

Letter from Monroe T. Cook to Alexander Graham Bell, April 18, 1892

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THE SILENT EDUCATOR For Teaching Language to the Deaf, Adopt the Method Used With Helen Keller.

The following taken from the explanation by Miss Sullivan of the manner in which Helen Keller learned language, contains valuable ideas for all teachers of the deaf:

“It became evident to me that it was not wise to confine myself strictly to the use of words of which she knew the full meaning, and I began to give her many words in my sentences without any further explanation concerning them than was conveyed to her by their connection with those words which she did know. I observed that she adopted their use, often without inquiry. After this I invariably gave her complete sentences in communicating with her, often long ones, using many words of which she did not understand the meaning, but in connection with others of which she had full knowledge, and in such manner that she was able to comprehend the meaning I desired to convey. She thus became familiar with, and in the daily use of, many words the full meaning of which had not been explained to her in detail; and, before I realized the importance to her of this practice, she was the possessor of a vocabulary which astonished me.”

[???] [??]

“I am constantly asked, by persons familiar with teaching the deaf, how it is that Helen has acquired such a comprehensive command of language in so short a time. I think it is, first, because she has, like many hearing persons a natural aptitude for comprehending and making use of language as soon as it is acquired; and second, because volumes of words have been placed in her possession by means of conversation, reading to her from

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books, and from her own constant use of books printed in raised letters. I have had no particular method of teaching, but have always regarded my pupil as a study whose own spontaneous impulse must be my surest guide. I have never taught Helen to use signs such as have been employed in teaching the deaf, but confined myself to the use of the manual alphabet in communicating with her. *I have always talked with her as I would to a seeing and hearing child*, and have insisted that others should do the same. When a person asks me if she will understand this or that word, I reply 'Never mind whether she understands each separate word in a sentence, she will guess the meaning of the new words from their connection with others which are already intelligible to her.'"

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"I am convinced that the freedom and accuracy which characterize Helen's use of English are due quite as much to her familiarity with books as to her natural aptitude for learning language. I gave her books printed in raised letters long before she could read them, and she would amuse herself for hours each day in carefully passing her fingers over the words, searching for such as she knew, and would scream with delight whenever she found one. Many times she would inquire the meaning of some new word she had not previously felt, and, having learned it, would go on with great eagerness to find its counterpart on other pages; she thus naturally became interested in the subject of which the words treated, and, as books were placed in her hand suited to her age, she was soon reading simple stories. In selecting books for Helen to read, it has never occurred to me to choose them with reference to her misfortune. I have read to her such publications as other children of her age read and take delight in, and the same rule has been observed in placing in her hands books printed in raised letters."

None of the pupils in our schools for the deaf can by any manner of means in all probability be made to any where near approach Helen Keller in ability in the use of language, but there seems but little room to doubt that if we follow to the letter the plan above quoted given by Helen Keller's teacher, in the education of all deaf children our

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schools would turn out a greater number of English speaking (writing) people and fewer foreigners. The plan followed in Helen's instruction so far as we have quoted it above embraces the one great principle to the observance of which we are tending, and is in accord with the natural, usual way that hearing people learn language and there is no occasion for a radically different method for the deaf. It is also in accord with the statement of Dr. Bell, "I would have a deaf child read to learn language, not learn language to read" which is undoubtedly substantially the correct way. Of course this is understood as meaning by gradual steps from the known to the unknown.

The great mistake made by a majority of teachers of the deaf is that they allow it to become a settled conclusion with pupils that when they come to a new word in reading they must have it interpreted into a foreign language for them before they can pass over it. Accordingly sentence building and explanations in signs is applied to every new word and expression as soon as met. If this is right and necessary it establishes a special law which applies in language teaching to the deaf and in no other case.

Hearing teachers of the deaf, who stood beside or behind you with a sign or an explanation for every new word you ever heard or read? In your first efforts at reading you met and passed over many words the meaning of which you did not know, though you got the meaning of the matter as a whole. Suppose you did have an imperfect understanding of the meaning of some of the words at the start, what harm was done? You know their right meaning now, do you not? How did you learn it? By frequently seeing and hearing the words used. Still you insist on signing and making perfectly clear every word and expression occurring in the lessons of your pupils if there is the slightest doubt in your mind whether they understand it fully, lest they have an opportunity to establish a meaning for themselves from the context, or lest they deviate slightly from exact precision in establishing a meaning. You are altogether too ready with your signs and explanations. You don't labor enough in getting your pupils habituated to guess these meanings for themselves. Unless the pupils know more than the teacher, which is seldom the case, they will depend upon him entirely for the meanings of all new words and constructions

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provided he allows them to do so. They will hardly branch off of their own accord and do their own thinking in this line, it is for the teacher to see that they develop this power by exercising it and he can see to it in no better way than by scrupulously withholding unnecessary assistance. Teachers read and think carefully on the above explanations by Miss Sullivan.