

# **Developing an English language / literacy course for adult deaf learners: Insights from the chalk-face**

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*This paper offers insights into the teaching of literacy / English language to adult learners who are severely and profoundly deaf. The paper builds on an earlier study (Denny 2002), which documents the inclusion of Deaf learners in an adult migrant ESOL program at the School of Languages, Auckland University of Technology, and the subsequent establishment of a Deaf only Literacy / English language course (Roach 2002, Thompson forthcoming). The present paper draws on the on-going reflections of the course developer / classroom teacher over a period of 4 years. A number of themes are identified and these are explored in relation to (1) adult literacy (2) bilingual education (3) ESOL methodology (4) curriculum development and (5) teacher decision-making. Practical suggestions are made that may help guide others in what is essentially uncharted territory.*

Keywords: adult literacy, deaf learners, course development, bilingual instruction, reflective practice

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the themes that emerged from developing and teaching a part-time English language/ literacy course for adult learners who are severely and profoundly deaf (see Johnson 2004 for definitions). First, however, as a means of introducing this topic, I would like to share a brief anecdote. In order to finalise details of securing a New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) interpreter for this paper, the day prior to the session I approached the CLESOL helpdesk. The person was very helpful and in the course of conversation asked me if I had just arrived at the CLESOL conference and if I had attended any of the presentations so far. Something in her enquiries puzzled me. TESOL is my profession and I had been at the conference since the first day. I had even attended the powhiri and enjoyed the articulate humor of the host city's resident wizard. After a few minutes, however, the reasons for my puzzlement became clear. The helpdesk person had not made the connection between TESOL and the teaching of English language/ literacy to deaf adults. Perhaps others may also have made the same false assumption. However, I would argue to the contrary. The teaching of English language/ literacy to adult Deaf learners embraces many of the issues that have been raised at this year's CLESOL conference: bilingual education, a better relationship between adult ESOL and adult literacy, the learning of vocabulary, and the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. Indeed, I believe the topic lies at the very heart of this year's

conference theme: Hearing every voice. This paper, therefore, has two aims: (1) to highlight that Deaf learners share a socially and culturally cohesive community characterised, above all, by the use of a signed language and that the provision of English (language and literacy) instruction to deaf adults needs to be taught as an additional language within a bilingual context, and (2) to outline the themes that have emerged from the actual process of developing and teaching such a course (see also Denny 2002 Roach 2002, Thompson forthcoming).

The paper first provides some background to the provision of English language / literacy instruction to adult Deaf learners. Discussion is limited to the Australiasian context, although this in no way diminishes similar concerns in North America and elsewhere, where ESL methods are also increasingly being employed in the teaching of literacy to Deaf adults (e.g. Gerner de Garcia 1995). Second, the nature of second language / literacy instruction is discussed, in particular relation to Deaf adults. The context of the study is then identified before moving on to outline the methodology employed in the study. Emergent themes are then identified and discussed.

## **Background**

As a means of providing some background for those not familiar with the context of literacy instruction for Deaf adults, I first want to touch on three areas:

- Who are adult deaf learners?
- Why is there a need for an English language / literacy class for deaf adults?
- What is meant by English language / literacy instruction?

### **Who are adult deaf learners?**

The term deaf refers to someone who is wholly or partially unable to hear. The terms 'severely' or 'profoundly deaf', however, refer to those who were born with, or developed hearing loss at a young age, before the full development of oral language (see Johnson 2004, p. 358-59 for discussion of these terms). It is recognised that those who are severely or profoundly deaf belong to a socially and culturally cohesive community, characterised by the use of a signed language, in New Zealand, New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). In this

paper, the term Deaf, with an upper case D, is used in recognition of the Deaf community that exists.

Not all severely or profoundly Deaf adults are fluent in NZSL. Some, for example, may be recent migrants to New Zealand. However, it would be fair to say that most Deaf adults use a signed language (NZSL or a combination of) as a preferred mode of communication.

### **Why is there a need for an English language / literacy education for deaf adults?**

Research has identified that many Deaf children under-achieve in education due to low literacy levels and because of this, as adults, are disadvantaged in both further education and in vocational opportunities. Arguably, with an increasing emphasis on literacy skills in the workplace, and in society in general, the situation is “far more grave than at any other time” (Power and Leigh 2000, p. 6). In recognition of this situation there has been increasing research into the provision of literacy programmes for Deaf adults, particularly in the Australasian context (Cresdee 1997, Cummins and Leigh 1992; Denny 2002, Duffy, Warby and Phillips 1999, Freebody and Power 1998, Hyde and Muspratt 1998, Leigh and Cummins 1992). This research has resulted in a number of recommendations, including:

- The importance of adequate resourcing
- The importance of small classes
- The use of ESOL methodology
- The importance of a bilingual approach (i.e. the recognition of learners’ first language)
- When taught by hearing teachers, the importance of a bilingual Deaf support tutor as a role model

These recommendations relate to the need for establishing adult literacy programmes for Deaf adults. To date, however, there has been very little information on how such recommendations are being implemented. Buzacott (2000), to some degree, tries to bridge this gap by focusing on the development of appropriate visual teaching strategies and resources within a competency-based ESOL curriculum. In addition, Denny (2002) discusses the challenges faced by hearing teachers who have taught Deaf adults in an adult migrant ESOL program at the Auckland University of Technology. She also discusses the subsequent

need for a 'Deaf only' literacy class and touches on some of the challenges involved with its development. Roach (2002) reports in more detail on the development of this class in an unpublished paper titled 'Trials, tribulations and triumphs', which identified both the challenges involved and the ensuing successes. Dugdale (2004) also offers valuable insights into course development and methodology in the establishment of a Deaf-only literacy course and the integration of such learners into a regular community-based adult literacy program. In subsequent email discussions with the experienced teacher involved, many of the points identified accord with the Australasian experience, including:

- For a deaf- born adult, English is a second (and additional) language.
- The lack of a solid language base in childhood makes it more difficult to acquire the rules of written English
- The limited access to English of born-deaf children denies them a solid language base.
- Vocabulary is a stumbling block. A user-friendly dictionary is essential.
- The recognition that in some literacy contexts 'Deaf English' may be the most appropriate and effective mode.
- The difficulty of applying what one learns in the classroom to real-life literacy contexts due to the lack of constant reinforcement from hearing spoken English.

(Dugdale 2004, p10-11):

The study reported in this paper seeks to add to the literature on course development and methodology by identifying the themes that have emerged from the actual delivery of a 'Deaf-only' English language / literacy class. It is in this sense "insights from the chalk-face".

### **What is meant by English language / literacy instruction?**

Adult English language instruction (the domain of TESOL) and adult literacy instruction have been positioned as two separate areas of pedagogy, but much can be gained from a dialogue between the two (see Hunter 2004). It is not my concern to discuss how this dialogue might take place. But I do wish to illustrate one way this might happen in practice.

In the context of the present course, what I mean by "English language instruction" is the development of learners' "knowledge about" written language: the grammar, vocabulary

(including multi-word units) and discourse features of texts. In this regard, one goal of instruction is to raise learners' linguistic awareness of written English by targeting explicit knowledge (see Loewen et al. 2004). The ultimate goal, however, is to have Deaf learners understand and (re)produce written texts. This, then, is clearly the domain of TESOL.

In most discussions of adult literacy, a distinction is made between literacy as the acquisition of a distinct set of reading and writing skills and literacy as a social practice (Barton 1994, Gee 1996, Heath 1983, Street 1984). At risk of simplification, the former 'skills-based approach' and asocial view is one largely adopted by TESOL. Unlike the concerns of adult literacy instruction, there is frequently little concern for the social purposes of texts and the human relationships they embody. An possible exception, however, would be genre-based approaches (e.g. Feez 1998, Johns 2002)

Combining the two perspectives, my definition of literacy, then, is the ability to use knowledge 'about language' to comprehend and (re)produce texts, so that learners can become functionally adept members of the society in which they live. In this view, knowledge about English is a means to a social end. I would argue that for Deaf adults, most of whom do not have a solid language base and have not had the benefit of oral input in their language development (Dugdale 2004), a skills-based approach to literacy is not only necessary but essential. But I would also argue that we must not lose sight of the social purposes of literacy.

Two articles that I have found useful in providing a framework of what is required for teaching English language / literacy to Deaf adults are Freebody and Luke (1990) and Auerbach (1994). Freebody and Luke identify four co-dependant roles that a competent reader must adopt in interpreting a written text:

- code breaker (How do I crack the text?)
- text participant (What does the text mean?)
- text-user (What do I do with the text, here and now?)
- text analyst (What does all this do to me, personally?)

Auerbach identifies five inter-related pedagogical perspectives for the teaching of writing to adults:

- the form-focused perspective
- the ‘sharing stories’, or ‘writing about our lives’ perspective
- the genre approach
- the ‘literacy as social practices’ perspective
- the ‘social transformation’ or ‘critical’ perspective

My own view, one that has developed from my involvement with the present course, is that we need to be familiar with theoretical perspectives, but that we also need to adapt our practices to suit the particular needs of our learners (Duffy and Hoffman 1999, Schirmer 2001). In other words, we need to develop a principled but eclectic approach, depending on the context of the course. It is these beliefs that have formed the basis of the course (Graves 2000).

## **The Context**

Above I have touched briefly on the AUT experience in establishing a Deaf-only English language / literacy course for adult Deaf learners (also see Denny 2002, Roach 2002). Here I provide some further background to the empirical study that informs this paper.

## **The course**

In 2000, the School of Languages (AUT) was approached by the Resource Coordinator for Deaf Learners (a function of the Disability Resource Office) to establish a part-time Deaf-only class. It was envisaged that this course would help bridge the needs of those studying in mainstream courses. From the outset, however, the course largely drew on the wider Deaf community and this being the case, it developed a community-literacy focus, one that has remained. The course is now in its fourth year. The course is part-time, 4 hours per week on Saturdays. There is now a cap of 12 learners, and this semester we have 10, most of whom are rollover students from the previous semester. The course is certificated under the Certificate in English Language, a competency-based ESOL program (but for the Deaf learners oral/aural

competencies are omitted and the syllabus is developed to meet the specific needs of Deaf adults). Learners require 4 semesters to obtain a full certificate, but are awarded a 15-point Certificate of Proficiency each semester, at the level they have achieved. Upon the accumulation of 60 credits learners are awarded a full certificate. Initially, learners were required to pay in full for the course (or find alternative funding, for example, through Work and Income New Zealand). In 2002 and 2003, however, the course received funding through the Ministry of Education's Adult Literacy Strategy (Ministry of Education 2001, 2002). This funding was withdrawn in 2004 and as a consequence the university was approached to subsidise the course. Ministry of Education funding was reinstated in 2005 (at the time of writing this paper).

The course is taught by a hearing ESOL teacher. Classroom support includes a Deaf bilingual tutor, two trained bilingual New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) interpreters and a note-taker. Instructional resources include the use of a computer laboratory where learners can use both grammar-based and word processing software.

### **The learners**

Since the inception of the course in 2000, all but one learner enrolled has been severely or profoundly deaf (one learner had significant hearing and articulate speech). Approximately 60% of learners have been New Zealand-born, including those of Maori and Pacifica ethnicity. The remaining 40% have been new migrants (including one refugee). Thus, learners come from a range of cultural backgrounds, but especially in the case of those born in New Zealand, share a Deaf culture characterised by the use of NZSL. NZSL proficiency, however, varies among such learners. This is more the case with those not born in New Zealand. Admission into the course, however, requires relatively competent signing skills (in NZSL or another signed language), as assessed by an independent bilingual at the time of enrolment. English language / literacy proficiency also varies, always resulting in a multi-level class. All new learners are given a non-threatening placement test prior to enrollment to assess their entry level. Those with very low literacy levels are referred to classes run periodically by the Auckland Deaf Association.. Many enrolled students chose to rollover from one semester to the next and at the time of presentation of this paper (September 2004), there were three learners receiving full certificates at the end of the semester, having attended for four semesters.



## **The researcher's role**

The researcher has been involved with the course as course developer and classroom instructor since its inception in 2000. My role is thus that of a teacher-researcher (Stenhouse 1975). I am equally guided by a recognition that “researchers should study what teachers do with methods in order to recognize and understand the complexity of classroom life, how teachers adapt and modify methods and materials to meet the needs of diverse students, and the process and contexts for teacher problem solving, decision making and development” (Schirmer 2001, p. 85).

## **The study**

### **Aim**

The aim of the study was to identify the themes associated with developing a part time English language / literacy course for adults who are profoundly deaf for the purposes of improving course delivery and for providing insights for others teaching and/or developing similar courses.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are the themes that emerge from a reflective analysis of the course development processes and the teaching of the course?
- (2) How might these themes inform a better understanding of the provision of English language / literacy courses for Deaf adults?

### **Method**

The study can be described similarly as “formative program evaluation”, adopting an “interpretivist position” (Lynch 1996, 2003), and an exercise in reflective practice (Bartlett

1990). To these ends, the data were collected over the four years the course has been running by means of (a) participant observation (b) a reflective teacher journal (c) Board of Studies reports and email correspondence with the Programme Leader of the certificate program and (d) evaluative reports written for the Ministry of Education. For the purposes of this study, data analysis was carried out by first “eye-balling” the data (Boglan and Biklen 1982) to identify salient categories. These categories were then reduced by subjecting them to ‘iterative revision’ (Lynch 2003, pp. 135-147), involving layers of period reflection.

## **Findings and discussion**

Table 1 outlines the salient themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. It is recognised that these themes overlap in some aspects.

### **1. Learning preferences of adult Deaf learners**

Deaf adults in the class appear to have a number of learning preferences:

- A predominately visual learning style
- A preference for working with texts that are socially salient
- A preference for task-orientated methodology

A predominately visual learning style is nothing new for those involved with Deaf education.(see Buzacott 2000, Hanks 1999). In relation to instructional materials, layout must be clear and unambiguous. Paradoxically, this is not always the case for commercially published ESOL materials. Illustrations are a big plus and can be exploited in a number of ways (e.g. as pre-task discussion for a newspaper article or for teaching a specific grammar point). In commercially published grammar materials, however, a caveat is that many contain reference to spoken dialogue. All grammar-related exercises need to relate to written language. I have found that the teaching of grammar should relate to classroom texts, either those being read or those written by students (Feez 1998). Use of an OHP is also essential as this can project an image to the front of the class, making it easier for Deaf learners to focus as a group. It goes without saying that 18-point font plus is required. Classroom proxemics are also important in that (1) learners line of vision needs to be unimpaired (2) the teacher needs to stand close to the interpreter and (2) excessive movement should be avoided when

standing in front of the class (e.g. when working with the white-board). The seating arrangement favoured by students is a semi-circle arrangement.

Learners tend to respond better to texts that are 'socially salient'. By this I mean, texts that serve a clear social purpose, such as job advertisements and job application letters, letters of complaint and the like, and newspaper articles that are related to learners' own interests. When adopting the practice of

Table 1: Themes, Observations and Implications

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>Course implications</b>
Learning preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Visual learning style</li>   <li>▪ Socially salient text-types</li>   <li>▪ Task-orientated</li> </ul>	<p>Clear layout of materials</p> <p>Use of OHP</p> <p>Classroom proxemics</p> <p>Syllabus design</p> <p>Small group / pairs</p> <p>Self-paced learning</p>
Positive affective environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Presence of Deaf bilingual support tutor</li>   <li>▪ Learner centered approach</li>   <li>▪ Non-threatening assessment practices</li> </ul>	<p>Provides role model</p> <p>Principles of adult learning</p> <p>Assessment of learners' 'subjective needs'</p> <p>Adoption of negotiated syllabus</p> <p>Clear objectives</p> <p>Achievement-based</p> <p>Criteria made explicit to learners</p> <p>Competency-based (students pass at individual levels)</p>
Bilingual methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Delivery</li>   <li>▪ Methodology</li>   <li>▪ Interface between L1 and literacy</li>   <li>▪ L1 development</li> </ul>	<p>Use of NZSL interpreters</p> <p>Encouragement of learners' L1</p> <p>Recognition of social purpose of literacy</p> <p>Improved NZSL</p>
Challenges of multi-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Divide class into two levels</li> </ul>	<p>Difficulties of syllabus construction</p>

level learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use of Deaf bilingual tutor to support weaker learners in one class</li> </ul>	Better affective environment
Learning and classroom processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Planning vs improvisation</li> <li>▪ The social context of the classroom</li> </ul>	<p>Importance of both planning and interactive decision-making</p> <p>Recognition that all learning is socially situated</p>
The need for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The course developer /classroom teacher</li> <li>▪ The learners</li> <li>▪ Course funding</li> </ul>	<p>A supportive network required</p> <p>NZSL interpreters / notetaker / support tutor</p> <p>MOE funding makes course more accessible</p>

developing written language around personal experience (e.g. a favourite place, a past experience), many learners, especially those with low proficiency, do not respond well, even if models are provided. All learners produce a more accurate text when the task involves a socially salient text, in part, possibly due to the availability of prefabricated chunks of language, but also possibly because the text accords with learners' own views of what literacy entails. Writing recounts or personal descriptions is arguably a school based literacy practice, which many Deaf adults may not have fully participated in.

The Deaf adults in this class respond well to task-based methodology. This falls into two main types: (1) small-group tasks that provide opportunities for discussion and to clarify ideas, such as cloze-type word puzzles to revise newspaper articles and pre-task and post task reading activities (2) individual computer-orientated tasks, which allow learners to work at their own speed. Some instruction, of course, needs to be teacher centred. However, as in other pedagogical contexts, too much of this appears to have an adverse effect on learners' concentration.

## **2. A positive affective environment**

The creation of a positive affective classroom environment cannot be understated where Deaf adult learners are concerned. Three factors have contributed to this. A fourth factor, the use of learners' first language (NZSL) is treated as a separate theme.

- The use of a Deaf bilingual support tutor
- A learner-centred approach
- Non-threatening assessment practices

Two years after the course started, on the request of the class teacher, a Deaf bilingual support tutor was employed. This reflected not only the need for support, but also accords well with Australian research (e.g. Cummins and Leigh 1992, Cresdee 1997, Duffy et al.1999, Leigh and Cummins 1992), which identifies a Deaf bilingual as a valuable role model. The support tutor has been invaluable in creating and sustaining an positive affective classroom environment, beyond that of the rapport developed with learners over time by the hearing classroom teacher. The role of the support tutor also involves providing feedback to the classroom teacher on what went well and what can be improved.

Meeting the needs of learners through a learner-centred approach has also been crucial in creating and sustaining a positive affective classroom environment. This involves (1), the recognition of principles of adult learning, such as personally relevant content, reduction of stress and anxiety, variation of learning experiences and the importance of individual learning styles (see Brundage and Macheracher 1980 in Nunan 1999, p. 15 for a discussion of these) (2), the assessment of learners “subjective needs” (Brindley 1989); that is, those needs identified by the learners themselves and (3), the adoption of a (partly) negotiated syllabus, in which learners themselves have input into the content and methodology (see, for example, Breen and Littlejohn 2000). Achieving this in the class involves encouraging learners to bring their own texts (newspaper articles, email correspondence) to class for learning experiences and personal feedback. This, then, recognises the social purposes of literacy by linking learners’ own experiences and interests to classroom learning.

The third point relates to non-threatening assessment. Deaf adults, in general, have not had positive experiences with assessment and the reduction of assessment-related anxiety is crucial for a positive affective environment. The class is accountable in two ways. First, it is part of a certificated program and second, in the case of the Ministry of Education, evidence of outcomes is required. This necessitates a summative assessment plan, in this case, competency-based tasks related to literacy. Learners in this class also place great importance on summative results (i.e. the award of a certificate). Adopting non-threatening assessment practices has involved awarding a pass at the level each student achieves at. This satisfies both program accountability and learner needs and alleviates anxiety.

### **3. Bilingual instruction**

In part, the use of bilingual instruction can also be seen as a means of creating a positive affective environment. Here, I identify it as a theme in its own right, in recognition of its crucial importance in Deaf education. The use of bilingual instruction is not new. Its benefit in addressing literacy is well-documented in the literature, both in school based education and in adult literacy programs (e.g. Cresdee 1997, Duffy et al 1993, Leigh 1992, Wilbur 2000). Here I discuss bilingual instruction in relation to four observations that emerged from the present class:

- Mode of delivery
- Classroom methodology
- Interface between NZSL and English literacy
- Development of NZSL skills

At a fundamental level, instruction is necessarily bilingual in a context, such as this one, where the teacher is a hearing teacher. This is what I mean by “mode of delivery”. I am referring to the use of NZSL interpreters to put into sign what the teacher says and, conversely, to voice what the learners sign. This is not an easy task for the interpreter, and in recognition of the concentration required and the fatigue incurred, the class now has two interpreters.

At a different level is the actual methodology used. By this I mean the purposeful use of learners’ signed language to promote learning. Examples include (1), small group discussion as a pre-reading activity (2), small group discussion to clarify ideas after initial reading of a text (3), pair-work tasks involving vocabulary revision and (4), for review, translation of a text into NZSL, which is then voiced by the interpreter so as to check comprehension of the text.

This latter activity was requested by a more proficient signer, who felt the need to relate English literacy skills to social uses within her own Deaf community. This, for example, might involve discussing, in signed language, over a glass of wine, a current issue or item of interest in the printed news media. Not all learners felt comfortable with this activity and some had a tendency to translate the written text into “signed English” rather than NZSL. Proficiency in both literacy and NZSL were factors. However, I think this interface between NZSL and literacy points to a direction little recognised in the literature on Deaf education: the social uses to which literacy is put in the lives of Deaf adults. It is a reminder that literacy is learned in social contexts and used in different communities in different ways and for different purposes (Heath 1983).

Finally, bilingual instruction serves two purposes: on the one hand, English language / literacy development and on the other, signed language development. One of the comments



frequently made in course evaluations is the benefit to learners in regard to increased NZSL vocabulary and fluency.

#### **4. Challenges of a multi-level class**

Elsewhere (Roach 2002) I have identified this theme as one of the major challenges in developing and teaching the course. This theme has taken on a life of its own, in that it impacts directly on materials development, methodology, assessment practices and upon opportunities for classroom learning. As previously mentioned, a policy does exist to exclude learners with very low literacy. These are referred to the Deaf Association. However, in any given semester, a wide range of English language / literacy proficiency still prevails. For example, learners are free to re-enrol in the course from one semester to the next and such learners build up a knowledge of English language and literacy skills that far exceeds that of many newcomers. It has taken time to accept mixed proficiency as a given contextual constraint. Various strategies have been employed. First, in a large class with no support tutor, I attempted to find the middle ground. However, such middle ground proved elusive with classroom materials being too easy for some and too difficult for others. It proved impossible to develop and teach two sets of instructional materials in the same class. Second, with the support of a support tutor, the class was divided into two groups. This ultimately proved unsuccessful for a number of reasons: the support tutor felt uncomfortable as “the teacher” of one group; preparation of two sets of instructional materials and related assessment tasks was time-consuming; and it was felt that a better affective environment was achieved with all learners in one class. At present, one set of instructional materials is used with all learners and the support tutor is available for individual attention if required. The computer facilities continue to provide a space for self-paced learning and additional one-to-one tuition.

#### **5. Classroom processes support successful learning**

In both general education and second language instruction, the relationship between classroom processes and successful learning is an important one. (Breen 1985, Breen and Littlejohn 2000). In that classroom processes differ in this particular context, due to the characteristics of the learners and the bilingual methods employed, initially this also posed

some challenges, to be precise, some adaptation to the teaching of ESOL to hearing learners. Classroom process in the context of adult Deaf literacy has two aspects:

- The cultural environment of the classroom
- Planned versus improvised classroom instruction

It cannot be stressed that successful classroom learning emerges from the recognition and cultivation of the cultural processes at work within any particular context (Breen 1985). Ensuring optimal learning conditions involves recognition of many of the points thus identified, for example, the importance of rapport and the creation of a positive affective environment through recognition of learners' needs and preferences. A recommendation is to actively encourage Deaf adults to bring their own culture (and language) into the literacy classroom and to exploit this for successful learning.

A second aspect of classroom process involves planning, to be precise, planned or improvised instruction (van Lier 1996). This distinction captures the difference between pre-instructional planning and instruction that deviates from the plan, involving interactive decision-making. Both are important. The first provides direction, the second responds to learners' incidental needs. In regard to the latter, I have found this instructional context demanding, as the learners frequently take the lesson in directions not initially envisaged. It takes some skill and patience to go with the flow (and to be precise about the questions learners ask) yet not to be distracted and to return constantly to the main focus of the lesson. Most learner questions relate to lexis and grammar.

## **6. The need for support**

The final theme is all-embracing and relates to many of the points so-far discussed. It would not be incorrect to state that without such support, the course would have folded soon after its inception, or would have dwindled to unsustainable numbers. Support relates to three overlapping areas:

- The course developer / classroom teacher
- The learners

- The program

Without the support of the university, and particularly a receptive Programme Leader, this course may not have lasted the four years duration, for the simple reason it was initially time consuming to get off the ground. For the teacher, many hours went into materials development, far in excess of that required for other ESOL-type courses. For anyone wishing to develop an English language / literacy course for Deaf adults, a prior recognition of the commitment required is necessary. Equally, such commitment needs to be supported by the availability of resources.

Learners also need support. This, as identified above, comes in the form of a Deaf bilingual support tutor, NZSL interpreters and a note-taker and the availability of teaching/learning resources such as computer facilities. In this regard, this course has been well –resourced.

It is not difficult to see that this course is relatively expensive to run. Initially, learners were required to pay full fees. The user-pays environment has proved a real barrier to many learners, particularly to those who do not have employment. Ministry of Education funding was secured in 2002 and 2003, but this was not made available in 2004. In order to keep the course afloat the university was persuaded to heavily subsidise the course. Fortunately, at the time of writing (March 2005), Ministry of Education funding, through the Adult Learning Literacy Pool, has been reinstated. I strongly recommend that others developing a course for Deaf adult learners apply for such funding.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding, I hope this paper has offered insights into what is pedagogically an immensely rewarding instructional context. I think it is well-accepted that teachers' practices are transformed through teaching, and from reflection upon teaching, and in my case this is certainly true. However, the territory of adult Deaf literacy instruction is one that is largely uncharted. I have had to map my own territory and with it I take full responsibility for any wrong turns and blind alleys. Likewise with the research process. The study is unequivocally interpretative and its validity lies not with the discovery of an objective reality but with the understandings that others may invest in the findings.

Lawrence Stenhouse (cited in van Lier 1996, p. 3) once said that the curriculum needs to be brought into the classroom “on a porter’s barrow”. Each Saturday morning, as I wheel the instructional materials to class - a box of dictionaries, photocopied worksheets related to the text-of-the-day, a tray of OHP’s, vocabulary review tasks with their colored strips of paper, marked homework, an array of colored board markers – I am constantly reminded of this image. In this view, however, a course also entails more than just materials – it is a systematic collection of accumulated knowledge and experience that guides classroom practice (van Lier 1996, p. 3). What I have attempted in this paper is to reflect on my own practice and to lay bare the accumulated knowledge and experience I have developed over the duration of the course. I have attempted to make my tacit understandings explicit so that others involved with, or planning to set up a similar course, might benefit from any insights.

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