The idea that video can help students improve their reading and writing skills might have been easily dismissed a generation ago. Today, however, video is a central component in a variety of strategies designed to teach literacy skills.

This profile highlights several programs using these strategies. The feature story focuses on an innovative teaching practice for primary-school students that is especially effective for children who are deaf, many of whom begin kindergarten with limited English skills. Based on the idea that students will gain a broader understanding of material if they have the chance to go over or “revisit” it in different formats, the practice revolves around a variety of activities that include the viewing and creating of videotapes, group and one-on-one discussions, drawing, and writing.

Other highlighted teaching practices focus on how students with disabilities use technology to write captions for a video. The ultimate goal of this strategy, as well as the others featured, is to give students the skills they need to become independent readers and writers.

Students and their teacher discuss how to caption a videotape – a unique multi-step process that strengthens literacy skills.
Telling Tales in ASL and English

After watching a story told in American Sign Language (ASL) and then retelling it in sign on videotape, students participating in the following project write their own version of the story.

Viewing a Story
At the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Boston, Massachusetts, a small class of primary-school children have come to the Literacies Lab to work with reading specialist Anne Devaney on their reading and writing skills. They are young children who are deaf and who use ASL.

The students, who have varying fluency in English, begin their work by watching a story in ASL presented by a teacher or on videotape by a storyteller. The videos – which come from Horace Mann’s extensive videotape library – are classic imagination-capturing tales that hearing children typically read in the early grades. “A primary goal is to make the writing process as visual as possible,” said Doris Corbo, the program’s curriculum specialist.

To reinforce the concepts that underlie the story, Anne leads a discussion focusing on its plot and characters. Students are asked to retell part or all of the narrative in sign language to improve their understanding.

Creating a First Draft on Video
After watching and discussing the video, students go to a writing table to draw the story’s scenes and characters. This “visual road map” will be used later when they retell the story again in writing.

While students draw, Anne takes each one aside and, using a camcorder on a tripod, videotapes him or her retelling the story in sign language. In the process, the student becomes more familiar with the structure and content of the narrative. This videotape version becomes the student’s first draft.

Video: A Tool for Reading Comprehension
As part of the ongoing research initiatives of the Peabody Literacy Program at Vanderbilt University, researchers in the Cognition and Technology Group have developed an innovative teaching strategy that uses video to promote reading comprehension.

Here’s how it works: At-risk students view one- to two-minute video segments about timely issues like AIDS and civil rights. Afterwards they are given three passages to read that are similar in form and content. Only one of the passages, however, accurately describes the segment. The reader is asked to read each passage carefully and to discern which is the most accurate. At any point in the process, students can review the video.

The authors emphasize that these “discrepancy passages” enable students to increase their comprehension and fluency – well-documented benefits of repeated reading.

In order to more closely approximate standard reading practice, the process is sometimes reversed. Students read passages first and then choose video segments that best represent them. This way students have an understanding of the text before viewing the video. Students can also be given readings that are designed to extend and deepen their understanding of the content, rather than describe the videos.
Working with Teachers and Classmates
While Anne watches the videotape with the student, she transcribes the child’s sign language into English on a computer. If the student disagrees with the teacher’s translation, the two discuss what the student meant and how to convey this content in written English. After the story is fully transcribed, the student prints it out and reviews it three times – alone, with another classmate, and with Anne or another teacher.

As an alternative to working with the teacher, a pair of students may watch one of their sign language drafts together and discuss its content. According to Doris, some students express themselves more easily with classmates than with teachers.

Once they have been videotaped telling a story in sign, Horace Mann students sit with their teacher and discuss how to transcribe the videotape in written English.

Captioning Helps a Student Get the Big Picture
Soon after the Brown Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts, received a captioning workstation through a federal research grant, co-teachers Sue Lesser-Seltzer and Ellen Waite and their students with language learning disabilities brainstormed how each student might use the technology.

Franklin Castillo, a student who according to Ellen “struggles with getting the whole picture,” chose to caption one of his favorite sitcoms.

Rather than transcribe every word spoken – the traditional way to caption – Franklin and his teachers decided that Franklin would only describe the important action in each sequence.

After replaying the video several times, Franklin was able to clearly describe the key ideas in different parts of the story. For example, during a scene in which one character was trying to serenade an unimpressed young woman, Franklin wrote, *Steve is singing a love song to Laura. Steve really gets into the song and doesn’t realize Laura has left the room.*

“I believe that this process was a true learning experience as Franklin himself began to understand the whole plot,” said Ellen. “Franklin was absolutely delighted with the finished project and got a great deal of positive feedback from his classmates.”
**How Do Students Caption?**

Creating a captioned video involves watching a videotape, writing text to match, then combining the text and video. The process sometimes begins with a videotape developed and produced by a group of students and their teacher.

Whatever the videotape being captioned, students use a VCR to play, pause, and search the tape while they compose corresponding text using a word processor. The text may be a direct transcript of the audio, a translation from one language to another like American Sign Language to English, or a general description.

At the beginning of the writing process, students often discuss the content of the video with classmates or a teacher. After they enter text using a word processor, they print out their work and make revisions as many times as necessary.

When students are satisfied with their text, they combine it with the video – a process that can be manual or automated. The text and video are routed through a piece of equipment called a character generator and recorded using a second VCR.

**What Equipment and Software Are Needed?**

A basic captioning workstation consists of a personal computer, two VCRs (one for playback and one for record), and a character generator that allows text to be superimposed onto video. A computer monitor, a video monitor, and a printer are also needed. Some systems require a time-code reader.

When evaluating a potential captioning system, keep in mind whether the word processing software suits the needs of your students and whether the system has the ability to create and read time code (though this function may be unnecessary for your purposes).

Staff at WGBH – the first organization to caption television and a leader in the field – can answer questions about captioning options for schools and provide the names of hardware and software suppliers. This kind of information can also be found on NCIPnet. At WGBH, address your questions to:

Geoff Freed  
CPB/WGBH National Center for Accessible Media  
125 Western Avenue  
Boston, Mass. 02134  
Voice and TTY: (617) 492-9258

For more information, contact:  
National Center to Improve Practice  
Education Development Center, Inc.  
55 Chapel Street  
Newton, MA 02158-1060  
(617) 969-7100, ext. 2412  
TTY: (617) 969-4529  
Fax: (617) 969-3440

© 1995 Education Development Center, Inc. and WGBH Educational Foundation.

All materials in this document may be photocopied and distributed.