

SIGNS INSTEAD OF SOUNDS

Book and CD bring words alive for deaf

Uses sign language and printed text

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Like many deaf people, Jaime Smith has trouble reading.

Even the simplest newspaper articles are often indecipherable. Great works of fiction are completely beyond her reach.

"I would do anything to be able to improve my reading skills," the bright, energetic 25-year-old says through a sign language interpreter. "I want to go to university. But I can't keep up with the reading. They use huge words that mean nothing to me."

For Smith and others like her, help is on the way.

A new computer-assisted reading course being developed by Edmonton's NorQuest College will give deaf people a better grasp of what they're reading by combining the written word with recorded translations in American Sign Language.

"There are many people who are deaf who struggle reading English," says Bill Persall, one of the course developers, who is also deaf. "That's because English isn't their first language. Their first language is ASL."

Persall, instructional assistant at NorQuest, and Flo Brokop, a literacy instructor at the college, have been contracted by the National Literacy Secretariat and Human Resources Canada to develop a book and CD-ROM



JOHN LUCAS. THE JOURNAL

Instructor Flo Brokop and instructor assistant Bill Persall show student Jaime Smith, left, their new computer program for deaf students at NorQuest College.

to help deaf people improve their reading skills.

To be called the *NorQuest Reader*, the book and CD will be modeled on a prototype the two put together that includes text and photographs of NorQuest staff acting out simple stories, with images of Persall translating them into sign language. Deaf people can read the text and simply click on the ASL icon for an interpretation when they get stuck.

Persall, who has been deaf since birth and learned ASL as a child, says deaf people learn to read and relate to print in a different way from people who can hear.

When most people learn to read, they associate printed

words with spoken sounds. They are able to process information from long, complex sentences by recognizing familiar words and patterns of words. Part of the enjoyment comes from the rhythm and poetry of the written language, which people "hear" in their heads from the memory of the spoken words.

People who have never heard the words spoken are less likely to recognize them on the page.

"A sentence is a string of words that don't seem to have any relationship to each other," says Persall. "ASL is different from English because it deals with concepts rather than individual words. People

who are deaf are capable of understanding complex concepts in their own language. It's when they try to associate English words with those concepts that they get lost."

Smith, who began losing her hearing when she was 10, barely remembers the way the words sound.

"To relate the words to the sounds is very tough," she says. "I used to hate reading. I was too embarrassed to try."

The book and CD will include 15 stories of 800 to 1,000 words combining text and an ASL illustration.

They will be written for a deaf audience at skill levels ranging from grades 4 to 9.

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