LITERACY EXPERIENCES AND READING LEARNING STRATEGIES. TALES OF DEAF ADULTS[1]

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Abstract

In recent years the concepts of deafness and deafhood have impacted literacy and deafness studies. Increasingly, researchers say that deaf people live in a visual reality, which leads them to acquire their knowledge foundation in a different way to those who can hear.This relatively new strand of thought has led to an effort torecognize exactly how deaf people generate knowledge, and how they learn from their life experience. Considering this premise involves reviewing the general theories of teaching, learning and research and their application in education of deaf people. The epistemological perspective presented here is based on cultural beliefs and the experience of being deaf in the generation of scientific knowledge (Easterbrooks and Beal-Alvarez, 2013; Hauser, et al., 2010;Holcomb, 2010;Humphries, 2004; Paul and Moores, 2010; Young and Temple, 2014).

The aim of the present qualitative study was to analyze the literacy experiences of deaf people who have completed high school and postsecondary studies and live independently. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were given to deaf people aged between 20 and 40 years old, who were bilingual in Chilean Sign Language (ChSL) and Spanish. Interviews were conducted in ChSL and transcribed into Spanish. The key findings suggested that the respondents valued visual learning experiences, especially the incorporation of ChSL into the literacy process. They also valued teaching that starts from visual elements such as sign language, fingerspelling, morphology,

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pictures, lipreading, amongst others. The study reflected on the cultural beliefs and experiences of the deaf towards the construction of educational knowledge, theoretical and practical, and in the literacy processes of deaf people.

SOCIAL CONCEPTIONS OF DEAFNESS AND EDUCATIONAL MODELS

The education of deaf people in the world has been developed from a homogenizing perspective; through educational models aiming to teach the oral languages of the hearing majorities. Those educational models imposed a strong "hearingization" vision of deafness and also a dominant culture based on orality(Cuevas, 2013; Humphries, 2004; Ladd, 2003; Leigh, 2009). From those models, deafness was conceived as an illness and deaf people as defective hearers. This educational perspective prevailed for more than a century without answering the demands of literacy, social inclusion, and quality of life of a heterogeneous population with special characteristics. The low educational attainments (Moores& Miller, 2009) reflect the need to think about the conceptions of deafness and their educational implications, considering the life experiences of deaf people as subjects of right with full participation in society (ONU, 2008).

The education of deaf people in Chile has been largely oblivious to the world controversy regarding the conceptions of deafness and educational models directed therein (Herrera, Puente, & Alvarado, 2009). Since the Milan Congress of 1880 oral monoligualism was imposed exclusively -and selectively within educational systems and therapeutic teaching provided in the classroom. The main aim was, thelinguistic colonization and social normalization through the teaching of speech as the exclusive access to knowledge and culture for the hearing majority (Cuevas, 2013). The Hamburg Congress of 1980 impactedthe countries deaf communities, deaf teachers and teacher training institutions, generating strong questions toward oral monolingualism. Recognizing the right of deaf people to be educated through an accessible language [like ChSL], without restrictions imposed on the learning and use of oral language, was the starting point of the changes to come. Since 1980 a new stage of teaching experimentation begun, where teachers learn ChSL and communicate with the students through it.

The social model of disability reconfigurates it as arelative phenomena, relating disability to cultural and social contexts. From this model, disability is defined as a cultural interpretation of the human variability, based on the construction of citizenship and the rights statement. The representations of deafness are reflected in educational models, going from biological perspectives to social perspectives, emphasizing the collective construction of the body condition of the different persons (Cuevas, 2013; Ladd, 2003). The critical studies about deafness consider it as a social category similar to the linguistic minorities, arguing that sign languages and the cultural features of deaf communities are the main differentiating aspect between them and other groups with disability conditions. Regarding this point, Humphries(2004) stated that deaf people have their own and particular culture and that the different communities of deaf people around the world possess shared cultural beliefs, common practices and sign languages- that are distinctive.

The conception of deafness as differenceis oftenmaterialized in educational models that value interculturality and bilingualism(De la Paz, 2012; Lissi, Svartholm, & González, 2012). Deafness is defined as a difference, valuing sign languages as acultural identity feature of deaf communities around the world. Deaf people live their lives in a visual reality that makes them to acquire knowledge differently to the hearing people (Hauser et al., 2010). The experience of being deaf allows them to generate knowledge accordingly to how deaf people learn (Holcomb, 2010). Therefore, for Moores (2010) the general theories of learning and research are not applicable to the education of deaf people. Deaf people produce knowledge (Young & Temple, 2014)and it should be part of their education and research. This perspective makes salient the sign language, the deaf culture, and the experience of being deaf for knowledge generation; making explicit the differences in the ways of acquiring knowledge and learning that are particular of the deaf people (Dye, Hauser, &Bavelier, 2008; Herrera, Puente, & Alvarado, 2014; Mayberryet al., 2011; Morford et al., 2011). Traditionally, the educational models have been centered on hearing difficulties, without considering the individual characteristics and the cultural practices of the deaf population(Humphries, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The current study starts from a qualitative methodology, which aims to look at the effective teaching strategies and the processes of literacy attainment of deaf people to propose a reading model that considers the conceptual, linguistic and cultural frame of the deaf community. The individual experience was analyzed and articulated within a social experience shared by people who identified strongly with the language and culture of the deaf community. The interviews were carried out by a deaf teacher fluent in ChSL, prior authorization and approval of the confidentiality terms were granted by the participants. The interviews were video-recorded and were later transcribed from ChSLinto written Spanish. The interviews were completed in the facilities of the "AsociaciónCiudadanía Real de Sordosen Santiago de Chile" (Association Real Citizenship of Deaf in Santiago de Chile).

Recruitment considered participants that were active in the deaf community, fluent in ChSL and having technical and/or university studies. Fourteen deaf people participated, 8 men and 6 women between 20 and 40 years old and showing deep deafness. Eleven of them did not use hearing-aids as they considered them useless. Most of them (9) acquired ChSLafter being 7 years old. Thirteen attended in primary school to a deaf school with oralist educational model and some of them with totalcommunication. All the participants attended to regular hearing school in the secondary level that did not have support programs. Eleven of them studied a technical degree and 3 of them a university degree. They work in deaf education, drawing, design, theatre, administration, and computing.

The content and discourse analyses used different qualitative techniques; a semantic study based on qualifications, associations and oppositions related to the process of learning reading and writing and a study of the discourse enunciation regarding the

identity construction of the participants. The analyses were centered in the identity narratives and educational knowledge for the alphabetization of deaf people.

RESULTS

The school and family appreciation of deafness in the life experience of the interviewed participants is diverse and constitutes a relevant factor in the construction of the personal and cultural identity. In general, the described school experiences favored a dual personal identity in relation to the community identity. The personal identity, built upon the predominance of hearing models, considered the only good models of readers. Respondents mentioned*"I will not think I'm a deaf and dumb person" (E09).*They disagree with the idea of *"reading and writing like a hearing person" (E03) or "read and understand the world as a deaf person" (E01).*Two different visions of the self-coexist, on the one hand, an individual identity that values oral and written communication as a means of social integration, and on the other hand, the collective identity that values the ChSL and the deaf community. Respondents sayed *"living in two worlds" (E09),* "learning to read help to integrate both worlds most effectively" (E06).*This construction develops and matures through time, going from negation to the acceptance of the deafness; it is also reconfigurated as a political discourse in the deaf community.

This identity is defined in the use of the ChSLin the families and in the contact with other deaf people from the community and the school, respondentssayed *"a deaf child like any other child can learn all forms of language" (E01), "deaf people think in pictures, in ChSL, in lip movements, not in words" (E12).*It gives autonomy and self-esteem. The participants refer to positive models of deaf identity that were also active readers, often within their own family. The positive models of good readers are present in both school and family, making learning largely continuous. According to the interviewed subjects, it is required to "*change the image model from hearing people reading and writing to deaf people that read and write" (E01).* The opinions differ regarding if the model of a good reader should be a hearing or a deaf reader, because their educational experiences in oralist models have nurtured a hearing model of reader. The discourses are tensioned between reading as a hearer or as a deaf person. An important element within identity construction is the participants statement that they have to *"live in two worlds"* and that they should learn to read and write in order to integrate with the world of the majority.

The interviewees valued the early acquisition ofChSL, regarding it as fundamental for learning and to construct meaning. They considered that it is better to learn ChSL first and thensecondly oral language - although not all of them had that experience. Their linguistic identity is clearly bilingual, they said they think in ChSL, read in oral language and LSCh, and write in oral language. Becoming aware of these differences has helped to overcome the learning barriers; and to generate learning strategies for the second oral language during their life.

A general narrative of the interviewees was that their school experiences were not positive. They remembered episodes of failure, frustration and negation. They

described *"routine learning"* (*E01*), *"slow processes"* (*E12*), *"lack of motivation"* (*E03*), *"few significant learning"* (*E06*), *"scares comprehension of contents"* (*E07*)[related to the limited use of teaching strategies], *"fear to ask questions"* (*E12*), *"limited vocabulary, syntactic difficulties, unavailability of support programs"* (*E04*) and *"few opportunities of participation in integrated schools"* (*E12*).

The participants produced knowledge about learning to read and write from their successful experiences of their own learning situations. The reference to the use of contexts appeared in the interviews, stating that "*an unknown word cannot be comprehended without context"(E12)*and that often the "meaning is inferred from context*" (E09).* Regarding the acquisition of personal learning strategies, they pointed out that "*all possible tools are required" (E12)*;*that "reading systematically is the only way to learn to write and that it is necessary to try different ways of writing (E03)*; that "*the teaching of reading and writing should be in two languages, that ChSL helps to achieve comprehension" (E01)*; and"*teaching Spanish grammar with visual support facilitates proper writing" (E09)*. For the participants, "*reading should create images in ChSL" (E01)*;"*education of deaf people should rely upon programs and textbooks for deaf people - and have the same curriculum as hearing people*" (*E13*). Bilingualism is valued as the educational model more favourable for the deaf students. Alongside, the participation of good deaf readers as models to imitate, and the development of strategies and visual resources of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSIONS

The social and political advances within the Knowledge and Information Society have favoured the recognition of the identities and human diversity inherent to global society. In this context, diversity is an essential element for educational systems aspiring to generate more inclusive societies. In the case of deaf people, attention to diversity requires the respect of linguistic and cultural identity and natural bilingualism. The oralist educational models have imposed principally hearing language, establishing a norm of the citizen able to understand and communicate using oral and written registers. This image was imposed upon deaf communities and consequently it was experienced as an oppressive force - making invisible their differences and identity(Cuevas, 2013; Ladd, 2003). The oral model imposed a "homogenizing" identity typical of linguistic colonialism, thus it has become the main aim of the deaf community using oral language to revert the situation.

Contact with sign language,deaf culture and identity are all initiated - in most cases - in the institutional educationsfor deaf people with a bilingual approach during the first years of their life (Anglin-Jaffe, 2013). It is there, in the relation with their peers and with adult models of deaf people, where they discover and develop their cultural and personal identity (Humphries, 2004). Also, the hearing families with deaf sons and daughters learn to communicate in ChSL during the schooling of their children in the bilingual school (De la Paz, 2012). Intercultural bilingual education includes deaf communities and deaf adults; provides models to imitate and also participates in the educational processes sharing their knowledge in the teaching and learning.

Deaf education requires teaching practices that are effective and based on evidence of experience to take teaching decisions. The deaf teachers need to rely on knowledge concerning multiple strategies, multiple languages and multiple ways to satisfy the needs of their students (Easterbrook & Beal-Alvarez, 2013). The development of specific programs and strategies to teach reading and writing to bilingual deaf students (Herrera, Puente, & Alvarado, 2014)promotes personal and cultural identity of the deaf people, and also their self-esteem and generation of educational knowledge regarding diverse ways to learn in the diversity.

Finally, the world view – inclusive of ideas concerning learning -from the deaf communities perspective differs to that of the hearing community, and this is one of the problems regarding the models and strategies that are required for use. Deaf people build their thought using images, signs, actions, movements, spatial orientations, etc., all without words. The educational proposals should explore this world view and design programs that promote learning of reading and writing but also that promote personal and cultural identities and that favor the exercise of citizenship.

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