

Deaf/Blind Testimonies by Emely Wang

Jugo, a 24 year-old man 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' attendance, the teachers pronounced them unteachable; they returned home and spent the last three years in isolation. Their only communication with their family was for bathroom needs or in anger. When we told the school that we'd like to try something developed with the deaf-blind in mind, they brought Jugo and Pedro back, hoping this "new thing" might work for them.

I sat down with Jugo on the first day, handing him a plastic card with a SUN (Symbolic Universal Notation) symbol printed in 3D. Instead of taking the card and playing with it as I had expected, he merely let it sit in his hands. I finally put it on the table and traced the symbol on the card with his fingers. When I let go, he limply returned his hands to his side. For the next hour, I continued to manipulate his fingers, demonstrating the numbers 1, 2, and 3. But every time I released his hands, he would return them to his side. I began to understand why the school felt he was unteachable. When a student doesn't respond, learning assessments are nearly impossible.

The next day, a deaf facilitator trained in SUN began to teach Jugo. I attempted the same with Pedro, whose response was not much different. I started to wonder, "Will SUN not work with the deaf-blind?" Suddenly, I heard a cry of excitement at Jugo's table. The local leader, who had been observing Jugo and his deaf facilitator, suddenly saw Jugo responding to the orientation lesson. After being taught how to determine the top of the card, Jugo turned 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 1, 2, and 3. This time, the facilitator used a simpler hand gesture to indicate the numbers. Finally, Jugo made the connection between the card symbol with the hand gesture, and demonstrated comprehension by tapping the correct fingers when different cards were handed to him.

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

From there, all of the consecutive words were quickly mastered; Jugo could demonstrate understanding by signing the word correctly. He knew he was learning a way of communication, and shook with excitement.

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