



Chasing the Why: Understanding the Deaf Child's Home Language Environment (HLE)

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Abstract

Research indicates that strong communication between mother and child in early developmental stages is one predictor of later development of higher-order thinking skills. For Deaf children, this strong communication between mother and child hinges on **having an accessible language** in the Deaf child's home language environment (HLE). The purpose of this study was to **create a richer, contextualized understanding of how language is used in a deaf child's HLE to facilitate their conceptual knowledge development**. The agogical phenomenology method used a semi-structured interview script across a purposeful sampling of five signing families; **parent and child communications** were observed during these interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify commonalities and contrasts across the five signing families, resulting in identifying **Reciprocal and Contingent Family Interactions (RCFI)** as a core essence of the Deaf child's HLE.

Research Questions

1. What is the essence of the lived experiences in a home language environment where sign language is used that allows for extended discourse?
2. What are the characteristics in a deaf child's home language environment that may be associated with opportunities for incidental learning?

Guardino & Cannon (2015): Guiding Principles of Deaf Ed. Research

These were the guiding parameters of this study:

Attention towards interactions within the native culture are essential for children's understanding of social/behavioral norms;

Adults/peers **influence** cognitive development and learning along with cultural beliefs and practices;

Researchers should not study the individual alone but **in relation** to environmental surroundings;

An individual's social, behavioral, and academic development is an **evolving process**; it is influenced by their experiences.

The Home Language Environment

- The HLE is a rich and complex environment for content knowledge & language development; language use facilitates knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978)
- Primary/native language in the home influences language maintenance across generations (Duursma et al., 2007)
- Total & unrestricted access in the HLE provides a stable environment for language to develop (Bialystok, 2001)

Themes in a DC's HLE

Family Interaction – Defines how families interact with each other and includes evidence of communication strategies that parents employ to sustain conversations

Family Integration – Defines the roles within the family; individual family roles make a difference in the deaf child's life

Language Modality – Defines the choice of language that a family uses for primary communication at home

Literacy – Defines reading materials or activities that are done as part of the home environment

Enrichment – Defines what types of activities a family takes their deaf child along with them on community trips or travel experiences

Resources – Defines information or tools that a family has to fall back on in terms of dealing with a particular situation, or community support

Self-Awareness – Defines how families adapt in the face of adversity or a form of difficulty in an experience

Autonomy: Independent Problem Solving – Defines how parents encourage their deaf child to be an independent problem solver

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Method

Agogical phenomenology: The practice of uncovering a phenomenon and using the data to inform adult learners (andragogy) & educators (pedagogy)

Participants

- Purposive sample (five signing families)
- Families had at least one Deaf child
- Parent dyads had at least one Deaf parent
- Deaf child(ren) were between 6 and 12 years of age

Data Points

- Interviews, video recordings, interview translation documents
- Researcher field notes

Data Analysis

- Phenomenological analysis
- Thematic analysis
- Hermeneutic Circle (validation)

Main Finding: The Core Essence

Thematic analysis across families revealed the emergence of a core essence: **Reciprocal & Contingent Family Interactions (RCFI)** were essential towards understanding *how* language is used in the home. Uncovering the essence of RCFI lies in the emergence of **questioning strategies** that parents used to elicit information while interacting with their Deaf children in ASL.

Supporting themes for RCFI came across parents' use of literacy, language modality, and family interactions: Literacy served as the context of conversations; language modality served as the medium of communication, and family interaction served as the time spent between family members engaged in conversations for sharing of rich contextual information.

References

