



Teaching New Zealand Sign Language to Hearing

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While New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) could be learnt by hearing and hearing-impaired students using spoken English we believe full immersion and the particular techniques we have used have created a successful learning environment. The full immersion teaching technique is described here, which has been developed and refined in response to student feedback and teaching experience.

Context

Aoraki Polytechnic teaches a range of NZSL Level 1–3 qualifications to adult learners (see Appendix 1, pdf). While to date students have mainly been hearing, a small percentage is either deaf or hearing impaired. Our tutor is hearing impaired. At any one time we have approximately 45–50 students enrolled in four courses that run simultaneously over 10-weeks.



Classes are taught using full immersion NZSL. At the start of the classes the full immersion approach is explained to students, and they are also told that there will be no speaking during tuition. All teaching and learning is conducted in NZSL, with the exception of a 10-minute break midway through each tuition session to enable students to ask questions and seek clarification.

Classes are taught in 2-hour sessions once a week. We use a range of teaching resources including written information, visual aids, practical exercises and DVDs.

Full immersion teaching and our experiences

Full immersion is recognised as an effective technique for learning any second language as it enhances the language in its broadest context, including, for example, grammar and culture. It is noted as

particularly successful for children (Clark, 2009; Cohen & Kirk, 2006; Chen, 2008). Immersion – in our context - is simulating a deaf environment.

We have found that by integrating this learning through selecting specific subject areas for the students to focus on, the learning experience is enhanced.

Students are required to engage in spontaneous conversation on a specified subject.

This approach immediately takes most students out of their comfort zone as they are unlikely to have learnt all the “technical” subject related signs. Notwithstanding this we encourage students to try to make themselves understood.

Relating this back to how children learn a language is a helpful reminder for our adult students. Children often do not get all the words right, but by trying, and in many cases needing to make themselves understood, they gradually add to the pool of words (and in the case of our students – the signs) they feel confident using. They learn by feedback from those they are conversing with. Grammatical and cultural aspects of the language are also gradually absorbed (Chen, 2008).

It is a challenge for a hearing (or hearing impaired) tutor to maintain the simulated deaf environment – but we have found that this is an important aid to successful learning. Teacher talk (signing) is vital to the student’s language development.

Obstacles and steps taken to overcome them

1. Lack of opportunity for students to be part of a deaf community/mix in a deaf environment

South Canterbury has a very small deaf community. Our closest active deaf community is via the Deaf Club in Christchurch, which is two hours travel away, and our mainly hearing students often do not find it easy to access or to be accepted into a deaf community.

Steps taken to minimise this obstacle to effective learning

Although there are a number of deaf people in our community, privacy issues and the lack of a formal group in South Canterbury has made it hard to contact and establish a local network; however, we are continuing our efforts to establish a South Canterbury Signing Group. Initially this is likely to consist mainly of Aoraki Polytechnic students who wish to meet on an informal basis. Our vision is that this gathering will gradually attract a broader basis of attendees.

2. Adult students reluctance to take risks with a second language

In our experience our adult students tend to want to make sure they have the signs and grammar perfect before they feel confident with their signing.

Steps taken to minimise this obstacle to effective learning

We take particular care to build an atmosphere of trust within the classroom environment so that students feel able to sign and know that it is acceptable to make initial mistakes. Students are encouraged to make themselves understood, and not worry about mistakes they make. These are pointed out by the tutor, and peers in a constructive way.

3. Visual nature of NZSL

NZSL is a very visual language and many hearing adults struggle with the need for direct eye contact and the integral part facial expressions play in NZSL. This does not come naturally to many hearing New Zealanders.

Steps taken to minimise this obstacle to effective learning

The tutor needs to be very aware of this difficulty. It is important that the tutor consistently models the eye contact and facial expressions required. Providing students with an opportunity to converse with fluent signers is also a useful tool for reinforcing eye contact and facial expressions. Videoing students signing has also proved a useful learning technique for our students – they can see themselves lacking the required facial expressions and eye contact and acknowledge the need to improve in this area.

4. Resource suitability

Many of the resources currently available in New Zealand are quite difficult for hearing students to understand. This is particularly the case with DVDs: the signing by those for whom NZSL is their first language is often too fast for student to follow and learning from these resources can therefore be difficult.

Steps taken to minimise this obstacle to effective learning

We ensure we use a range of resources, including those that incorporate fluent signing, as this provides good modelling for students. Used in moderation and in conjunction with the tutor signing at a slower pace than that modelled on the DVD, they are a useful learning tool.

Key contributing factors

We believe the following factors in our teaching practice have contributed to our success so far:

- Where possible creating a real deaf environment by travelling to a deaf club/deaf gathering. Students report immersion in this environment is invaluable.
- Make allowances for students who are not primarily visual learners – given that NZSL is a very visual language. Good written material for the reader/writer learning style is helpful.
- We have instituted a planned “tea break” in the class – where speaking is permitted to ask questions and clarify understanding. Particularly with new students, the lack of opportunity to speak actually impacted negatively on their learning. If they did not understand what the tutor was signing and their attempts to sign their particular question were not successful, learning was impaired. Providing a set time where questions could be asked was a significant help to our students.
- Videoing of students signing conversations has proved a valuable learning tool and provided an important learning resource. It is not only useful for the students to see themselves signing but also for other students to “interpret “what was being signed.
- Student study groups are an important learning tool. Students have on occasion expressed disappointment when they find themselves in a situation where they need to use their signing skills and felt disappointed with their efforts. It is important to remember that they only immerse themselves in their second language for a short period each week. Any additional practice, such as regular signing sessions with fellow students, can only help their fluency.

Evidence

Evidence that our practice is successful comes in the form of academic results and student feedback.

Academic results

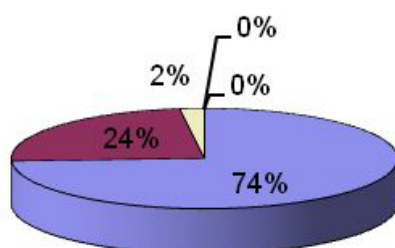
We have experienced a pleasing “returning student” rate. That is, students who only intended to enrol in the introductory course decide to continue studying beyond our Level 1 qualification. This indicates that students believe their learning objectives are being met. Return rates from the Level 1 to Level 2 qualification average 65% compared with 30–50% in similar courses that run from ‘beginner’ to ‘advanced’ in teaching blocks (Aoraki Polytechnic Success and Retention statistics, 2009). Rates are even higher from the Level 2 to Level 3 qualification. Students have told us that as well as finding the full immersion learning effective, an importance factor in their decision to continue studying is the “team feeling” that has built up in the class by this stage.

Academic results for NZ Sign Language courses are competency based. The percentage (average 95%) of our students who achieve competency is also evidence of the success of the teaching practice (Aoraki Polytechnic Success and Retention statistics, 2009).

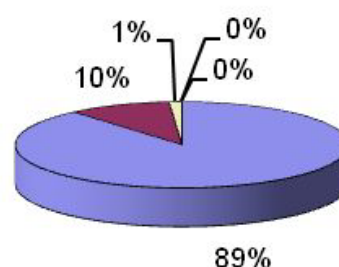
Student feedback

Student evaluation of both the learning programme and the tutoring are sought on a regular basis. A summary example of student feedback follows

Course/Tutor Evaluation



February - December 2008



July - December 2007

Key

Purple - Excellent

Red - Very good

Yellow - Neutral

Note: 0% of learners reported the course/tutor evaluation was either below standard or poor

Key themes in the student feedback include

- the importance of a positive learning environment
- a good range of teaching techniques to cater for different learning styles
- modifications for hearing students have enhanced students learning.

Student feedback consistently reveals that full immersion – having to learn by signing – works. The following excerpt from a post-course evaluation is an example of many similar comments received from students, both written and verbal.

“Arriving at the first class and finding we weren’t allowed to speak was a worry at first, but it did help us learning our signing and really made us work hard. In the long run it meant I learnt more and remembered more of what I had learnt” (April 2008).

References

- Aoraki Polytechnic. (2009). Success & Retention Statistics.
- Chamot, A.U. & El-Dinary, P.B. (1999). Children's learning strategies in immersion classrooms. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83(3), 319–341.
- Chen, G. (2008). Full language immersion programs in public schools. *Public School Review* <http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/25>
- Clark, K. (2009). The case for structured English immersion. *Educational Leadership* 66, 42–46.
- NZSL Tutor Interview 7.4.09
- Student Evaluations – Aoraki Polytechnic NZ Sign Language classes 2007 and 2008

Appendix

Aoraki Polytechnic New Zealand Sign Language qualifications.

All programmes are assessed using competency based assessment. Students are either Competent or Not Yet Competent.

Level 1 Introduction to New Zealand Sign Language

5 credits

One compulsory module

20 hours classroom tuition

Level 2 New Zealand Sign Language

20 credits

Four compulsory modules

- Beginners
- Intermediate 1
- Intermediate 2
- Advanced

80 hours classroom tuition

Level 3 Applied New Zealand Sign Language

10 credits

Three elective modules – of which two must be completed to achieve the qualification

- Conversational Sign Language
- Advanced Conversational Sign Language
- NZ Sign Language Socio - Cultural Contexts



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