Like most teachers of deaf students, I begin preparing to teach my students a story by asking myself questions:

- How familiar are my students with the concepts and vocabulary in the story?
- How will I include all the new vocabulary words in the day’s learning to give students the repetition they need?
- What additional worksheets and materials should I make?
- What teaching method would work best with this story and this class?
- How can I make the learning experience challenging and fun?
- How much time will I need to plan the lesson and create materials in order to teach the story next week?

For many of us, the answer to this last question—How much time?—often dictates what finally happens in the classroom. Every day, we face the time-consuming task of adapting materials from curricula that don’t meet our students’ needs or match their learning styles.

At Last, Ready-Made Literacy Units

Recently, I completed two years of field-testing of literacy units specifically designed for teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students. The units were part of the Cornerstones Project, an activity of the WGBH National Center for Accessible Media. (The units were

Photos courtesy of NCAM/CORNERSTONES
Introduction

What is Cornerstones?

Plug into You Need

Video Pages

Teacher Comments

CornerStones

building blocks of literacy

Offering literacy units for teachers of young students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The Teaching Units

Box
developed with funding from Steppingstones of Technology Innovation for Students With Disabilities, a program of the U.S. Department of Education.)

The Cornerstones Project built the literacy units around three animated stories—The Fox and the Crow; Click, Clack, Moo; and Joseph Had a Little Overcoat—originally featured on “Between the Lions,” a long-running children’s TV program co-produced by Boston PBS affiliate WGBH, Sirius Thinking, Ltd., and Mississippi Public Broadcasting. Each unit is two weeks long, and immerses students in the language and ideas of one story. Students can download on-line video clips of each story (in Windows or Mac) in whichever communication mode they prefer—ASL, Cued Speech, or Signing Exact English (SEE). Free downloads are available at the Cornerstones website, http://pbskids.org/lions/cornerstones. Students can also download a hypertext version of each story. (The stories are also available in their original picture book format at local libraries and booksellers.) By clicking on the highlighted words, they can see additional meanings or uses of the words, each with a matching picture.

The three units also offer interactive games that reinforce target words and concepts in ways deaf and hard of hearing children will find meaningful.

Effective Teaching Practices and Multiple Activities in Each Unit
A downloadable Cornerstones lesson guide for each literacy unit includes a day-by-day sequence of learning objectives and lessons, with a wide range of classroom and seat work activities, all of which reinforce lessons within each story. Downloadable teaching and assessment strategies supplement the lesson guides. These printable resources include exercises, storybook templates, work sheets, writing prompts, flash cards, and lots of games—all designed specifically for children who are deaf or hard of hearing!

Generally, students who are deaf or hard of hearing have not been exposed to as many English words and concepts as hearing children have, and they often must learn many new words in order to be able to read even short selections. The ready-made Cornerstones materials offer a sustained, systematic approach to teaching vocabulary and strengthening students’ reading skills. This allowed me to devote more time to teaching, and I loved having so many choices. In the first unit I taught, I was so overwhelmed by all the materials that I ended up choosing familiar activities like concentration games and story-writing prompts. However, as I grew familiar with the materials, I began trying new approaches.

Building Vocabulary a Chunk at a Time
Cornerstones suggests that a class spend five or six days exploring each story, with one key difference: Instead of having students learn all of the targeted vocabulary before reading the story, Cornerstones recommends that teachers break the vocabulary into smaller chunks of new words to be learned each day. As the class progresses through the story, each Cornerstone lesson reviews previously learned vocabulary and teaches new words.

When I tried this strategy, I found that building new vocabulary over several days made it possible for students to learn more words, and was far less overwhelming for them. Thanks to the daily vocabulary review and the re-reading of story sections, students were retaining the meanings of words and using them in their writing. Subsequently, I have applied this technique to my regular reading units and have found my students becoming more successful at retaining and using vocabulary.

Free to Be Creative
As my students progressed in learning new vocabulary through chunking and reinforcing activities, they also engaged in complex discussions about character, motivation, and plot. The Cornerstones materials gave me the freedom to add new learning objectives and use creative teaching strategies.

For example, during one unit my students were learning how to use quotation marks around dialogue. I created a series of mini-lessons about English and ASL grammar using the Cornerstones “Character Match-Up” activity. First, the students matched the sentences to characters, as described in the teacher’s manual. Then I asked the students to sign the dialogue in ASL, and we discussed how ASL uses role shifting to indicate dialogue, just as written English uses quotation marks. Next, I asked the students to create their own short dialogues for the characters in ASL, then to translate the dialogues into written English using quotation marks. Next, I asked the students to create their own short dialogues for the
characters in ASL, and translated their dialogues into written English using quotation marks. The students loved reading and signing their dialogues to each other.

**Signed Versions of the Animated Stories**

At the start of each unit, the Cornerstones lesson guide previews the animated story in a video clip. Students select the communication mode—either ASL, Cued Speech, or SEE. With my own class, I chose to begin by using the picture book itself, which allowed me to observe and address how each student approached authentic print. Later in the lesson, I used the video clips to lead the students in a discussion about how and why the storyteller chose specific ASL signs—in the same way that hearing children might discuss a specific word choice in a written description. We also made a game of viewing a section of the video clip and then locating the matching passage in written English in the storybook.

**Word Games and Activities to Reinforce Learning**

My students particularly enjoyed the games in each Cornerstones literacy unit—“Lionel the Sentence Maker,” “Library Destination,” and others—and they loved exploring the interactive activities on the website. Having all of these activities available for a unit meant that I could count on students seeing and using the words they were learning without having to create the materials myself. Because there were so many choices, I could break the students into small groups to work on creative and reinforcing activities that matched their skill levels and individual learning styles. These activities gave me more time to observe and assess how each student used and understood the target vocabulary and concepts. I could then adjust my teaching accordingly.

**Building a Bridge Between ASL and Written English**

While I can and will apply many of the Cornerstones teaching techniques to other stories, it’s hard to overstate the benefits of having ready access via the Cornerstones website to such visually engaging, fully featured materials. I would love to see additional units developed using the Cornerstones approach: building a bridge between ASL and written English by encouraging children to explore identification of words in print, word knowledge (including multiple meanings), and story comprehension. Especially if enough units were developed for a full year of teaching across grade levels, the impact on deaf students’ reading abilities and how these children are taught could be tremendous.

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The practical illustrated dictionary you’ve been looking for is now revised! This excellent unique resource contains literally thousands of words. Organized in English word order, each word is spelled and its proper part of speech is clearly identified. Each word is then accompanied by an illustration of its sign and an English sentence in which the word is used! There’s even an illustration depicting the situation of the sentence! Designed from 41 years of experience in education of deaf students, this dictionary is truly one of a kind. Affordably priced, this is a resource you will not want to be without!

“Students who arrive in the United States and all those who are learning English as well as American Sign Language should find this book very helpful.”

— *Perspectives*

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