

## **A Journey of an ESL Student with Hearing Loss**

*by Joo Young Hong*

This article is a case analysis of the author, a native Korean, who learned English as a second language (ESL) in Korea as a child with severe-profound hearing loss. Based on my personal experience and learning from available research, I aim to provide recommendations for parents and teachers of ESL students with hearing loss.

### **Hearing Characteristics**

I was born with hearing, but lost my hearing ability when I was 10 years and 7 months old. I hear almost nothing without hearing aids. With hearing aids, I hear about 40 dB (right) and 50 dB (left), which is the range of moderate hearing loss. Another important component of hearing ability is speech discrimination or word recognition rate, which indicates how accurately a person perceives speech or words. Compared to hearing people who discriminate speech easily, my speech discrimination rates are about 64% (right) and 19% (left), respectively. This means that I hear about 6 words correctly out of 10 words with my right ear and about 2 words correctly out of 10 words with my left ear.

### **English Language Learning Environment**

Although I had already acquired a first language (L1) before I lost my hearing, my first exposure to the English language was after I lost my hearing. Even with this significant hearing loss, which seriously affects communication competence and language skills (Paul, 2001), I had some linguistic and environmental strengths in learning English. First, hearing aids gave me a good amount of amplification and enabled me to live in an oral world. Second, I already had an L1, which was a major tool of learning L2 (e.g., understanding English sounds, syntax, semantics). Third, my family valued education and included me in conversations all the time to promote my language development. Fourth, in regard to educational environment, I enjoyed English because it was a subject area rather than a communication tool. English education heavily relied on the grammar translation method. However, I also had challenges in learning English. Teachers were unaware of how to support students with hearing loss, because they had not had any other students with disabilities before. Audio and video devices were ineffective, because their soundtracks through my hearing aids were unclear.

### **Strategies in Learning English**

To gain knowledge, I relied on visual information most of the time. The newspaper was a great resource for learning L1, as well as for current events, and helped me with my L2 acquisition. As a child, I spent a considerable amount of time reading newspapers every day. This supported not only my L1 improvement, but also that of L2, as affirmed by research in regard to the positive contribution of L1 to L2 (Gabriele, Troseth, Martohardjono, & Otheguy, 2009; Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2012). Since English was mostly about vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension when I first learned it, I could focus on only a few essential areas of English language learning, so I concentrated on understanding written English rather than on accurate speaking or listening. Another important strategy I used was memorizing by repeatedly reading an English textbook; in addition, explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction helped me understand English language rules.

I first learned communicative English in my 20s. I was in an authentic environment for using English every day. I interacted with native speakers daily, being able to see their lips, facial expressions, and gestures while communicating with them. These visual supports were critical to improving my communicative English skills. This time, I put purposeful effort into improving English pronunciation and conversation along with my previous knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar rules.

### Recommendations for Parents and Teachers

First, use assistive technology, including hearing aids and cochlear implants, to give the most benefit of hearing to the students. Second, it is important to use L1 as much as possible because it expands hearing-impaired students' understanding in L2. Third, although most students can learn a language incidentally by interacting in their natural environments, students with hearing loss require explicit and intentional instruction to improve their language because of the lack of incidental language learning opportunities (Crosson & Geers, 2001; Justice, Swanson, & Buehler, 2008; Paatsch, Blamey, Sarant, & Bow, 2006; Pakulski & Kaderavek, 2001). Fourth, encourage the students to read repeatedly on the topic that they like. Repetition of storybook reading not only improves language skills of students with hearing loss, but also increases their interests in reading (Kaderavek & Pakulski, 2007; Massaro & Light, 2004; Pakulski & Kaderavek, 2001). Fifth, sequential story cards are useful for increasing students' understanding of abstract concepts, a difficult skill for many students with hearing loss (De Feu & Fergusson, 2003; Ingber & Eden, 2011; Pakulski & Kaderavek, 2012; Passig & Eden, 2003). Sixth, visual support combined with simple written text can promote language development of students with hearing loss (Massaro & Light, 2004; Musselman, 2000). Seventh, focus on a few essential areas of language skills at a time so that students do not get overwhelmed. Eighth, design a classroom and family environment that promotes natural conversations. The effects of language learning are maximized when students with hearing loss learn the language in meaningful and authentic contexts (e.g., school, home, or outside) (Paatsch et al., 2006). Last but not least, believe in the students and be patient with them. It may take longer for them to learn the language, but they will enjoy learning English when it is taught patiently and with encouragement.

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