The use of Visual Phonics by Hand in an oral setting

Karen Hardwicke discusses the advantages of this system which helps deaf children understand sounds better and improves their language skills

Visual Phonics by Hand is a system designed to offer fair access for deaf children to the phonic element of words. Each of the phonemes is represented by a single discrete action which reflects the manner and placement of the sound. The actions have their origins in the fingerspelt alphabet and focus the child's attention on the user's face – thus aiding lip-reading. With its visual as well as auditory information, the system accommodates the most profoundly deaf children as well as children who have greater access to sound via cochlear implants.

My first experience of Visual Phonics by Hand came whilst I was working as a Teacher of the Deaf in a Total Communication provision. I had the pleasure of learning the system via a workshop run by Babs Day, who devised the system. With daily sustained use, the impact of Visual Phonics by Hand on my Key Stage 1 class was clear. Most memorable was a five year old profoundly deaf child who, with the aid of Visual Phonics by Hand, was able to sound out CVC words independently.

I then moved on to my present position at Mary Hare Primary School. I was excited to find out the applications of Visual Phonics by Hand in this, an oral school for deaf children.

Jolly Phonics was already in place at Mary Hare. This is a system widely used in mainstream schools. It uses a multisensory teaching approach (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) to help children learn the sounds of speech. Each sound has a discrete action e.g. the short 'a' sound is represented by the hand pretending to be an ant crawling up the arm and saying 'a a a'. Jolly Phonics is generally used in the early stages of learning to read and is more suitable for the younger child in its use of large, 'mime-like' actions.

Jolly Phonics, like all systems, is not without its limitations. Once the children have learnt single sounds and are ready to begin blending them, it is more difficult to apply Jolly Phonics due to the gross motor actions and accompanying repetitive sounds. Thus, if a child tries to blend the sounds 'c-a-t', using Jolly Phonics, it becomes 'c-c-a-a-t-t'. There is a need for a system that facilitates blending for reading. In addition, one that is appropriate for the older deaf child working at a delayed level in terms of their phonic knowledge is also needed.

Visual Phonics by Hand has been introduced alongside Jolly Phonics at Mary Hare Primary School and is used according to the needs of the individual child. It is the system I have found to be most useful, both with last year's class of lower Key Stage 2 children, for whom the finer hand shapes were more appropriate and whose experience of fingerspelling rendered Visual Phonics by Hand an easy system to learn, and also for this year's class of younger children who have enjoyed learning the actions for the Phase 2 letter sounds. For both age groups, the system has proved fun and accessible and has significantly bolstered the children's segmenting/blending skills.

A typical session looks like this:
The session begins with a song about segmenting and blending sounds for spelling and reading. The children have designed their own actions and enjoy learning and using correct terms such as 'phoneme' and 'digraph' in the song.

As a warm-up activity, flashcards are used to revise previously learnt sounds and their Visual Phonics by Hand action.

The sound of the day, for example 'ai', is introduced – its spoken form, its Visual Phonics by Hand action then its written form.

The children are asked to blend the sounds for reading. All of the words contain the sound 'ai' – rain, pain, train, sprain. This can be an opportunity to introduce new vocabulary.

A puppet is often used at this point. She is asked to blend the sounds of a word for reading eg 'h-e-n'. Visual Phonics by Hand actions accompany each of the sounds. She invariably makes a mistake and mispronounces the word 'p-e-n'. As well as causing much amusement, the error generates discussion as to which sound she got wrong – initial, middle or final.

The children then work in differentiated groups – those who can segment CVC words and those working at a CCVC/CVCC level. They are asked to segment five words containing the sound of the day on five individual strips of paper. As well as hearing the word, the children are given a visual clue with the use of sound buttons – indicating single letters, and sound lines – indicating two or more letters but making one sound (ai, ee, igh). More able children are asked to think of and to record other words that rhyme with 'rain'.

Finally, the children are asked to look at the words and match those that rhyme – 'train' and 'main', 'fail' and 'mail' and to identify the 'odd one out' – for example 'paid'.

The use of Visual Phonics by Hand has had positive offshoots. Implementing a new system needs the involvement of the children's parents. There have been two workshops held for parents, in which they have been taught each of the Visual Phonics by Hand actions. Parents have responded positively and have made comments such as: 'With Visual Phonics by Hand I can help Jake to break down the words when we are reading. It can also help him understand how to say them.'

All the parents agreed that Visual Phonics by Hand helps to support their child's reading and writing skills and they are reinforcing the system at home.

Another positive benefit of Visual Phonics by Hand has been its impact on 'joined up' working between Education and Speech Therapy.

The workshops were a joint project with Claire Whittaker, a Speech and Language Therapist at MHPS who has embraced the use of the system in her work. Claire has written the following about Visual Phonics by Hand:

Why Speech Therapists should use Visual Phonics by Hand:
Having worked as a Speech Therapist for over 15 years, I have learnt how significant the correlation appears to be between a child's poor intelligibility and his or her struggle with phonics. No matter what the difficulty may be with the oral motor co-ordination, it is often the case that, with closer examination, the child may not know the correct sound that he or she is actually aiming for. This is certainly evident with children who have a signing background. The children that I work with at Mary Hare Primary have very poor phonological awareness and have not picked up phonological skills spontaneously as a hearing child would. The children are often unsure what sound a letter makes or what sound a word starts or ends with. I believe that, in order to improve the clarity of their speech, it is vital that work should be carried out that focuses on improving the child's phonics. In the past I have tried many different approaches to address this – Cued Articulation, Jolly Phonics, Superphonics etc. Each method can work and is often appropriate for an individual child but, for a Speech Therapist working with deaf children, I have found that Visual Phonics by Hand has just 'ticked all the boxes'.

When addressing the production of a specific sound, it is useful to initially describe to the child where that sound is made in the mouth. For example, when working with a child who is 'fronting' (replacing the sound 'k' with a 't'), the visual phonic actions clearly illustrate how the 't' is made at the front of the mouth and the 'k' is made at the back. Not only does Visual Phonics by Hand illustrate placement but it goes further than this and at the same time helps reinforce letter shape (for example with the 'k', the finger shape mirrors the letter shape). It is therefore appropriate to use Visual Phonics by Hand with a hearing child or any child who needs phonic support.

There are many similarities between Visual Phonics by Hand and Cued Articulation (which is also a useful tool for Speech Therapists). However, Visual Phonics by Hand was developed specifically for the deaf child and based around finger spelling, so not only does it show placement and mirror letter shape but it also emanates from a system that most deaf children have already been exposed to. For example, the 'm' action not only highlights the nasality of the sound and the fact that the letter has three vertical lines, but it is also simply the spelling action on the nose rather than on the palm of the hand.

In my experience, the deaf children I have worked with pick up Visual Phonics by Hand surprisingly quickly. I have been amazed by how beneficial this system is and how, by providing this added information about each phoneme, the children appear to be able to store the individual sounds and to retrieve them and use the phonemes appropriately. The clarity of their speech therefore improves quickly and consistently.

Visual Phonics by Hand is well regarded by a range of specialists in deaf education. It can be used effectively in a variety of contexts: for deaf children in special schools as well as resource bases, by Teachers of the Deaf and Speech Therapists. It has applications for oral as well as signing/TC settings.

Visual Phonics by Hand increases the possibilities of a level playing field for the deaf child in his/her access to literacy.

Karen Hardwicke has worked as a peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf with pre-school children and as a Teacher of the Deaf in a TC provision. She now enjoys working at Mary Hare Primary School. Being the parent of a deaf child was her initial driving force.