaf who must, of necessity, be visually oriented. The signs are large and distinct enough to be usable by deaf infants and can convey any idea in any language with the preciseness of any spoken language. Most importantly they provide the "visual symbol system" which the deaf person can use as the vehicle of conscious thought.

There appears to be no conflict between these "oral" and "manual" systems -- so why the controversy? Well, much of the controversy stems back to conflicts between the original educators -- shall we say "personality conflicts" and even political differences between England and France. A gross lack of understanding of the psychology of deafness and an inability to distinguish between deaf, deafened and severely hard of hearing created many mis-understandings. A deafened child might be quite successful in a pure oral

environment (since he already has the vehicle for language) but a deaf child of the same intelligence and age might be a failure in the same environment. Each camp tended to surround themselves with children which were successful in their own program and then claimed that they had the right method and the other side was wrong.

Another reason for the conflict was the obvious desire for parents to see their deaf children speak as soon as possible -- never realizing that in the deaf child, speech is a second language. Teachers were put under pressure to produce a speaking child as soon as possible, and when this was seen to be impossible under the pure oral system, the finger of guilt was pointed to the "enemy" with claims that the use of sign language will prevent the deaf child from developing normal speech and lip reading skills.

The "manualists", too, must take their share of blame for the schism -- for there has long been a lack of understanding of the role of manual systems in communicating with, and educating the deaf. On the one hand there are "finger spelling" systems which faithfully represent the written form of a language by simply spelling out each word as it might be written or with some other system of representing letters by hand positions. On the other hand there are systems rich in "conceptual signs" which do not represent the words of a language but only the concepts and ideas of what is said. Linguistic studies of such languages, such as the American Sign Language, Auslan, have shown that these sign languages are linguistically distinct and complete languages, on a par with any spoken language as different as English is from Chinese. "Manualists" have failed to realize that some of these sign languages can be destructive to language development because they differ radically from the accepted spoken language. Indeed, language problems among the "manual" deaf has long

been one of the "oralists" strong arguments against the manual system. In recent years sign systems have been developed which enable English to be signed exactly as it is spoken, grammatically correct, with all words and word endings in tact. Such "signed English", which is what I use with my son, enable the deaf to develop a visual symbol system which faithfully represents English -- hence deaf children can now develop language on a par with and at a pace commensurate with hearing children.

Studies of deaf children who have used Signed English from birth show that these children possess superior speech and lip-reading skills compared with children raised under the "pure oral" system. There is simply no truth to the myth that using sign language degrades speech. In fact, as I have observed with my own son, when language begins to develop, the deaf child naturally begins to make vocal sounds without any encouragement from parents or teacher. This is because of the proximity of the vocal motor areas in the brain to the language centers.

Let me emphasize once again that language and speech are two different things -- once my son develops a proficiency in language, he will then learn to vocalize. In the meantime he can communicate with a vocabulary as large as any of his hearing peers and can read and write considerably better than most children his age. And even if my son were never able to pronounce one word -- it is much more important for his assimilation into society that he be able to communicate in writing as a literate, intelligent individual. There are a number of deaf scholars who are masters of their language even though they can't pronounce a single word. An example of this is simply too significant for me not to mention -- so please forgive me for mentioning a particular country and school by name. Singapore has had an educational

program for the deaf for only about 20 years. For various historical reasons, two simultaneous programs were established. A pure "manual" program taught only in Chinese since its founders were trained in China and a pure "oral" program taught only in English since its founders were trained in England. Today, some twenty years later, I'm told, only about four Singaporeans have graduated these programs and gone on to college -- Gallaudet college in the United States. All four of these deaf individuals were products of the "manual" program -- even though they had to learn English as a second language and pass an entrance examination in English! No, they can't speak -- they were never trained to speak -- but they can read, write and become useful, contributing members of society; professionals who can do anything their hearing peers can do -- except hear. And isn't that what rehabilitation is all about? The theme for this conference is "Rehabilitation: The Practical Approach" -- and what could be more practical than giving deaf people the means by which they can help themselves.

Well, I have done a lot of talking, but I still haven't mentioned Total Communication! Total Communication, as an educational philosophy, is simply the right of each deaf child to use what ever means of communication aid him in learning -- this may include speech, lip-reading, electronic amplification, reading, writing and sign language and finger spelling. The Total Communication school is not "manual" or "oral" everything is used, and children communicate simultaneously in Signed English and with their voices. Children with more residual hearing learn to depend more heavily on amplification -- children with little residual hearing depend more heavily on visual communication. All means supplement and support each other -- there is no conflict between methods -- only a unity of approach. In the Total

Communication home the deaf child has rapport and acceptance with and by his family. From the cradle the deaf child is able to communicate in perfect ease and fluency -- he can express himself, describe what he wants, laugh, enjoy stories, be a part of his family -- and later a part of society.

Is Total Communication panacea or placebo? I won't answer that since I'm obviously prejudiced. But perhaps I can answer questions which you might have about Total Communication.

Thank you.

(Question and Answer Session Follows)