

# Learning from Helen Keller

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**Key Words** : First Language Acquisition, Language Learning

**Abstract** : If we can identify the conditions under which the learning of one's first language occurs and understand the principles behind them, we are then in a stronger position to develop classroom techniques that have a greater probability of having a beneficial effect on student learning. In this paper, the learning conditions arranged initially by Anne Sullivan that surrounded her pupil Helen Keller's successful and rapid acquisition of her first language are described. The analysis presented in this paper explains, among other points, how the successful language teacher first observes the student's responses and then arranges further activities based on these responses. In this way, the teacher is constantly learning from the child and in doing so, actively engaging the child and the child's curiosity naturally in their learning.

How does a child develop their understanding of the world they live in? What role does language and interaction with others play in this exploration? What would our lives be like without the ability to use language? How are language and thinking related? Though we still cannot definitely answer these questions, all of us can gain insight into the acquisition of our first language and the effect our use of language has had on our own development by examining our own learning histories. Indeed, the first step in understanding language acquisition is to identify the conditions under which our mother tongue is learned. If we are able to find such conditions, especially those that yield rapid learning, and understand the governing principles behind them, we can then have more confidence that such conditions, if adapted to the classroom, will have a good chance of yielding a beneficial effect on learning. However, most of us do not remember with precise detail when we first started using language in our lives. Therefore, to gain more clues that might point to the conditions surrounding the quick learning of language, the documented, successful case of the language acquisition of Helen Keller is examined in this paper.

## **Research Method**

It is not unusual for scientists to research a single, exemplary person to glean as much as they can from that person's experience that can in turn benefit the general public. No less an eminent scholar than the renowned neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, employed this very method of research. His books, *The Mind of a Mnemonist, a Little Book about a Vast Memory* (Luria, 1987a) and *The Man with a Shattered World, the History of a Brain Wound* (Luria, 1987b) are examples of this style. Analysis in this kind of research involves the skill of extracting key and relevant points from a vast amount of information and applying them to the research question at hand. In the case of this paper, the search is for the conditions that are observed to surround the rapid acquisition of one person's first language.

This kind of research necessarily involves the use of the subject's own words as data. We are very fortunate that in the case of Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan (sometimes referred to as Anne Sullivan Macy), we have a rich description in their own words to draw on (see Keller, 1955, 2003a, 2003b). They, of course, can describe and explain their experiences more clearly than anyone else could presume to do. Even a cursory examination of any of Keller's writings will show that there is certainly much depth to her story. As to scientists accepting Keller and Sullivan's account as is we have to look no further than William James. It is commonly known that that prominent psychologist who was a contemporary of Keller's, along with others in his field, thought her words a more than worthy subject for study. He is often quoted as having said of Keller in regard to the gift she has given us in articulating the workings of her mind, "Whatever you were or are, you're a blessing."

## **Helen Keller**

Most people are familiar with Keller's story, that at the age of 19 months she suffered an illness that left her blind and deaf, and subsequently she virtually ceased to use the few words she had been able to produce from before her illness. Though she developed her own signs to communicate, they had become inadequate by age 6 (almost 7) when she met her teacher, Anne Sullivan. Therefore, her case is of particular interest to us because though an older child, she had not yet acquired her first language.

Furthermore, we find much evidence in her autobiography and later writings (Keller, 1955, 2003a, 2003b) that Keller did indeed acquire the fundamentals of using her first

language effectively and rapidly — in a period of only several months — and that she grew into a woman who was sensitive, confident, imaginative, independent, loved life and participated fully in society despite the different mode in which she was forced to communicate. She also earned a college degree, was fluent in several languages, was a successful author and political activist, and achieved all this in a time when opportunities for women to further their education and live independently were limited.

Because she was and still is such a well-known and influential figure, one can find several hundred research papers and books that include information on Keller's case in diverse fields such as psychology, philosophy, the education of the deaf/blind, social welfare, sociology, and religion to name just a few. She is such a rich source of material that it is perhaps understandable that there have been significantly fewer studies that apply her case to language education, in general, or to first language acquisition, specifically (see Cochrane, 1979; and Hill, 1997, two of the few examples). We may be so struck by her achievements that we might overlook the simple point that she was able to achieve what she did mainly because she became extremely skilled in using language. So, to repeat again, the purpose of this paper is to add to the body of knowledge about Keller, and also language acquisition and learning by analyzing the conditions that surrounded her rapid acquisition of her mother tongue. To date, other research that attempts this has not been found, although it may exist. The analysis in this paper was the result of independent research, but it is still quite possible that others also have independently arrived at similar conclusions, and the author would be pleased to be informed if such studies do exist.

There is no doubting Keller's ability to effectively and naturally use language. Of course, she did not achieve this on her own. This feat was accomplished through her interaction with a teacher and the learning opportunities that the teacher provided for her. Therefore, the techniques Sullivan used in teaching Keller are of interest to us because they may be even more effective when used with a child who receives impressions of the world through all five senses.

### **Sullivan's Method**

Luckily for Keller, Sullivan did not have any clear idea of how to teach her, and did not feel obligated to follow any particular methodology because there was none to draw on at that time. She did, though, read S. G. Howe's reports on the education of Laura Bridgman, one of the first recorded deaf/blind persons to learn language, and had conversed with

Bridgman through the manual alphabet while studying at the Perkins School for the Blind where Bridgman was a resident during her adult life (Collins, 1995; Freeberg, 2001). However, Sullivan mainly fell back on her own resources and observed how a baby learns and thus tried to connect the words and phrases that she signed into Keller's hand with the object or action in the context of life in the moment Keller was experiencing it, as we do when we speak to an infant. Little did Sullivan know then what has subsequently been demonstrated scientifically since, that children take notice of events that happen simultaneously or closely following one another, and may even say that one has caused the other though the two events may, in fact, be totally unrelated (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993).

It is also fortunate she did not try to teach her the alphabet first and then words later, as that might have severed any immediate connection with the real world she was trying to make, or could have created unhelpful associations that would have had to be relearned later. It most likely would have killed Keller's curiosity as well (see Freeberg, 2001; Howe & Hall, 1903; and Lamson, 1878 for further accounts of the pioneering techniques used to initially teach language to not only Laura Bridgman but also Oliver Caswell, Julia Brace, and other deaf/blind children and young adults at the Perkins School for the Blind prior to Keller's birth, and the amount of success that was achieved with these methods).

Words spelled in the manual alphabet into Keller's hand had the immediacy of and were at first the closest thing to speech that Sullivan could use with Keller. So, Sullivan also realized that Keller needed to be in a physical state in which she could spell into her hand, and a mental state in which Keller could not only "hear" but also begin to "listen" to her teacher through the manual alphabet. For example, when Keller was very angry, obviously it was difficult to spell into her hand at all, so there would be little possibility of learning language at those times. Likewise, she could spell phrases into Keller's hand, but if Keller was not paying any attention to what she was doing, it was less likely she would learn. Sullivan's initial struggle with Keller to gain her attention and replace the behavior that kept her from learning is well dramatized in the movie, *The Miracle Worker* (Coe & Penn, 1962).

In addition, Keller must be allowed and encouraged to follow her natural inclination and curiosity to imitate (Meltzoff, 1981) in signing the words in context as well. Finally, she needed to create situations where Keller might start initiating interaction (Trevvarthen, 1977) with or without signing words. By initiating, Keller would demonstrate a ready interest in the activity and therefore be more deeply engaged in the exchange than

if it were being randomly forced upon her. Sullivan could then also learn more about Keller's degree of understanding from the manner in which Keller initiated the interaction.

An example of this kind of exchange happens even on their first day together. When giving her a doll, Sullivan spells *d-o-l-l* into her hand and Keller spells it back. But when Sullivan takes the doll intending to give it back after Keller has spelled the word again, Keller flies into a rage perhaps thinking the doll was being taken away for good. Sullivan quickly changes tactics, gets some cake, and spells *c-a-k-e* in her hand. Keller spells *c-a-k-e* and Sullivan gives it to her. Sullivan then shows Keller the doll, spells the word, and Helen spells *d-o-l*. Sullivan supplies the other *l*, gives her the doll, and she runs off. In this way the spelling of words for Keller was connected to an exchange in a series of events that she was simultaneously experiencing and she was immediately rewarded for signing the words with a piece of cake and getting her doll back.

But what is even more interesting is something that happens the very next day while Keller is working on a sewing card. Sullivan writes (italics in all Keller, 2003a quotations appear in the original text):

I thought I would try another word; so I spelled "c-a-r-d." She made the "c-a," then stopped and thought, and making the sign for eating and pointing downward she pushed me toward the door, meaning that I must go downstairs for some cake. The two letters "c-a," you see, had reminded her of Friday's "lesson"—not that she had any idea that *cake* was the name of the thing, but it was simply a matter of association, I suppose. I finished the word "c-a-k-e" and obeyed her command. She was delighted. (Keller, 2003a, p. 221)

This series of events is significant because only one word and part of another are exchanged but much is communicated. Keller initiates with spelling *c-a* and uses gestures meaning Sullivan should fetch her some cake, which she does. Sullivan noticed what Keller was doing and did not insist on her spelling *c-a-r-d*, but immediately followed Keller's order to bring her cake. How delighted Keller must have been to realize that through using this new finger game she was not only able to have something she desired, but also make someone else go fetch it! Even on these first days, Sullivan was noticing and learning from Keller — learning how her mind worked and how she was connecting ideas, which in turn influenced the kind of activities she tried with Keller and how she interacted

with her.

This approach to teaching Keller led to the famous language breakthrough that occurred at the pump house, on April 5th, 1887, almost one month after Sullivan had arrived. While cold water was running over one hand and her teacher was spelling *w-a-t-e-r* into the other, Keller realized that the one meant the other, and all other things, actions and emotions could also be represented and communicated by these finger movements. She also understood that she could now use language to find out other things she wanted to know. In a few hours after that moment, Keller added at least 30 new words to her vocabulary. With this understanding the world burst open to Keller and she could not be held back.

### **First Steps in Language Use**

Sullivan's early role as Keller's teacher had been to introduce as much language as possible in context, especially when Helen seemed interested or engaged. She did not sign only individual words, but also complete phrases and sentences, and talked to Keller naturally as a sensitive adult would to a small child. She continued to do this after Helen became aware that language had a use. However, once Keller understood how language worked, learning about her world began in earnest and with it Sullivan's role changed. She now became a provider of experience, an interpreter, of sorts, of the world to Keller, and a clarifier of Keller's speech through the manual alphabet.

She explained things to Keller in simple and then more detailed and abstract ways, trusting that even if she did not understand everything immediately she had understood enough not to be frustrated, and eventually, as Keller had more experiences, she would understand more. She likened it to planting seeds that would germinate at different times depending on the conditions. Sullivan realized that Keller could initially understand more than she could put in words, and made a point to always use simple, but complete sentences with Keller, expressing whole ideas. An example of these early exchanges is described in this excerpt from a letter Sullivan wrote just two weeks after the pump incident:

...she expresses whole sentences by single words. "Milk," with a gesture means, "Give me more milk"; ...But when I spell into her hand, "Give me some bread," she hands me the bread; or if I say, "Get your hat and we will go for a walk," she obeys instantly. (Keller, 2003a, p. 232)

In this example, Sullivan could have more easily only spelled “bread” into Keller’s hand and Keller would most likely have gotten the bread for her just the same. Of course that would have not furthered Keller’s exposure to new and comprehensible examples of how language is used in context. In addition, Sullivan used Keller’s natural curiosity of the world. She made it a point not to force Helen to learn anything that did not interest her. However, she was quick to notice what did interest her and then present her with more of the same. In this way again, Sullivan was learning from Keller.

Sullivan’s signing was in no way one-sided of course. There was dialogue between Sullivan and Keller. Dialogue in this case, between the two was dynamic and therefore, not entirely predictable. Sullivan could never know exactly how Keller would respond to something, so she needed to remain alert and flexible. Even with Keller’s limited knowledge of words communication was possible. Keller’s speech was limited, but she still could initiate questions and was allowed to direct the conversation, never put off. Keller writes:

My ideas were vague, and my vocabulary was inadequate; but as my knowledge of things grew, and I learned more and more words, my field of inquiry broadened, and I would return again and again to the same subject, eager for further information. Sometimes a new word revived an image that some earlier experience had engraved on my brain. (Keller, 2003a, p. 25)

At first she would just indicate to her teacher when she wanted to know the name of a certain thing, but after about only four months of instruction, she was asking more complex questions. For example, she was forming questions like, “Who put chickens in eggs?” and “Flies bite-why?” (Keller, 2003a, p. 243). These questions were answered in the moment, and as truthfully and simply as possible, even if the topics were seen as embarrassing by others. In fact, one of the keys to Sullivan’s approach and maintaining Keller’s curiosity was this very practice. Sullivan writes:

If it was natural for Helen to ask such questions, it was my duty to answer them. It’s a great mistake, I think, to put children off with falsehoods and nonsense, when their growing powers of observation and discrimination excite in them a desire to know about things. From the beginning, *I have made it a practice to answer all Helen’s questions to the best of my ability in a way intelligible to her*, and at the same time truthfully. “Why

should I treat these questions differently?" I asked myself. I decided that there was no reason, except my deplorable ignorance of the great facts that underlie our physical existence. (Keller, 2003a, p. 245)

Also, Keller's questions contained important clues for Sullivan about her level of understanding of a subject and helpful indications of where Sullivan's original explanation might have been deficient. In a sense, she was not teaching as we often imagine the activity, but again, Sullivan herself was learning: learning about Keller's likes and dislikes, learning ways to explain things more clearly to her, and learning to experience the world anew by having to relate information about it to Keller. This perhaps raised Sullivan's own level of excitement and curiosity as well. She never knew what each day would bring and no two days of teaching Keller were ever the same. Sullivan writes:

*I see no sense in "faking" conversation for the sake of teaching language. It's stupid and deadening to pupil and teacher. Talk should be natural and have for its object an exchange of ideas. If there is nothing in the child's mind to communicate, it hardly seems worth while to require him to write on the blackboard, or spell on his fingers, cut and dried sentences about "the cat," "the bird," and "a dog." I have tried from the beginning to talk naturally to Helen and to teach her to tell me only the things that interest her and ask questions only for the sake of finding out what she wants to know. When I see that she is eager to tell me something, but is hampered because she does not know the words, I supply the necessary idioms, and we get along finely. (Keller, 2003a, p. 255)*

As far as can be discerned, Keller was seldom, if ever told she was wrong, made fun of, or rebuked for raising her perfectly natural questions or making what others might call mistakes. Keller writes:

Even when I studied most earnestly it seemed more like play than work...Whenever anything delighted or interested me she talked it over with me just as if she were a little girl herself. What many children think of with dread, as a painful plodding through grammar, hard sums and harder definitions, is to-day one of my most precious memories.

...Added to this she had a wonderful faculty for description. She went over the uninteresting details, and never nagged me with questions to see if I remembered the day-

before-yesterday's lesson. (Keller, 2003a, p. 30)

### **Using the Natural Inclinations of the Child**

When Anne Sullivan arrived at the Keller home in early March of 1887, she was quite unsure of how to go about teaching Helen. But by trying to create the conditions in which she had observed how a baby learns its first language, she stumbled upon a natural technique of teaching and learning not only language, but also of using language as a means to develop the individual person. The key elements of this were to first use the child's natural inclination to imitate and their curiosity, which stem from their interest and activity in learning about and regulating their world. Then bits of language were presented always in an immediate, meaningful context. In addition, the nature of the interaction between the child and the adult was dialogue — about topics driven by the child's curiosity. These topics were then guided and expanded by the adult's responses. The child's understanding was checked through questions that were allowed to arise most often from the child, and which were addressed by the teacher in the moment.

Of course, Sullivan was not the first or only one in the history of language education to employ these techniques. But this evidence from Keller demonstrates that under these conditions she, at least, learned language and about her world rapidly and happily. Because of their demonstrated success, we suggest that these are the learning conditions that we must test and examine further, as they appear to offer much promise to learners. Though learning can occur under other conditions, Sullivan's approach seems to be a powerful one that teachers and parents would be foolish to ignore. Learning in this way is stimulating and a joy to both the student and the teacher (Keller, 1955). There is no concern about dealing with behavioral or attentional problems or a need to threaten the child to make them learn. Therefore, perhaps the most significant gift we can give that may secure our children's futures as stable, confident, and independent adults is to take the time and concentrate our effort on, first and foremost, learning from them, as Sullivan did with Keller, not teaching them. And as Sullivan did, trust that in this way the child will learn exactly what they need to know, and do so more efficiently. Three months after meeting Keller, Sullivan writes:

Something within me tells me that I shall succeed beyond my dreams...I know that she has remarkable powers, and I believe that I shall be able to develop and mould them. I

cannot tell you how I know these things. I had no idea a short time ago how to go to work; I was feeling about in the dark; but somehow I know now, and I know that I know. I cannot explain it; but when difficulties arise, I am not perplexed or doubtful. I know how to meet them; I seem to divine Helen's particular needs. It is wonderful. (Keller, 2003a, p. 238)

But what would there have been to explain? Of course it felt right. Sullivan intuitively came upon the natural way we all have acquired language and an important way we continue to learn about our world. It naturally was right.

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### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Keith Wigglesworth, for without his steady, patient guidance and advice this paper never would have been written. I am indebted to him for explaining some key principles of human learning to me, and doing so in a manner that has moved me to begin seeing, searching, and asking questions for myself once again.

I also thank the very competent librarians at Toyo Eiwa University, who have, over the course of four years and with great cheerfulness and enthusiasm, found old and obscure references for me, often at very short notice.

And of course, I am deeply grateful to both Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan for sharing their lives through the written word so that all who understand language may benefit from their experiences. They are an inspiration to me in my teaching, in my learning of languages, and as human beings.

## ヘレン・ケラーの学び

ミリアム T. ブラック

本論文では母国語の教育が最も成功した例として、アン・サリバンによる三重苦のヘレン・ケラーへの教育法を分析しながら、言語学習に関するいくつかの提案を行うものである。サリバンの教育の特徴は、まず教師が生徒から学ぶ、つまり生徒が一番知りたいと思っている内容を探りながら、そこを出発点として教授と学習のきっかけをつくることである。生徒が興味を持った内容について自主的に学習を始めたときに、教師はそこから生まれてくる生徒の様々な質問に答えながら、その学習の幅を広げていくことが重要であることを論じた。