

ARE THE DEAF DOOMED TO BE DUMB ?

A Prologue to the Study

On entering a school for the deaf, one is taken by surprise to see the children of different ages gather around and immediately start off communication using their typical sign language. They generally start with the question "are you also deaf and dumb?", building upto, "from where have you come?", "are you a new teacher?", "Will you teach us?" etc. It is interesting to see how uninhibited, spontaneous and warm they are to a new person. Slowly the surprise and good feelings give way to a sense of disappointment because most of the things other than the expected preliminary enquiries of the children, through sign language and occasional meaningless sounds, are not understood.

Gujarat scenario, as far as the schools for the deaf are concerned, is that out of the students in each school, there is hardly one or two who can talk clearly to be understood by an outsider. They generally communicate wholly through gestures, limiting their communication to the groups of deaf peers and teachers. In fact, their interaction gets further restricted because many of the gestures are locally specific rendering the children incapable of mixing with deaf peers from a different district !

Experiencing such a sorry plight, the logical questions that arise are : "Is a deaf person doomed to be dumb also ?" Is such a pathetic situation an inevitability or can there be some

alternatives to help these children talk, so as to facilitate their interaction with the society"?

It is interesting and relevant to state in the context that the term "deaf and dumb" is now obsolete. The word "dumb" is no more used as an appendage to the word "deaf". This itself could be taken as an inspiring fact as it implies that, to be deaf does not necessarily mean to be dumb. Of course, in the western countries, the word dumb had been curtailed long ago and they are much more advanced in training the deaf to talk. In India, in many states, the term "deaf and dumb" is still used. In some parts, efforts are on to develop the speech of the deaf.

Problems start right at the stage of identifying a child as deaf. Generally this happens pretty late. In the early years of development, parents either do not pay enough attention, or they have their own guesses which delay their seeking any medical attention. The result is that by the time a child is identified as deaf, it becomes more difficult to train it to speak than it would be, had it been identified earlier.

As soon as a child is identified deaf with a specific degree of deafness, it ought to have suitable hearing aid, and it has to be trained to get used to wearing it. But unfortunately, children generally do not get adapted to wearing the machine throughout the day. They feel it as an extra fitting, irritating their ears and avoid wearing it at the slightest pretext. As far as speech development goes, these aids are indispensable. Hence, it is necessary that the children

are trained right from the outset to get used to wearing hearing aid.

Talking about machines, another essential equipment for speech training, is the group hearing set. Every class should have this, so that every child with the headphone can hear what the teacher speaks through the microphone. Unfortunately, many schools are not adequately equipped with these systems. Mobilisation of funds and commitment of the teachers and principals are the only solution for this drawback. What to say of machines when there are worse situations of the children not getting admitted to the schools at all? Even after getting the child identified as deaf, in a large number of cases, further follow-up is not done. In many cases, the parents are ignorant about the possibilities of educating the child. It would take years for the child finally to reach the school. This delay affects his speech development adversely.

Talking about those children who are within the school system, there are various problems. The deaf, like the hearing students, have the problem of individual differences, the added one being the degree of deafness. In a class, moderately deaf and profoundly deaf are all put together, majority being of the latter category. Among these children, the degrees of difficulty in learning to speak also differ. Generally, as one can easily guess, the profoundly deaf need more time and concentrated efforts to develop speech whereas the others can pick up faster. So, it goes without saying that, unless these children are grouped according to the degree of deafness, speech training

strategies cannot be effective.

Whatever be the efforts within the schools, unless there is follow-up in the home environment, speech development cannot be successful. Generally, the parents treat the children as deaf, picking up hand gestures to communicate to the child, rather than talking. They take it for granted that the children cannot hear and hence cannot talk. Thus the children are deprived of a "talking environment", which is essential for a child to learn to speak.

In the case of day boarders, specifically, there is a better scope for developing speech. For this, the parents and siblings and the community at large have to co-operate. They are responsible for providing the talking environment and to encourage the child to talk. It is a long way to go to drive into the heads of the parents, how significant their role is, in helping the deaf child to speak. More crucial is the role of the school to provide guidance to the parents in this regard. The common problem of the schools is that the parents, majority of them being illiterate, do not come to the school when they are called for meetings. This being so, more plausible strategies have to be found out to encourage the parents to visit the school regularly and take guidance.

In the case of hostlers, the role of the parents becomes crucial during the long vacation periods. What happens in reality is that whatever speech (if at all) is developed during the ten months in school, is totally forgotten during

the vacation and they come back as dumb as earlier to be started afresh ! Here again, the parents have to be adequately counselled regarding how they should treat the child at home.

In case of hostlers there has to be proper planning so as to provide opportunities for the deaf to interact regularly with hearing children. Regular forums have to be thought of where these two groups come to a common platform and share experiences. This can help a lot to bring out the deaf from their niche, shedding their inherent inhibitions.

Coming to the classroom activities, speech training is a scheduled activity for the first three years of school education. In the fourth year, they start off with the syllabus of first standard of regular schools, and then onwards, speech training is done away with. In every period, comprehension of the children is assessed through their response by way of sign language or written communication; but seldom are they asked to talk ! Hence, gradually, speech is forgotten and the child takes completely to sign language. That is how a deaf child becomes totally dumb.

The common problem voiced by teachers of the deaf is that, the children take longer time than hearing children to comprehend what is taught to them, and hence the teachers fall short of time to concentrate both on speech development and comprehension. Resultantly, the teachers give priority to finishing the course in time and do not bother about devoting time to train the children to talk.

So, that is the sad story of speech training of the deaf children. Shouldn't speech training be essentially a method of educating the deaf that runs across all subjects and classes, rather than a 'subject' to be followed for just three years ?
