

Deaf/Blind Testimonies by Emely Wang

Jugo, a 24 year-old man who was born completely blind and mostly deaf, had been living in isolation with his 26 year-old brother Pedro, also born deaf and blind. Eight years ago, they had both attended a school for the blind in Paraguay. After three years of attending the school, the teachers pronounced them unteachable. They were sent back to their homes where they spent the last three years in isolation. Their only communication with their families was bathroom needs and anger. When we told the school that there was something that we'd like to try that had been developed with the deaf-blind in mind, they brought Jugo and Pedro back in hopes that this "new thing" might work with them.

I sat down with Jugo on the first day and handed him a plastic card that had a SUN (Symbolic Universal Notation) symbol printed in 3D. Instead of taking the card and playing with the card as I had expected him to do, he merely let the card sit in his hands. I finally put the card on the table, took his fingers and traced the symbol on the card. When I let go of his hands, he limply returned his hands to his side. For the next hour, I continued to manipulate his fingers to demonstrate the numbers one, two and three. However, every time I released his hands, he would return them limply to his side. I was starting to understand why the school felt that he was unteachable. Without response from the student, it is almost impossible to assess learning.

The next day, a deaf facilitator who had been trained in SUN began to teach him. While they worked, I tried to do the same thing with Pedro. Pedro's response was not much different. I was starting to wonder, "Is SUN not going to work with the deaf-blind?" Suddenly, I heard a cry of excitement from Jugo's table. The local leader, who had been observing the interaction between Jugo and his deaf facilitator suddenly saw Jugo responding to the lesson on orientation. After being taught how to determine the top of the card, Jugo began turning every single card he was handed right side up. After a few minutes of practicing the new skill, Jugo's facilitator began teaching him the numbers one, two, and three. This time, Jugo's facilitator used a simpler hand gesture to indicate the numbers. Finally, Jugo was making the connection between the symbol on the card with the hand gesture and demonstrating the comprehension of the connection by tapping the correct fingers when different cards were handed to him.

Finally, his facilitator moved on to teach the concept. He handed Jugo the scrambled number cards. Instantly, Jugo grabbed them from his facilitator's hands and began putting them in order from the smallest number to the largest number. Afterwards, he flashed a bright grin and snatched the candy reward from his facilitator's hands.

From there, all of the consecutive words that were taught were quickly mastered and Jugo was able to demonstrate his understanding by signing the word correctly. He understood that he was learning a way of communication and he shook with excitement.

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After we left, the local leader continued to teach the school's staff so that they can continue to work with Jugo and Pedro. They had made plans to re-enroll both brothers and continue teaching literacy using the 3D SUN symbols.