Parents Sharing Books With Young Deaf Children in Spoken English and in BSL: The Common and Diverse Features of Different Language Settings

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Twelve parents of young deaf children were recorded sharing books with their deaf child—six from families using British Sign Language (BSL) and six from families using spoken English. Although all families were engaged in sharing books with their deaf child and concerned to promote literacy development, they approached the task differently and had different expectations in terms of outcome. The sign bilingual families concentrated on using the book to promote BSL development, engaging in discussion around the book but without referring to the text, whereas the spoken language families were focused on features of the text and less inclined to use the book to promote wider knowledge. Implications for early intervention and support are drawn from the data.

This paper presents the findings of a study into deaf children’s early experiences of literacy at home. The study was a qualitative investigation into early literacy practices of families with deaf children that draws on research that does not take a deficit stance toward deaf children’s literacy but considers its positive features within a developmental paradigm. Our use of the term “deaf” in this context includes children with moderate to profound hearing loss. The project considers two groups of deaf children, those from sign bilingual homes and those from spoken English homes. The possibility that literacy development for the two groups of deaf children is likely to follow different routes is fundamental to this study because it is likely that different strategies will prove to be facilitative for each group. This has implications for parents and teachers of the deaf interacting with these young deaf children. The study was driven by the continued search for an understanding of how deaf children learn to read and what factors influence their success. In general, deaf children’s standards of literacy remain low, and it is the area of education in which they most significantly underachieve (Luckner, Sebald, Cooney, Young, & Muir, 2005; Powers, Gregory, & Thoutenhoofd, 1998).

Research studies that do demonstrate higher levels of achievement tend to be relevant to particular groups of deaf children rather than the breadth of the population. For example, Lewis (1996) provides evidence of the achievements of a cohort of deaf children using a particular communication approach (natural auralism), whereas other studies have demonstrated the achievements of deaf children of deaf parents (Moores, 2001; Paul, 1998). Most studies also focus on school-aged children or school leavers, but relatively few have considered early literacy of deaf children at home. Current research into literacy seems to focus largely on discrete components of the reading process such as phonological skills (e.g., Harris & Moreno, 2006).

Williams’ (2004) review of the literature on deaf children’s emergent literacy concluded that there was a need for case studies that cross the boundaries of home and school contexts and that consider a broader
array of deaf children, taking into account “the cognitive, social, and cultural aspects of their literacy learning” (Williams, 2004, p. 362). This study aims to do this by investigating the children’s literacy experiences at home and the parent perspective as well as the nature of the involvement and support of the educational professionals involved. This is intended to inform our understanding of early literacy development but also point to implications for intervention or support and identify facilitative practices.

For this study literacy was taken as encompassing reading and writing, that is, children’s early engagement with print. We acknowledge that “literacy” is a contested term, both within mainstream and special educational settings (Layton & Miller, 2004), but this narrow definition of literacy as “reading and writing” reflects the focus of the available research in deafness and early literacy, what Williams (2004) describes as:

Children’s initial encounters with print and early reading and writing development (Williams, 2004, p. 351)

This definition fits the study’s aims as it is the practices around print that can present the greatest challenge for young deaf children and their families.

Literacy is viewed as one aspect of young deaf children’s “semiotic practice” (Gillen & Hall, 2003), that is, one of a variety of ways that deaf children make meaning. This is consonant with research into early childhood literacy for hearing children, which has recently burgeoned (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Research has shown that young children’s literacy development begins in the social environment of the home, and community, and that these early experiences with print pave the way for more formal literacy instruction at school age. To explore this aspect of deaf children’s development, reference is made to the social interactionist theories, which assert that the role of social interaction is central to children’s spoken and written language development (Anning & Edwards, 1999; Garton & Pratt, 1989). Within this theoretical perspective, the analytical concept to be explored concerns the nature and characteristics of parent–child interaction around home literacy events.

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory asserts that children’s skill development requires the interaction of two parties. This has been developed into the notion of child as apprentice, learning alongside a guiding adult (Rogoff, 2003). This study thus explores the problems of conceptualizing young deaf children’s early interaction around text within a social interactionist model. This stance allows deaf children’s early literacy experiences to be conceptualized within the context of their unique language-learning environment. Young (2003) suggests that research into early experience for deaf children is only meaningful if the findings are examined within a specific social/cultural context. Empirical work needs to take full account of a child’s home environment, with its individual characteristics (e.g., Cairney, 2003; McNaughton, 1995; Pahl, 2002), including the language being used with the child, when considering early literacy practices.

This focus on context and the social environment is congruent with a sociocultural construct of literacy, which highlights the importance of the interaction between children and adults during literacy events. This prevailing view, which builds on work into early interaction by Bruner (1983) and Vygotsky (1978), suggests that children acquire literacy as they engage in meaningful activity and social dialogue around written language. It is therefore not surprising that the activity of storybook sharing has received more research attention than any other aspect of early literacy development because book sharing is essentially social and entails a central role for the adult.

The social nature of book sharing is seen as a key factor in supporting young children’s literacy development and has also been shown to relate to their later success in school (Wells, 1987). The familiar and predictable routines that children learn when they are sharing a book with an adult (described by Bruner [1983] as formats) help them learn to participate in the activity and also provide a framework for their own storytelling and reenactment. This is also recognizable as “scaffolding,” which Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized as strategies that adults use to help children carry out tasks that stretch their unassisted potential. By engaging in these activities, children are developing their verbal language and also learning fundamental reading behaviors, such as book handling,
awareness of written language, and conventions of print. Storybook sharing also helps young children to develop their concepts of print, letter identification, and word recognition, thus preparing them for early attempts at conventional reading (Justice & Ezell, 2000; Neumann, 1997).

Storybook sharing has the potential to allow the adult–child interaction to go beyond the here and now and to engage in more decontextualized talk. This can be characterized by language about situations beyond the immediate present (Leseman, Kuys, & Triesheijn, 1995). It is argued that such language skills as prediction, inference, and definition may be central to learning to read (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Snow & Tabors, 1993).

The success of the interaction between parent and child for this activity is crucial, and to take this further, some studies have argued that the actual bond between parent and child can affect the book reading (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1997). This draws our attention to the affective aspects of book sharing. Adult interaction styles that facilitate linguistic development in this context have been particularly scrutinized. Wood, Wood, Griffiths, and Howarth (1986) used the term “contingency” to describe adult responses to infant activities that are likely to foster the development of self-efficacy, understanding, and communication. This requires interaction that provides opportunities for initiative, which is challenging but not demoralizing. Typically, it can be seen in adult comments, which continue and expand topics introduced by the child (semantic contingency) or which add new information to a topic or ask for clarification from the child. This is often characterized by a more equal-like partnership in discourse. Indeed, some research suggests that children can also be “highly tuned” to their mother’s styles of reading (Morgan, 2005, p. 300) and know how to elicit feedback from them.

A specific example of high involvement on the child’s part is dialogic reading where the child becomes the storyteller and the adult assumes the role of an active listener, adding information, and asking questions. This prompts the child to increase the sophistication of descriptions of the material in the picture book and has been shown to improve the language skills of hearing children (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). This process involves a shift in the parent’s role from just reading aloud to engaging the child’s active participation and focusing on the child’s interpretations and reactions to the story.

These notions of contingency and reciprocity have been further explored in research into the structure of the interactions around literacy where there has been an attempt to define and describe successful interaction in this context. Meier (2000) talks about active literacy engagement in which children become “engaged in meaningful and creative ways with books and literacy activities,” (p. 18). Certainly, activity and involvement on the child’s part are essential to their engagement, but what we perceive to be meaningful and creative can be difficult to pin down. We would suggest that what is seen to be meaningful contextually and indeed culturally specific could be investigated in relation to deaf children in different language environments.

Loots and Devise (2003) take this further to describe a more general conception of shared and reciprocal involvement, which they term intersubjectivity. This term has been taken from earlier work by Rommetveit (1985), Stern (1998), and Trevarthen (1995), who used it to describe the fine-tuned reciprocal communication between infants and their mothers through mutual use of sounds, mimicking, and movement.

The application of the notion of intersubjectivity to the discussion of development of deaf children provides a useful overarching term, which suggests that a reciprocal exchange takes place on various levels. First, behavior and affect are seen as important, that is, how the partners interact physically over the activity. One indicator of this could be the seating arrangements and closeness of the partners. It also distinguishes between the reciprocal nature of the interaction, that is, how intentions and attention are shared, and the actual creation of linguistic meaning or outcome of the interaction. It is these definitions that have informed our conceptualization of successful interaction around book sharing and thus shaped the analysis framework for this project, which is discussed below. They also provide a context within which to consider deaf children’s early literacy experiences.
Issues for Young Deaf Children

We consider that the specific case of deaf children requires the consideration of literacy development within the individual’s wider meaning-making context. Clearly, the sociocultural context is important for all children (e.g., Baquedano-Lopez, 2003), but there are particular considerations that obtain for deaf children in terms of their early language experience and their home language environment. Deaf children may be raised in a home where sign language is used as the primary means of communication. This is likely to have practical implications for literacy experiences and may have cultural implications for the way that literacy is viewed, particularly in families where the parents are deaf themselves. Alternatively, deaf children may be raised in homes where spoken language is used for communication. Their experience of early literacy is still likely to differ from that of hearing children because of the implications of hearing loss and possible delay in language development. Deaf children’s early literacy experience will therefore be influenced by this diverse and complex set of factors, and research so far has not looked across different types of language environment.

Research into deafness and early development often suffers from a polarized approach where oral/aural and sign bilingual issues are explored separately (Gallaway & Young, 2003). This results in findings that are either only relevant to specific groups of children or which are overgeneralized but do not actually reflect the real diversity of the population as a whole. We would argue that more can be learnt by looking at specific issues across the continuum of communication approaches. Our goal is therefore to be inclusive in our scope but specific in our examples to allow for the identification of shared and distinct early literacy experiences. Our review of the literature on parent and child interaction around literacy events therefore encompasses both spoken and sign language environments. We will use the term “sign bilingual” to refer to homes where British Sign Language (BSL) and English are used and where BSL is likely to be the language of mediation for literacy activities. This encompasses families where one or more parent may be deaf and also hearing families who would describe themselves as bilingual and use BSL. We will use the term “spoken language home” to refer to homes where spoken English is the preferred language of the home and therefore used by the parents to mediate the literacy activities. This does not exclude families where one or more parent may be deaf as it is the language of the environment that is the central criterion.

Early Literacy in Sign Bilingual Homes

Research into hearing children’s early literacy experiences shows that how mothers manage conversations with their young children around shared activities is crucial for early language development. The particular challenge for a deaf child and parent is that everything is going through the visual channel. Research, which began in the 1980s, has shown that deaf mothers are adapted to this and employ a set of attention-getting and directing strategies that are unique and which influence the timing and structure of their input (Spencer & Harris, 2006). The identified characteristics of facilitative early visual communication are pertinent to this project because they focus on the relationship between what mothers say to their children within the context of a particular activity. Research that focuses more specifically on parents and deaf children sharing books identifies a number of facilitative conditions that we have grouped into the three categories of: (a) practical communication strategies, (b) style of interaction, and (c) climate (the affective features) of the activity.

There are a number of studies, which identify practical communication strategies that deaf mothers use when engaging their children in a book-sharing activity. One of the most comprehensive breakdowns of these strategies is provided by Lartz and Lestina (1995). They identified strategies used by three deaf mothers while reading to their children aged 3–5 years old. The six categories/strategies that all mothers used included the following:

2. Text paired with sign demonstration (pointing to text, elaborating with American Sign Language (ASL) explanations, then to text).
3. Real-world connection between text/picture and child’s experience.

4. Attention maintenance (tapping shoulder or lap, elbow nudging, and moving book).

5. Facial tone and body posture demonstrating character changes.

6. Nonmanual signals as questions (nose-twitch, lowered and raise eyebrows, and mouth movement).

Other studies have found similar types of strategies although there are some additions and elaboration such as the use of eye gaze and pointing to maintain attention and the parents’ translation of the stories into ASL (Akamatsu & Andrews, 1993). These practical strategies appear to facilitate relaxed book-sharing activities between deaf children and their deaf parents. Individually, these strategies seem straightforward and rather obvious, but actually these intuitive behaviors that deaf parents are able, probably mostly unconsciously, to deploy, are not likely to come naturally to hearing parents of deaf children. Research with hearing parent–infant dyads shows that adults are sensitive to the nonverbal cues provided by their infants and are able to adjust their responses and feedback accordingly (Papousek & Papousek, 1987). Koestler’s (1992, 1994) studies of how this applies to deaf–hearing dyads show that these so-called intuitive parental behaviors can be disrupted in interactions where the parent or child is deaf.

Alongside these practical strategies, it is also possible to identify a particular style of parent–child interaction in these bilingual settings, which further promote successful book-sharing episodes. An early study by Andrews and Taylor (1987) looked at this in detail by examining the behavior of a deaf mother when reading a book to her 3.5-year-old son. The mother was observed giving her son necessary support to respond correctly to questions and discussions about ideas in the book. She rarely responded to her son in a critical or negative manner, and she held the activity using many of the practical strategies mentioned above. Follow-up studies into this seem to stress the contingent nature of the parents’ interaction. That is, their ability to follow the child’s lead and develop the activity from the child’s interest thus assuming a less controlling role (Schleper, 1997; Van der Lem & Timmerman, 1990).

The third feature of these successful book-sharing episodes is the climate of these activities, which is possibly a result of the attitudes and experiences of the parents. This is perhaps the most significant feature, in that it brings all other behaviors together, but also the most intangible one. What comes through from the research is that successful examples of parent–child book sharing take place in a positive and supportive environment with parents who expect their child to become literate (Ewoldt, 1994; Schleper, 1997). The creation of this environment relies on the adults’ own experiences and perceptions of deafness and reading, which is perhaps why this is the most difficult feature of this activity for hearing parents to replicate or learn. Erting (1992) explains this by examining the different ways in which we see the deaf child. That is, how our expectations are shaped, not only by our experience of deafness but also by our assumptions and set of beliefs that we might hold about deafness. Erting argues that it is through the interactional framework provided by adults that children learn to use language and are thus introduced to literacy events. Therefore, parents who hold a positive view of deafness, which centers on difference rather than deficiency, are more likely to create a supportive environment for social interaction thus paving the way for early literacy development. It is argued that this approach to deafness, that is, “to a view of the child as a whole, as a competent learner but one who requires a visual environment in which to thrive” (Ertíng, 1992, p. 102) also raises expectations. Barriers to success cease to be located within the child, and the onus therefore shifts to the adults to make literacy events accessible and meaningful.

The shared reading project developed at the Laurent Clerc Centre at Gallaudet University brings together the themes we have identified that facilitate early shared literacy experiences in the home (Schleper, 1997). The aim of this practical project was to help deaf and hard of hearing children become better readers in school by teaching parents and carers how to use ASL to share a book with their deaf children. The coaching of the parents/carers centered on the importance of reading aloud to young children and how to do this through visual channel. Parents were tutored in 15 principles of book sharing that were
derived from research into how deaf adults read books to young deaf children. These principles reflect the research we have reviewed in that there is attention to practical strategies, style of interaction, and the environment or climate of the activity. The evaluation of the project by Delk and Weidekemp (2001) found that hearing parents and carers learnt from deaf adults in their reading with their deaf children that led to positive changes in terms of improved family communication deaf children's reading of English. Pertinent to this current project are the recommendations that deaf adults should be seen as models for some aspects of reading with deaf children and the importance placed on conversations around books prior to attention to the text.

Early Literacy in Spoken Language Homes

In contrast to the number of detailed studies discussed above in relation to early literacy in sign bilingual homes, very few studies have adopted a similar approach to early literacy development in deaf children using spoken language. There is often an assumption that oral deaf children will follow the same literacy development route as hearing children. Webster (1999) described literacy in deaf children using spoken language as "literacy same" (as hearing children). This view that literacy development in deaf children using spoken language is the same as that of hearing children can lead inevitably to comparisons with hearing children and attempts to address areas where deaf children are not achieving the same levels as hearing children. Swanwick and Watson (2005) suggested that the term "literacy similar" more accurately describes the process. This term, although anticipating that progress will follow a similar route to hearing children, allows for some differences and can enable a move away from a deficit model.

One study of relevance investigated hearing mothers reading books to their deaf children (Plessow-Wolfson & Epstein, 2005). The study found that all the deaf children engaged actively and willingly with the process of book sharing and that the mothers all used affect in their presentations. The researchers concluded that the individual dyads provided examples of "mutuality and reciprocation during story reading" (p. 377). There are few studies that report and analyze these successful episodes in spoken language contexts. The importance of the affective features of the activity is highlighted much more in sign language contexts, and this is a feature we will return to in our analysis.

One finding that recurs in the literature is the relative level of control exerted by the child or mother. Bishop and Gregory (1985) found that deaf children engaged with longer and more elaborate dialog with teachers than with mothers but that with mothers the children were able to initiate conversation more and exert greater control, sometimes turning the page of the book. Other research (e.g., Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972) found that mothers of deaf children were more controlling than mothers of hearing children in many situations.

Other researchers (e.g., Prezbindowski, Adamson, & Lederberg, 1998; Waxman & Spencer, 1997) have found that hearing mothers of deaf children find greater difficulty in establishing joint reference with their deaf children. There was no study that examined this interaction in relation to early literacy activities across the spectrum of communication approaches used with deaf children.

One paper that does present findings that are relevant to this study is a report by Gioia (2001). This was a study of literacy acquisition in three deaf preschoolers, whose primary focus was to document the ways in which they interacted with and around storybooks. In contrast to the current study, the research context was the preschool class. At the start of the study, the teacher did not use or refer to the text of the book at all. She held the belief that by looking at the pictures and talking about them and paraphrasing the text the children's interest would be sustained and they would learn more. The researcher, drawing on claims that by not using the text the children were being exposed to less rich language (Stewart, Bonkowski, & Bennett, 1990), persuaded the teacher to experiment with reading the text verbatim. The teacher then did this, encouraging the children to read as she pointed to the text and introducing vocabulary pertaining to book reading, for example, "author" and "title." The children engaged enthusiastically with this activity and were eager to be the next to
“read.” This contrast between the use of pictures for conversation and text for reading will be another focus of our study.

A second aspect of this paper, which will inform our data collection and analysis, is the reported findings from the interviews with the parents of these children. At the start of the study, all the parents reported that they had failed to develop satisfactory (in their terms) shared reading rituals with their deaf children. When they were videoed at the end of the project, there was a marked difference in the parents’ confidence around book sharing. The children had carried over to the home setting their school reading rituals and were found to initiate the book sharing and to take control of it in several ways, for example, by choosing the book, the positioning of themselves and their parents, turning the pages, and making contributions.

Method

This study considered families with young deaf children, in sign bilingual and spoken language homes as defined above. We had concluded that there was scope for a study that researched early literacy in homes where BSL was used as the main language for communication and the language of mediation for literacy events and a parallel study researching early literacy in homes where spoken language was used as the main language of communication with deaf children and for literacy events. We anticipated that the results of such a study would yield data that could be applied across the range of language and communication approaches used with young deaf children, as described in Swanwick and Watson (2005).

The following hypotheses underpinned this study:

- That parents of young deaf children will attempt to foster early literacy development and that they will engage in informal and formal literacy activities
- That parents will show a wide variety of strategies to promote early reading activities with their child
- That deaf and hearing parents’ strategies will differ depending on their language preferences
- That deaf and hearing parents’ different strategies will result in different outcomes from the literacy activities

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

- What practices do parents in different language homes engage in to promote early literacy in their young deaf children?
- How successful are these activities, and what is the nature of that success?
- What is their underlying rationale for these practices?

Participants

Twelve families took part in the study. The families were nominated and approached through their local Service for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children. The families formed two groups of six, one group comprised sign bilingual families and the other group comprised spoken language families. The first criterion for both groups was that the family should have a deaf child aged between 3 and 5 years. This age range was chosen with the aim that the children would be of an age when they would be likely to be interested in book sharing but not yet have entered school.

For the sign bilingual group, an additional criterion was that the main language used within the home and with the deaf child should be BSL. The mother in one family was hearing, and the rest of the parents were deaf. For the spoken English group the criterion was that the main language used within the home and with the deaf child should be spoken English. All six children in this group were severely or profoundly deaf. Five were using a cochlear implant, and one was wearing postaural hearing aids. Ten parents were hearing, and the father from one family was profoundly deaf and the mother from another family was severely deaf.

We did not impose any further criteria regarding degree of hearing loss, learning difficulties, or family background. The focus of the study was on the interactions between parents and deaf children and between the participants and the books. We wanted to investigate the extent to which both parties (parents and children) were able to adapt their behaviors to each other. We therefore decided that the child’s
language level (in English or BSL) was not the over-
riding concern, rather it was the parent’s ability to
adapt to that language level that was of paramount
importance. The children’s language level was not
therefore tested, and the children in the study showed
variation in their language development.

Table 1 gives details of the 12 families involved in
the study.

Two researchers collected the data: a hearing re-
searcher collected the data from the spoken language
homes, and a deaf researcher, bilingual in BSL and
English, collected the data from the sign bilingual
homes. The use of two researchers, who used the same
language as the families they were researching, was an
important aspect of the research design. Two pilot
studies were undertaken, one for a spoken language
family and the other for a sign bilingual family. Both
researchers visited each of these two families together.
The purpose of the two pilot studies was to test the
procedures that had been devised and to enable
the two researchers to check that they were giving
the same instructions to parents and following the
same procedures.

The researchers made two visits to each family. At
the first visit, a DVD recording was made of the child
and mother sharing two books. Although it was not
stipulated that it should be the mother, in each case it
was the mother who most frequently shared books
with the child, and so the DVD recording was made
of the child and mother. The family, either the mother
or child, chose one of the child’s own books as the
first book, and the researcher provided the second.

For purposes of comparison, the researchers used
the same book with each family and gave a copy to the
child to keep. The book was “Where’s My Teddy?”
(Alborough, 2002). This book was chosen because it
was considered to be attractive to children of this age,
and the story line was amenable to being conveyed in
spoken language or BSL. The researcher requested
the family to complete a diary record of literacy activ-
ities for 4 weeks.

At the second visit, 4 weeks later, the researcher
interviewed the mother. The researcher played an ex-
tact from the child and mother sharing their own
book and then the whole of the sharing of the second
book. Using the recording as the starting point, the
researcher interviewed the mother about the child’s
early literacy experiences and the mother’s view of
the process.

Results

The data on book sharing were initially analyzed using
a set of criteria that had been identified as significant
from the review of the literature. The focus was largely
the interaction between the individuals (the deaf chil-
dren and their mothers) and interaction between the
individuals and the books.

These initial categories (formulated from the re-
view of the literature) are summarized in Table 2.

The recording of the book sharing for each mother–
child dyad was analyzed using these categories. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Degree of deafness</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Cochlear implant</th>
<th>Hearing aids</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>2 yr 7 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy</td>
<td>2 yr 6 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>5 yr 10 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>4 yr 5 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>4 yr 0 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>4 yr 2 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>3 yr 10 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>3 yr 5 m</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edith</td>
<td>4 yr 2 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>3 yr 6 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>4 yr 4 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>4 yr 3 m</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. yr: year; m: month.
two investigators and two researchers analyzed the recordings of the two pilot studies together and reached agreement on coding. The rest of the recordings were analyzed by the relevant researcher and investigator individually and then discussed with the rest of the group to ensure that there was agreement. The process was repeated for each dyad, thus increasing the opportunity for the researchers and investigators to peer review each other’s work and therefore increase the trustworthiness of the decisions. A form of triangulation was also employed in that the interviews were examined in order to find evidence to support or contradict the findings. The same categories were used for both groups of participants. Table 3 shows the results for a child from a sign bilingual home and Table 4 the results for a child from a spoken language home.

The initial analysis of the book-sharing activities highlighted the differences between and within the two groups. One striking difference on first viewing the recordings was the way each dyad positioned themselves, with some sitting side by side and others much further apart and facing each other. A second difference related to the relative level of control between mother and child, with a few mothers wanting to control the activity. This was demonstrated by the mother taking physical hold of the book and then leading the activity, attempting to cast the child into a passive role. Plessow-Wolfson and Epstein (2005) observed this phenomenon in their study of book sharing and concluded that “the mother’s need for control minimized the zone of proximal development” (p. 375). The most striking observation, however, was that there were differences between the dyads in the nature of the activity itself. At first, the focus of our attention was on these differences. However, then we realized that some of the differences were at a surface level and might serve to distract from underlying commonalities.

We therefore realized that by analyzing the data according to these predetermined categories alone, we risked missing some new findings that might emerge from this unique study. We decided to reanalyze the interactions, allowing categories to arise from the data, following the notion of “grounded theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Having allowed the categories to emerge, we then grouped them using a different framework that was based on the notion of intersubjectivity defined by Loots and Devise (2003) as shared involvement in a reciprocal exchange. The three groupings used were behavior and affect (the physical context of the activity), intentions and attention (creation of shared values through action and how the two partners mutually engage in the activity), and the creation of linguistic and symbolic meaning (how the particular use of language leads to a certain type of shared meaning). Table 5 shows the categories used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Initial categories for analysis (all data)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raw data</td>
<td>Initial categories for analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| DVD material of parent and child engaged in book sharing | • Parent organization/management of the listening/watching environment  
• Parental and child language use (speech, BSL, and finger spelling)  
• Parent strategies for establishing, optimizing, and maintaining auditory/visual attention  
• Roles of child and parent in leading, initiating, and responding  
• Parent focus on book (meaning and context)  
• Parent focus on print, letter sounds, or shapes  
• Child’s demonstration of comprehension  
• Parent strategies for checking comprehension  |
| Parents’ written recollections and samples of literacy events shared with their young deaf child over a 4-week period | • Evidence of type and range of literacy activities taking place at home  
• Evidence of parent view of and approach to early literacy  
• Evidence in support of interview outcomes |
Table 3  Child (Jacob) and mother sharing book in sign bilingual home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book sharing—categories for analysis</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Evidence or examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions and communication style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for listening?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acoustic/lighting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for watching?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement/seating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom and Jacob sit next to each other on sofa just far enough apart for comfortable eye contact and shared attention to the book. They are comfortable and can touch each other but are not too close. There is a clear enjoyed and relaxed routine.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The session lasts 20 min and Jacob is involved all the time and is prepared to continue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the activity work practically?</td>
<td>Jacob holds both books and turns the pages. He leads the pace by doing this and by pointing to aspect of the pictures, making a comment and then looking to mom for a response or an explanation.</td>
<td>Jacob starts off the activity by commenting on the title page and describing the difference in size between the two bears. He then looks to mom who gives some more information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it managed? Who leads?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parent language use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main form of communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BSL/spoken English/bimodal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in language use and purpose (e.g., add voice to a sign to show lip pattern or add sign to a speech to support meaning)</td>
<td>Both mom and Jacob use BSL all the time. There is no use of any voice during either book sessions. No attention is given to any print in either book, including on the title page and there is no use of finger spelling in book activity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of finger spelling—specific purpose/role</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Particular strategies (e.g., signs on book or shows lip pattern)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Child language use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Main form of communication</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSL/spoken English/bimodal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in language use and purpose (e.g., use of voice with text or use of a sign where word unknown)</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of finger spelling—specific purpose/role</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular strategies (e.g., signs on book or asks for repetition)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Maintaining shared focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of voice, touch, and gesture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other ways of involving the child (e.g., making signs on the book)</td>
<td>There is a shared focus on the book that is maintained through joint attention to the book and eye contact between Jacob and mom. Mom also often nudges Jacob to get or maintain his attention when she is explaining something or telling part of the story. They both sign in the space between them, near the book.</td>
<td>Jacob routinely points to a picture and offers a comment and then looks to mom for her feedback or further explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book sharing—categories for analysis</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Evidence or examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Child role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Storyteller or audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens/watches</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tells the story</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talks about pictures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacob is actively involved. He talks about pictures and tries to make the story from them. He shares his ideas with mom and also asks questions by pointing to specific aspects of the pictures and looking to her for information.</td>
<td>Jacob repeatedly comments that the boy is frightened and then looks to mom for more information.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. Parent role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Storyteller or audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Extends meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses pictures or text?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses storybook to develop language/concepts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uses storytelling for listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mom lets Jacob lead the pace initially but she takes every opportunity to tell the story more fully. She responds to his questions or references to the opportunities and extends the story detail each time. She asks Jacob questions about the pictures and also seeks his attention to give him more story information.</td>
<td>Jacob starts off the story by describing the title page and mom adds that the big bear is real and the small bear is pretend. Jacob repeats and copies her signs exactly.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8. Focus on meaning (specify parent or child)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extends language using pictures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asks child to clarify (points to pictures)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explains ideas/events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacob tries to describe each picture and mom uses the pictures to tell the story more fully. It is a conversation around the pictures where mom extends Jacob's understanding and use of BSL.</td>
<td>Jacob comments that the boy is afraid and mom elaborates on why he is afraid (alone and lost). Jacob comments on the expression of the boys and the bear when they meet and mom explains that they have swapped bears.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. Focus on words or letters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(parent/child)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points to and reads/signs precise words</td>
<td></td>
<td>There is no focus on or attention to print from either the mom or Jacob.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fingerspells words or letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignores text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks meaning of a word</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent focus on text</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. Focus on pictures (parent/child)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk is mainly about the pictures</td>
<td></td>
<td>The entire focus of both book activities is on the pictures—it is a conversation about the pictures, in cases, where Jacob comments and requests information and mom elaborates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures used to clarify or add to story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child focuses on pictures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11. Use of the book (parent/child)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is it used?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jacob always holds the book and turns the pages. This controls the pace of the activity which mom sometimes has to slow down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How held by whom?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes Jacob keeps turning the pages when mom is still explaining an aspect of the story, so she holds his arm or turns the page back to the relevant picture. Then he resumes control.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4  Mother and child (Joanne) sharing book in spoken language home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book sharing—categories for analysis</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Evidence or examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions and communication style</td>
<td>Sat in an armchair, with Joanne sitting next to mom, in very close contact. Mom often looked at Joanne but Joanne mainly looked at the book. The lighting was good. Had the feel of a familiar situation, Joanne knew her own books well. Could hear well and responded to spoken language.</td>
<td>Joanne less engaged when reading her own book, which she knew well and was not demanding. Liked the bear book and made contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for listening?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acoustic/lighting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for watching?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement/seating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the activity work practically?</td>
<td>Mom managed the situation. Mom took lead on choice of book. Teaching initial letter sounds for words. Concentrating on single word vocabulary and counting.</td>
<td>Mom said “Shall we have the Blue Kangaroo book?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it managed? Who leads?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parent language use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main form of communication</td>
<td>Spoken language. Occasional gestures. Mom asked lots of questions for Joanne to answer, repeated the answers given, explained what was happening. Used own books to teach sounds.</td>
<td>Mom walked fingers across the book to illustrate a character walking and made pushing gesture for swing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSL/spoken English/bimodal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in language use and purpose (e.g., add voice to a sign to show lip pattern or add sign to a speech to support meaning)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of finger spelling—specific purpose/role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular strategies (e.g., signs on book or shows lip pattern)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Child language use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main form of communication</td>
<td>Spoken language. Uses some gestures and one or two signs. Copies those of mother. Responds to mom’s request to name objects or provide sounds for initial letters of words for her own books, points to objects, and comments or looks at mom with bear book.</td>
<td>Joanne walks fingers across the pages of the book in imitation of mom. Points to squirrel in book and says “mouse” and mom responds by affirming and giving correct name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSL/spoken English/bimodal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in language use and purpose (e.g., use of voice with text or use of a sign where word unknown)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular strategies (e.g., signs on book or asks for repetition)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Maintaining shared focus</td>
<td>Uses combination of voice and pointing to a picture or part of a picture. Expressive use of voice.</td>
<td>“Look Joanne, the little boy’s crying.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of voice, touch, and gesture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ways of involving the child (e.g., making signs on the book)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Child role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller or audience</td>
<td>Audience for own books—responds with seeming reluctance to mom’s requests for naming objects etc. (Book was mom’s choice). Listens and looks at book carefully for bear book and makes contributions and asks questions.</td>
<td>Joanne looks carefully at the pictures and points to objects, drawing them to mom’s attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens/watches</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tells the story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about pictures</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
for analysis. There were therefore two levels of analysis. The first used categories that had been predetermined by the investigators and the second a framework that was selected after examination of the data. This second stage could therefore be described as quasi-inductive.

Once we progressed to using this framework for analysis, the commonalities and differences between and within the two groups became more apparent, as discussed below.
The Physical Aspect

In all six sign bilingual cases, the mother and child position themselves side by side on a sofa for the book sharing, suggesting a familiar and comfortable routine. One pair starts off at a table and the child is restless and tired but when they move to the sofa she is more engaged. It is interesting that all but one of the pairs sit side by side close enough to share the book and touch each other but with enough space between them to be able to have eye contact and sign to each other. The exception to this is one deaf–hearing pair that sit very close to each other, the child is sometimes on the mother’s knee in front of her, so that there is no signing space between them or opportunities for eye contact.

This positioning is important because eye contact within the deaf–deaf pairs is integral to the activity. The use of eye contact maintains a shared focus and facilitates turn taking, often by providing a means for the child to seek input, clarification, or confirmation from the parent. Eye contact is less of a feature of the two deaf–hearing pairs in the sign bilingual group. The closeness of one pair makes eye contact almost impossible, and although the mother searches for it, the child remains focused on the book for the most part. The other hearing mother is very focused on the book herself and on the telling of the story and therefore does not make much eye contact with the child although he watches her.

In all cases touch is used, mainly by the mother, to gain attention. The approach varies between the pairs. A fleeting touch on the arm suffices for two deaf–deaf pairs and a quick nudge or a tap for others. One deaf mother has to work harder to involve the child, and she uses more persistent tapping. The deaf–hearing pair that is positioned very close together is touching all the time, and the mother tries mainly tapping to gain the child’s attention but he rarely responds. To compensate for this, she signs directly in front of him.
or on the book or on his body, for example, she makes
the sign for BEAR around his trunk and the sign for
CAT on his face.

Although there are a number of individual differ-
ences, it is clear that book sharing, for all the pairs, is
a physically close and enjoyable shared activity. All the
pairs are comfortable and participating in what ap-
ppears to be a familiar routine, and this is an important
contributing factor to the affective side of this activity.

Interactional Aspect

These physical/affective conditions facilitate the ways
in which the pairs interact and mutually engage in the
book-sharing activity. Analysis of the interaction pro-
vided information about the social dynamics of the
activity and the features of the communication.

There was variation across the sign bilingual group
in terms of the roles undertaken by mother and child.
All six pairs did effectively manage to share their at-
tention between the book and each other but to vary-
ing degrees. One of the deaf–deaf activities is led
mainly by the child in that he takes control of the book
and becomes the storyteller, just checking certain
items of vocabulary with his mother and glancing at
her regularly for feedback. All the other mothers
take a larger role in the storytelling although one other
child still manages the book. In three of the deaf pairs
there is strong and similar evidence of the child’s en-
gagement in the activity. All three children watch and
repeat any new signs given by the mother, and they
also show their attentiveness through eye contact and
nodding and by asking questions about the book usu-
ally by pointing at the pictures and then looking at the
mother. This last move is also common to the other
three pairs even though the involvement is not other-
wise as reciprocal in that the children make few con-
tributions to the activity.

Where the activity was less reciprocal, the parent
communication strategies had similar features. This
was most marked in the two deaf–hearing pairs where
the children had fewer opportunities to contribute. In
one case this was because the mother did not seek the
child's contribution or check his attention to the story.
Her attention was focused mainly on the book, and so
she was not aware when the child was watching and
was not able to incorporate his contribution into the
activity. The interaction was not contingent on the
child. In the other situation it is physically difficult
for attention to be shared because of the seating ar-
rangement and the child has very limited space to sign
or make eye contact with the mother. There is also
little time allowed for the child to make a contribution
as the mother leads the storytelling.

Symbolic Aspect

The features of the interaction show us how the pairs
successfully share their attention and their intentions,
but looking at how language is used tells us more about
the outcome of the activity in terms of the shared
meanings that evolve.

BSL is used by five of the six parents in the book-
sharing activities, for both books. No lip patterns or
voice was used in response to the text, and it is a purely
BSL activity although it is based around an English
source. Just one parent used signs in English word
order when she was reading the text, but she did not
use her voice alongside this.

The five pairs who use BSL share a lot of features
in terms of language use and the outcomes of the
activity. It is interesting that, apart from some atten-
tion to the book title, none of the mothers follow the
text or use the text in their storytelling. These pairs all
engage in sharing the story to a greater or lesser de-
gree. The hearing–deaf pair demonstrates only limited
shared meaning as the mother dominates the storytell-
ing with few contributions and limited eye contact
from the child. This is largely due to the mother’s
interaction style discussed previously. However, the
child does move the mother’s finger to certain places
on the page as if in request for information, which
suggests that a routine is developing where the child
might later be more involved in the activity. The re-
main ing deaf–deaf pairs share the experience of the
story more fully because the features of the interaction
discussed earlier (turn taking, eye contact, and contin-
gency) enable it. This results in three of the four cases
in a lively discussion around the story in the book
where the storytelling is led by the mother, but the
child contributes, asks questions, repeats information,
and talks about the pictures. The fourth child is
engaged but appears too tired to contribute. The discussion for these five pairs does not move beyond the story itself, but the parents give far more information than the text in the book and opportunities are taken to introduce and reinforce new sign vocabulary.

The data from the interviews with the parents in this group supported our analysis insofar as they regarded the important factor related to book sharing with their children to be the necessity to convey the story:

I would try to link, so that he could understand the story, not just one word, one word, one word but in story it continues. (Carl’s mother)

I question him about the story to get him to answer. (John’s mother)

I think (it’s) one of the most important things with any child is story telling. (Eddy’s mother).

Book Sharing in Spoken Language Homes

Using the same areas of analysis, we looked at the spoken language dyads. This group consisted of six mothers and six deaf children. Five of the children used cochlear implants, and the other one used post-aural hearing aids. One mother had a severe hearing loss and used spoken language, and one father was profoundly deaf and used BSL. The remaining parents and siblings were hearing. English was the main language used for communication with the deaf child, but in three families another language was also used; in two cases this was another spoken language; and in the third case, where the father used BSL, that was the additional language.

The Physical Aspect

In this context, five of the six pairs sit side by side so close that they are touching or in two cases with the child half on the mother’s knee for the book sharing. They are much closer than the sign bilingual pairs as the space for signing or eye contact is not a priority; in fact, there is very little eye contact between these five pairs. There is joint attention to the book, and the physical arrangement allows for the child to listen to the mother while looking at the book. Just one of the pairs in this group sit at a table with the book between them and rely more heavily on eye contact for turn taking and communication. It is noteworthy that the mother of this dyad is deaf herself, and therefore this position gives her more opportunity to monitor his engagement and respond to his contributions.

Interactional Aspect

The physical setting for the book sharing is adapted for listening rather than watching, and this is a tangible difference. However, the features of the interaction that enable both parties to be mutually engaged are parallel with the sign bilingual group.

For the spoken language pairs the children are successfully engaged in the activity when they are able to share their attention between the book and communication with the mother. They sit so that they can look at the book and listen, and only one pair, for the reasons discussed above, sit facing each other for eye contact. The modality of the activity for these pairs is spoken English. Because of the children’s developing language, the mothers do most of the talking, but it is clear from the children’s contingent contributions that they are engaged through listening.

The balance of the control of the activity is also with the mothers, but this control is used proactively in five of the six cases to involve the child in the book sharing. This is done by the pair taking turns to “read” each page of the story or by the child’s turn being used just for a comment or a contribution. What is important is that the mothers leave the space for this turn. In one pair there are limited opportunities for the child to contribute because the mother is totally focused on the text of the story. In this case the child becomes disengaged.

In general, there is more focus on the text in this group. Five of six mothers read the actual text, whereas we saw that none of the sign bilingual mothers referred to it except to point out the book title. There is evidence of focus on sounds of letters and on the sounds related to animals (what sound does the cow make?). These differences suggest that the intention of the activity is actually different for the two groups.
Symbolic Aspect

In this group all the pairs use spoken English, some with a few added gestures, and in one case some individual signs, but in no case is there sustained use of sign language for support. For these pairs the activity focuses on the actual reading of the story aloud, usually using the text. Only one parent uses the pictures exclusively, but she still sticks to the story line. The other mothers give attention to the text of the book, and this provides the momentum and direction of the activity. The mothers generally add and invite other comments using the pictures, and they also give and check vocabulary and provide, in some cases, support with letter sounds. The overall focus of the activity, however, is the shared reading of the book rather than a shared discussion about the book. The intensity of the engagement is therefore appropriately different (for example, less eye contact and turn taking) because some passive listening without comment on the child’s side is an expected and normal part of this type of activity. For this group the parent and child are sharing the language of the book through speaking and listening, and this activity is supporting the children’s developing English and listening skills. Evidence from the interviews with the parents of this group supports our observations on their views of the nature of the activity:

I read the text so she can follow the words.  
(Annie’s mother)

We’re in the middle of doing her alphabet at the minute … and how the letters are pronounced.  
(Pat’s mother)

I find it very hard not to read the text. Sometimes I might change a word if I know that he hasn’t understood the words. (Terry’s mother).

Discussion

Analysis of these three aspects of book sharing across the two groups, taken with the outcomes of the parent interviews, leads to a number of general points for discussion. The physical aspect of the book-sharing activity shows that both groups established a warm physical closeness and a routine for the activity. The basic principle of a physical setting which adds to the enjoyment of the activity and which facilitates the interaction is common to both groups, but each group organize themselves physically in a different way. The main difference was that the sign bilingual pairs tended to sit side by side a short distance apart for ease of signing and eye contact. The spoken language pairs tended to be touching, with the child frequently on the mother’s lap, which aids listening.

Our first level of analysis drew this affective side of the book-sharing activity to our attention, but when we returned to the data for more detail it became clear that the physical setting for the activity is equally fundamental to the outcomes of the activity for both sets of pairs. These results illustrate how the physical and affective aspects impact on the success of the activity, which we have defined in terms of reciprocity, in that these aspects pave the way for interaction around the book to successfully take place. The differences between the individuals may be explained by the hearing status of the parents, but nonetheless, they serve to highlight the importance of positioning and use of space as essential conditions for this type of shared activity.

Interactional Aspect

Our findings illustrate that the physical set up of the activity paved the way for the visual interaction around the book for the sign bilingual pairs. In the same way, the spoken language pairs are positioned to share an oral/aural activity around the book. This shows how the features of the interaction, which make this a mutually engaging activity, are common but illustrates the ways in which these features are differently manifested for the visual or auditory modalities.

Both groups were able to establish joint reference to the activity, and the children showed facility in dividing their attention between the book and their mother’s signs or speech. Turn taking was established in each case, although managed in different ways. The timing and structure of the mother’s input varied in its appropriateness, as did their use of questions and willingness to give the child an opportunity to contribute. There was also variation in the degree and manner in which the mothers were contingent on their child’s contribution.
The strategies that facilitated the children’s involvement were more evident in the deaf–deaf pairs where the mothers expanded on the child’s contribution either by offering the correct sign or giving some additional information. The timing and the placement of the contributions were also similar in that swift and brief interjections were made at the moment where the child is ready and signs given in the peripheral vision of the child to the side of the book, which remains the main focus of the shared attention. These contributions by the mother build on and develop the exchange around the book but do not disrupt the flow of the activity.

The mothers in the spoken language group do build on the children’s contributions but in a different way from the sign bilingual mothers. They do respond to the children’s comments and add to them, but their primary focus remains the text of the book. They draw the children’s attention to features of the text or pictures and comment on them. This led us to observe that the nature of the activity undertaken by the two different groups is actually different and therefore also so are the eventual outcomes and shared meanings. This is borne out by the parents’ comments and the clear distinction between the two groups with regards to their approach to the text in a book. The point to note here is that if the two different sets of parents are actually setting out to do something different with the book-sharing activity, then the evaluation of the success of the interaction has to take this into account.

Symbolic Aspect

When we look at the shared meaning or outcome of the book sharing, the findings diverge still further. This is where we can identify the greatest difference between the two groups. The sign bilingual group used the book as the basis for a conversation around the story. The mothers did not refer to the text, apart from drawing attention to the title, but were concerned to get across the whole story and use it to promote their child’s BSL and confidence as a communicator. The mothers in the spoken language group, by contrast, focused on the text of the book, usually reading it verbatim and were keen to draw attention to features of print and early phonics. Their contributions focused on the text or pictures, and only occasionally did they use the book for wider conversation. These differences were borne out by the parents’ comments in interview as reported above.

The focus on the symbolic or shared meaning aspect of the activity brings the three areas of analysis together and shows how the physical environment and the styles of interaction lead to and support the intention of the activity. The physical context of the activity (behavior and affect) provides the foundation for the partners to share their attention and their intentions, and where this works well, the result is shared meaning which in this case is derived from the storybook. For the sign bilingual group the outcome of the activity is a shared story and conversation around the storybook. This is most successful where the physical context and the interaction between the partners are adapted to the visual communication mode. For the spoken language group the focus is much more on mediating the text of the book, often reading it verbatim, and using the book to develop the child’s spoken language. This is most successful when the child and mother are in close physical contact so that the child can hear to advantage and see the book. The outcome for both groups is shared and mutual engagement, which we have called intersubjectivity, but leading to very different early literacy experiences.

Endnote

Our review of the literature revealed that research into deaf children’s early literacy in the home lacks a holistic view of deaf children’s diverse experiences. Research has either focused on discrete skills or polarized the issue of language use. The methodological approach to this study, and in particular the data collected across language modalities, has yielded a number of interesting conclusions and questions for future research. The study could not have been done without the skills of a deaf researcher who is bilingual in BSL and English and who was able to facilitate the data collection from sign bilingual homes. The quasi-inductive approach to the analysis allowed us to first of all identify the shared features across these diverse settings and then to shape an analysis framework to further extrapolate individual features.
The finding that all 12 parents in this study routinely shared books with their young deaf children is consistent with our original hypothesis. We have also shown that there is a wide variation of strategies but that the types of strategies are consistent within the two language groups. Both groups engage in a reciprocal and shared literacy activity, and the essential elements of reciprocity are common across the groups, whatever the language mode. These are the appropriateness of the physical setting, the shared interaction and attention, and the creation of shared meaning between the pairs. We learn from this that the reciprocal behaviors of the dyads are adapted to either the visual or the auditory/oral mode and that both sets of parents are intuitive in their approach. This positive finding reflects the research with hearing children (Papousek & Paopousek, 1987) and suggests that the type of disruption to intuitive parenting described by Koestler (1992, 1994) is not evident when the parents’ own language use and approach to the activity reflect their own skills and experiences.

The different sets of parents do approach the book-sharing activity with distinctly different expectations and goals. Where BSL is the shared language, there is little attention to the English at this stage but a rich experience of storytelling and shared discussion with support for the child’s developing BSL. The outcome of the book-sharing activity is much more English focused where this is the common and shared language, with an emphasis on promoting the child’s spoken language and early understanding of text-based literacy. The parents’ comments clearly correlate with these observations and suggest that they are acting in accordance with their own view of what early literacy skills and experiences their children need. This finding extends the work of Schleper (1997) and others, who have focused on the role of deaf adults as reading role models for parents. Deaf and hearing parents have approaches to sharing books with their deaf children, which are successful in terms of the shared engagement but also in terms of the different outcomes of the activity.

The divergence between the two groups, in terms of the outcome of the activity, raises further questions. The sign bilingual pairs focused on BSL conversation and language around the story and pictures, whereas the spoken language pairs concentrated on the telling or reading of the story in English using the text. Both scenarios provide opportunities for the development of early literacy skills, but the conversation and language focus more usually precedes attention to text. We cannot be sure whether we are seeing pairs at different stages along the same route or pairs traveling along two very diverse routes to literacy development. The spoken language pairs might have already progressed from the conversations around the book, and the sign bilingual pairs might not yet be ready for attention to text. Scarborough (2001) suggests eight strands that are woven together in skilled readers: background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge, phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition. The sign bilingual parents in this study tended to focus on the first four strands listed and the spoken language parents on the last four. This is directly supported by the parents’ own expressions of their priorities. It would be interesting to see the effect of these approaches combined as described in the study of Gioia (2001). We would also be interested to investigate the balance of literacy skills that these different individuals demonstrate at school age.

There are direct implications here for practitioners working with preschool deaf children and their families. This study suggests that that parents do have a view and an approach to their young children’s early literacy development, and they might also benefit from focused support. In this case, the sign bilingual families could be encouraged to develop more awareness around the print, including some single word recognition and initial letters of words. The spoken language families could be encouraged to take up more opportunities to extend their child’s language using the book as a starting point and to move from a direct discussion of the book to broader concepts and world knowledge. We suggest that teachers are perhaps missing an opportunity to encourage parents of young deaf children to develop the wide range of skills and knowledge that blend together to form a skilled reader. This could easily be addressed if the teacher support were contingent on the established routine and strategies already in place.

This study was seated within a social interactionist model that firmly places social interaction as central to
children’s development and underlines the importance of context and frameworks of support for learning. This has allowed us to describe some examples of diverse early literacy experiences within different language contexts and to specifically analyze the interaction between children and parents when they share books and how this interaction shapes the outcome of the activity. These rich descriptions have provided invaluable information about the diverse early experiences but also raise pressing questions about different routes to literacy.

Williams’ (2004) work in this area calls for us to cross the boundaries between home and school, and this study points to two specific avenues for this. First, the focus on interaction needs to be taken into the school setting so that we can learn more about the facilitative role of the adult in more formal approaches to reading. We also need to know how the different early literacy experiences that we have identified are reflected in children’s later literacy development in school. A further study that follows deaf children from different language environments into their early years of education and reading instruction would enable us to make these links between home and school and further inform our understanding of deaf children’s routes to literacy development.

Note

1. The term “teacher of the deaf” is used to describe teachers with a specialist qualification who are employed to work with deaf children and their families. It is the term that is customarily used in the United Kingdom.

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