

How My Daughter Taught Me To Teach

The Importance of Active Communication

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His hands flew, but I only caught a word here and there—*brother, tattle*. I was fascinated by his face, and the frown that creased his eyebrows, the hunch of his shoulders, and the sneer on his lips. I was in an American Sign Language class and my teacher was deaf. The interpreter had come for the first hour to explain the syllabus, and then we were on our own with a teacher who could not hear and did not speak, but could catch us every time we were not paying attention.

The class was engaging and fun, but also challenging and frustrating. I did not care about the grade I earned; I was there because of my daughter. Alexandra is deaf and I need to be able to communicate with her. Unlike the other students, what I learned in this class would prove vital for my family, my teaching, and eventually, myself.

Successful Strategies

Teaching my daughter English as her second language has posed many challenges, but has also revealed successful strategies that I have been able to bring to the classroom. The most important lesson I learned is that teaching involves the assurance that what I am saying is being understood.

First, oral communication means not only working on my expressive skills, but my receptive skills as well. I can talk for hours, but I am not very good at listening. Second, communication means using *all* of the tools around me: expressions, body language, visual objects, cultural ideas, and common background. Third,

communication when expressed through reading and writing is much more difficult than speaking and listening precisely because most of the guiding cues are missing in text. Therefore students need a completely new set of skills, which include practice in reading strategies as well as access to a huge vocabulary.

I have come to learn more about *active communication* and how this affects my teaching from my daughter and from my one-on-one work with her.

What Would I Do?

My daughter was diagnosed with a profound hearing loss when she was a year old. No one else in the family is deaf, so we were devastated. With my older son, parenting came naturally. We talked about the sky and the flowers and the leaves on our walks. We mimicked the cows and sheep when we played with his toys. We read every night, usually the same story.

What would I do with my daughter? How would I read to her, describe the world to her, ask what she thought about? All of the dreams we had for her were gone. She would never hear a bird, or music, or even the words *I love you*. She wouldn't recognize my voice when I called her. We were completely unprepared.

We started by going to the book store and getting books on how to parent deaf children. We read *Deaf Like Me*. We read more books, met with people, and learned to cope. One book compared raising a deaf child to raising a child who spoke Chinese when you only speak English. We contacted our local county office for special preschool services, purchased hearing aids for Alexandra, and signed up for American Sign Language (ASL) classes.

We started going to a community sign language class at the California School for

the Deaf and Alexandra also started attending preschool at the school. As we progressed in our learning, we saw the first of many speech therapists with our goal to make our daughter bilingual in ASL and English. ASL has no written form and is actually based on French, not English, so teaching Alexandra to speak, read, and write English would prove challenging.

At this time I started a job share as a teacher, teaching a combined World Cultures and Language Arts class with another colleague. In addition to my teaching, I was also taking Alexandra to mapping sessions for her cochlear implant, to speech therapy, and to school every week. We spent hours a day in the car, and our whole family slowly learned to deal with a different life than we had expected.

My son, Nicholas, learned ASL much faster than my husband or me. Therefore, Nicholas became the go-between for his sister and all of the other kids in the neighborhood. My heart ached to see her so isolated, but I learned that young children are very adaptable. Four years after Alexandra entered kindergarten, my principal told me that my job share position would be terminated. However, I held teaching credentials in English and science and would be placed full-time in the science department, working with the English language development students.

Becoming an ELL Teacher

My background with my daughter, taking additional second language acquisition and multicultural courses for the Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development credential (CLAD) from the State of California, and knowing some

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Spanish assisted in my preparation of teaching English language learners (ELLs). I had textbook supplements in Spanish and the district-required Science Safety Test printed in both Spanish and English. I had experienced through my daughter how difficult it is to learn English and how hard the families must work. I was ready to teach ELL science, even if I wasn't ready to work full time again.

My first year as an English language teacher, I taught 7th and 8th grade science which had a cluster of 10 ELD students mixed in with the English-only students. Less than half of the students spoke Spanish. I had Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Japanese, and one Russian student. Since this time I have had students with many different languages, including Farsi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Amharic (an African language).

I knew I needed to help these kids, because I identified with how they felt, and how they needed the English as much as I had needed sign language to communicate with my daughter. With the Indian and Asian languages, I had no cognates to work with and didn't even know how to say, "Get out a piece of paper" to my students' in their native language.

We often take communication for granted, but real communication is hard work. I thought about how I had felt in my sign language class where I had to watch the teacher's every move and stay completely focused or I would miss things. I saw my students struggling as I had, trying to make sense of my words by studying my face and hands. Eye contact is vital to communication.

With my son, I would be able to do the dishes or fold the laundry and still have a conversation with him. With Alexandra, it is different; I must look at her. My hands must be free to sign and I need to stop everything to have our conversation. The easy flow of words my son and I had as I prepared dinner, the back and forth as we played with animals, the morning talks on the way to school were all different with my daughter. The more I stopped multi-tasking and started focusing on her, the more I realized how much I was missing in my other conversations.

Giving Full Attention

How often do we give our full attention to someone, make eye contact as we

talk, really look at the expressions and not just hear the words? I know as a teacher I am often doing more than one thing, such as checking agendas as I answer questions and collecting papers as I give new instructions. Learning how to slow down and really listen is an ongoing struggle. I learned to make sure my students were watching me while I spoke. If I moved around the room to point out different things, I made sure my hands and face were always visible.

I gave up writing on the chalkboard and moved to the overhead so I would never have my back turned. I also spoke a little slower. I posted notes to myself all over the room that said "Slow Down," "Listen," and "Eye Contact." Now, I try to make time every week for one-on-one conversations with my beginning students. Just listening to them read, working through a worksheet with them, or correcting a paragraph together reveals so much about their understanding and language levels.

I am lucky to have a small group I can do this with. In my larger classes, trying to see each student individually takes about three days, and the other students quickly lose focus. Instead, I encourage group work in these classes, and listen to each group for three to four minutes each period. I have even had students record themselves in groups so I would be able to listen to them later. The first step in becoming a better teacher was to become a better communicator.

I remember the first sign my daughter and I learned. The teacher put the kids in a circle on the floor and pulled out a jar of bubbles. She blew them in the air while the kids bounced up and down trying to catch them. She showed us the sign for "more bubbles," and enticed the students by going around the circle and asking each of them if they wanted more bubbles. For most of us, it was the first time we could communicate with our children without miming and pointing. The elation we felt at learning real words carried through the week.

I immediately went to Target and bought bubbles, then took dozens of pictures of my three-year-old son blowing bubbles when his one-year-old sister asked him to. I wanted to bring this joy of understanding to class, so I set about trying to link English words to objects or pictures or words in the students' native languages.

I worked my way through that first year by drawing as many pictures as I could to go with my lessons. I invested heavily in overheads and colored sharpies and traced almost anything I could get my hands on.

We carefully studied every photo and diagram in the text book. I ordered picture dictionaries and picture books about cells and chemicals and the human body for us to read. We used stick figures to illustrate definitions. We placed pictures of the stages of mitosis in order and made huge posters of the planets. My students were talking and writing and learning science.

The Complications of Testing

In my third year of teaching science, the state of California decided to add a California Standards Test for science to our annual Standardized Testing and Results (STAR) testing. Now my reliance on pictures could become a problem for my students when they were tested, since testing does not make accommodations such as the ones I was providing for my students.

I was fortunate to have an assistant principal who started a class on campus for the parents to learn English. I then enlisted the help of the teacher to translate the district safety test in Korean. The district eventually translated the test into three other languages. I reviewed the text books from my college classes and began going to a monthly district training session for ELD teachers. I met teachers who had Spanish speaking bilingual aids in the classroom, but that wasn't going to help me.

With my daughter, we decided to mainstream her so that she would be exposed to English constantly. She would hear it and read it every day. Although the School for the Deaf fought the mainstreaming and warned that she would never be fluent in ASL, we just couldn't see limiting her to one language at a time in her life when it would be easiest for her to learn two. We knew how much faster she and my son had learned ASL than my husband and I, and how much more we had learned than the grandparents. I knew that the younger she was when she learned English, the easier it would be for her.

I felt the same way about my students. My goal was for them to be bilingual, so I encouraged the use of glossaries and dictionaries. I gave credit for vocabulary written in the student's own language, then in English. I encouraged them to write answers in their original language first, and then explain to me in English. I used anything the students' already had to help them learn science

and English. I began to write two tests for each unit—one was picture- or chart-based and one was multiple choice from the textbook test generator.

I spent the entire year frustrated by the discrepancy on the test scores for all of my students. Even my native English speaking students consistently scored higher on the tests with visual support than on the multiple choice test. Students could read a periodic table and fill in a chart for protons, neutrons, electrons, periods and families, but not answer a multiple choice question asking which element in a family had a particular number of protons.

The information required the same skill in reading and decoding the periodic table of elements, but the students struggled with understanding exactly what the question was asking. I found the same difficulty working on word problems in math with my daughter. She excelled at mathematical computation, but could not understand whether the question was asking her to add or subtract.

Finding a Balance

Recently, while reviewing a history test, we looked at one question which asked “All of the following were aspects of Zen Buddhism except...” We had studied extensively, so I know she was familiar with the concept. As I signed the question to her, she asked me what the word especially meant. She had confused *except* and *especially*. It was her knowledge of English, not her understanding of Zen Buddhism that was flawed.

I still struggle with finding a balance between testing my students’ knowledge of the content and testing their understanding of English. I still present tests both ways, and try to discuss the questions so that I can find words on the test that confuse them. We practice for the CST together in class several ways and review all of the vocabulary that I think they need. I also use the glossaries for history and science that are available from the California State Department of Education. Under certain conditions, new ELL students are allowed to use these glossaries during the state tests.

After three years, the ELD teacher retired and I took over the ELD classes. We have a unique program because only 3% of our population are ELLs, which means my ELD classes are very small, ranging from eight to 24 students, with

an average of about 12 students per class. This is definitely helpful for me when I am teaching them English, but causes some difficulty in their core classes.

Most ELL students in our district who test at the beginner or early intermediate level spend four periods a day in an English class. They do not have science or history until they reach the intermediate or early advanced level. Because we cannot support using a teacher for such small classes, our students get the state minimum of two periods of English a day, and are mainstreamed in science, history, and mathematics. They are not even clustered, but are randomly placed throughout the schedule. Often the content area teacher is not even aware of which students are beginners, and they do not have the resources or time to teach the lesson differently for the one or two ELL students in the class. The students are forced to work at grade level with no interpreter and little differentiated instruction.

We have an amazing staff of teachers, but the reality is that the class period is only 45 minutes for 34 students including beginner ELLs, autistic students, low performers mixed with high achievers, and even gifted students. The Asian cultures often respect cooperation much more than the competition we stress in American culture. My experience with the Asian students is that they will behave and sit quietly in the back of the room to maintain peace instead of expressing their frustration or demanding attention. They often go unnoticed because they are not causing problems. They are usually in a tutoring program or at the library until dinner time.

Unlike many of my Spanish-speaking students who have lived in America most of their lives, my students from other countries have usually only been here a year or two. Fortunately, we have a very diverse cultural make-up at our school, and new students quickly find others who are bilingual in their native language.

Using What I Experience

I have only been teaching ELD for three years, but I am constantly using what I experience at home and at speech therapy to help improve my teaching. It took my husband and myself several years to find a speech therapist with special knowledge about cochlear implants. Now, we drive an hour to see her and she is well worth every penny and every minute of our time. We tend to edit what we say at home and use only the words we know how to

sign. Finger spelling long words is a little tedious and usually not necessary for the day-to-day activities of family life.

During speech, the therapist has exposed Alexandra to a whole world of new vocabulary and revealed to me how much we are losing in her understanding. One day, she was supposed to identify a twig, but Alexandra had no idea what that was. In ASL, the signs for stick, branch, twig, limb, and bough are the same sign—tree with a finger indicating a part sticking out.

When she studied Robert Frost’s *The Road not Taken* in class, she described it to me as a road covered with silverware forks. No wonder it did not make sense. When I taught the poem, I included a picture of a fork stuck in a road, as well as one of a real wooded road that forked. We look at words with multiple meanings very carefully. Words like *fair*, *lead*, *bow*, *wind* and *read* do not usually stump native speakers. We read a sentence with the word *wind* and do not even pause to think about whether the “I” is long or short. We just know from the context.

This has led me to my newest goal—to always use complete sentences. It is so difficult to change the way I teach. I want the students to answer in complete sentences as well, even if the answer is easy. If I ask what a noun is, they can’t just say, “A person, place, thing, or idea.” Instead they have to say, “A noun is a person, place, thing, or idea.” If I start with sentences like this that are memorized, students have an easier time understanding the content. I don’t want to embarrass them so I will usually just repeat their answer in the complete sentence form.

Again, I have to post notes all around the room to remind me, only now they have to be bigger or I can’t see them without my glasses. So I have notes on the projector and the book shelf and my desk and in odd corners. They remind me to communicate clearly as the speaker. They remind me to listen carefully. They remind me to use whatever the kids already know, and the newest notes remind me that vocabulary is context based and is best learned in complete sentences.