Thinking About Being Deaf: Will the Present Research Help Guide Future Teaching?

A review of

Deaf Cognition: Foundations and Outcomes
by Marc Marschark and Peter C. Hauser (Eds.)

Reviewed by
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Specific empirical information regarding the manner by which deaf individuals, especially deaf children, learn new material has historically been quite limited. Additional investigation of cognitive strengths and liabilities in relation to hearing peers has also been inadequate, frequently focusing on negative aspects instead of searching for strengths that could help optimize the learning experiences of deaf individuals. Dissemination of the available knowledge has been even more incomplete.

Thus, many of the very individuals who could benefit deaf learners (i.e., teachers of the deaf, direct service providers for the deaf) have had little exposure to the information that could best inform their practices. In an attempt to bridge this gap, Marschark and Hauser have brought together findings from a variety of authors who span multiple disciplines (e.g.,
Upon my initial read of this work, I became fascinated by the information that the different academic contributors provide for the reader. Everything from theory of mind to mathematical reasoning to visual attention literature among the deaf is reviewed in an attempt to solidify a conceptualization of the elements that would be critical to the development of new best practices in the education of the deaf.

Much of this material is novel and offers unique contributions that could definitely strengthen the provision of services to deaf learners and help maximize their educational potential. Extensive research regarding the importance of audition and vision to memory and learning is explored. Ultimately, the overall consensus is that deaf learners significantly underperform in relation to their hearing peers, not because of any innate weakness/liability that deafness confers upon them as individuals, but rather because the teaching methods used are not properly utilizing deaf individuals' strengths.

I am disappointed by several aspects of the book. First, it seems to me that the editors are ambivalent about whether they are attempting to provide a scientific treatise to further best practices in teaching or to stimulate future research investigations. I find this unfortunate because, in the end, I don't believe either goal is achieved. If the work was meant to help educators improve their practices with deaf learners, then much of the material should have been edited to be more readable. Much of the work, although very well written and scholarly, is written from the perspective of a researcher. This means that a relatively research-naïve reader (as many educators often are) needs to struggle to get through the descriptions of methodology and other related material and perhaps may not arrive at the ultimate conclusion that the research has achieved.

If the editors wished to expand on the research side of material, I believe that a huge gap in the work lay in the lack of any imaging studies being reported. In the present technological era, we have access to quite an extensive literature on imaging, even as it pertains to deafness and learning. For instance, a quick scan of the literature reveals recent imaging articles pertaining to brain organization and cochlear implant outcome (Giraud & Lee, 2007), phonological processing (Aparicio, Gounot, Demont, & Metz-Lutz, 2007), and language processing (Corina, 1998), as well as working memory (Wilson & Emmorey, 1997). Blending these findings with the empirical findings could have strengthened some of the various authors' research findings.

At the outset, I expected to read a book that would help to bridge the gap between what we know about deaf cognition and how that can be translated into best practices in the classroom so that a traditionally underperforming group of individuals could be taught in inventive, new ways that would maximize their potentials. In the end, I found myself having absorbed a very academic, research-heavy work that contributes significantly to the literature on deaf cognition and the relevant processes but doesn't help much in improving teaching practices.
As a consequence, I would recommend this book to readers who are interested in the science of how deaf individuals learn. I would not, however, recommend it to those who actually do the teaching because I think it would be difficult for them to translate the book's findings into practice. This is often the challenge of translational research, and in this instance the editors fall short.

References


