

Cued Speech.

Why do we leave it so Neglected?

Did you see the Parkinson shows on TV recently, with those short clips of lip speaking at the beginning and end of each part? Clear lip speaking, shown so close as to fill the whole TV screen should give all the clues for anyone who needs to lip read but could you read every word, every time. If you can answer yes to that question, congratulations but I suspect that you are more skilful than a good many deafened people. For a lot of lip readers, something to provide a few more clues would be very welcome.

Cued Speech was devised about forty years ago in the USA not just to provide a few more clues but to make every sound and hence every word clearly visible. Its purpose was to develop the literacy levels of deaf children by helping them to understand spoken language and in turn acquire the complementary skills of reading and writing. It is now in use in various parts of the world but here in the UK, it seems, with some exceptions, to have acquired a stereotype image that it is for deaf children only and therefore not applicable for any other users. This is a pity because basically it is not a difficult skill and could be exactly what is needed to provide a few more clues for deafened people.

Cued Speech is not a manual system of communication. Cued Speech is the basic lip reading shapes, most of which, if not all, you will already recognise, plus a little bit more. In fairness, the "little bit more" is different hand shapes and positions, which combined with the lip shapes, form "Cues", to show all the 44 sounds that we use in the English language, and subsequently make every sound visible. Compare that with the 26 hand shapes used for finger spelling and you will get a feel for what is involved. All deafened readers will know the difficulties with sounds that cannot be lip read. The p, m, b letters and the throat sounds of k, g, h are some of the more obvious examples. With Cued Speech those letters, and much more, are all visually different. So no more guessing. If speech has not made sense first time, a repetition with subtitles is available, portable and always accessible (so long as the speaker has a free hand and is prepared to learn!).

What more could we ask for?

Logically Cued Speech seems to be so valuable but so many deafened people seem to be unaware of its existence or know very little about it. No effort is made to supply information, or even to raise awareness, at lip reading classes or during rehabilitation programmes.

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Newly deafened people who cannot be helped by hearing aids have to rely on lip reading, implants or possibly Sign Language as their best hope of regaining some useful rehabilitation. All of these routes take a long time to deliver results and in many cases, where people are older or are just unlucky, the required skills are not well acquired, if at all. It is possible that aptitude or talent for the particular skill may also play a part, and of course, the same may be the case for Cued Speech.

I believe that Cued Speech may offer something for all deafened people. For most it will be an additional skill, to be used a little when required but for some, it could be very much more. The hope of finding something of value for those in need is the real reason behind this article. The more methods of communication that deafened people can use, the more inclusive we become. It is essential that we should all be fully informed of what is available and able to make a free choice. If some deafened people find that Cued Speech is a skill that suits their particular needs, we should all support them with that choice, so that all have the opportunity to achieve the best rehabilitation available to them.

Many deaf children brought up with the use of Cued Speech will in time progress to lip reading or the use of an implant, letting Cued Speech becomes a supplementary but still very useful back-up skill. It is likely that most deafened people would take the same approach. Since deafened people already have the literary skills, learning Cued Speech will be much easier for them and it could do much to bridge that initial period of despair and isolation until other replacement communication skills can be acquired.

As an Outreach Volunteer for the LINK Centre for Deafened People, I will meet many newly deafened people and initially communication will be quite difficult. Cued Speech is obviously not the first thing to confront these people with but it would be nice to see if using this a little at the appropriate time, can help us to move

along the road to better communications a little quicker. With a view to that objective I have tried to find out what learning Cued Speech entails for a deafened person. It's taken me about two to three months to get basic use. I have to admit I'm still slow and I frequently make mistakes but that doesn't matter. I have also had no practice as a Cued Speech reader (need another user) but I have found it fascinating and the rest will improve with time. The system is based on the phonetic components that make up words rather than individual letters. It can take a while to think in these terms but is a fundamentally excellent ability to acquire. I hope that deafened people at social and support groups may take an interest, so that we might be able to give newly deafened people more courage to get socially re-involved a little sooner and then see for real what else it brings.

I would encourage all deafened people to find out more about Cued Speech, spread the word and hopefully give it a try – a good deal of what is required can be self taught. You will have fun (hopefully quite a lot) and you will learn something new. Potentially you will stand to gain (and make available to others) something very much more. Apart from its own value as a means of communication, Cued Speech is also claimed to help significantly with lip reading skills, with the co-ordination of sound/speech understanding for new implant users and with speech problems.

If you have any comments or questions on the above article, please e-mail me at: roland.hilton@ntlworld.com

Since the above article is encouraging you to think about something that is largely untried for deafened people, there are no assurances and you may feel rather uncertain. If that is the case you may gain confidence from a brief look at some of the proven achievements of Cued Speech. Research tests* have shown, impressively, that profoundly deaf children brought up with Cued Speech can correctly identify over 96% of spoken words and can have reading levels equal to hearing children of the same age. Parents and deaf children who have used the system, provide immensely encouraging testimonies and claim that it can give access to the English language in a way that no other system can match. This shows beyond doubt that as a working system of communication, Cued Speech gives extremely effective and reliable results. We cannot make the further conclusion that it will provide similar benefits for deafened people but it stands all the tests of logic and is well worth our consideration. (*Nicholls, 1979).