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Signing to Success: Developing Effective ASL Curricula in Secondary Public Education

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the history of American Sign Language (ASL) in public schools, analyze where ASL education is today, and provide potential solutions to improving the quantity and quality of ASL classes within public high schools. A significant body of research focusing on preK-2nd grade students and research with primary concentration on students who are Deaf or hard of hearing has already been developed. However, developing effective methods for teaching ASL to hearing people is a relatively new and under researched area. ASL was not officially recognized as a language until the 1950s. It wasn't until 2011 that Missouri first permitted ASL to be used for foreign language credit in public high schools and postsecondary education. ASL in public education is quickly becoming a developing area of study and practice. Providing ASL class options increases inclusivity within schools and their surrounding communities. Learners also benefit from positive cognitive impacts gained when learning a signed language, and also prosper from becoming bilingual. Yet, there is unexplored value in aiming central research specifically at hearing students at a secondary level. Classes in high school for hearing students in addition to those who are Deaf and hard of hearing deserve more attention within educational research. Theoretically, cognitive acceleration seen in elementary students can be expected in secondary students and provide lifelong benefits such as improved literacy and mastery of the students spoken language as well as enhanced appreciation for diversity within academic communities comprised of Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing individuals.

Keywords: American Sign Language, Inclusivity, Secondary Education

Signing to Success: Developing Effective ASL Curricula in Secondary Public Education

American Sign Language, or ASL, is a language that has only recently been formally recognized as a foreign language study option in most American schools. Used traditionally by the Deaf and hard of hearing community in the United States, ASL is a non-oral way of communicating through both hand gestures and facial expressions. It is a visual language that uses spatial awareness to help speakers and audiences understand what is being conveyed. ASL's popularity within the hearing community has been growing exponentially within the last two decades, which can be seen in the growing body of research regarding ASL in public education. However, little research has been conducted at the secondary level. Studies confirm lifelong cognitive benefits in young children, and it can be inferred that if ASL is taught to secondary students, they could also achieve these cognitive advancements. In addition, teaching ASL to hearing students increases inclusivity and cultural awareness amongst student populations. Public schools should implement ASL education at the high school level so students may receive benefits in the fields of cognitive achievement, increased inclusivity, and advanced cultural diversity.

ASL is an extremely young language with an interesting history. There was no official language for the American Deaf population in the early 1800's. Rather, if you were Deaf, you spoke a local sign language that those around you also knew, and *only* your local Deaf community knew (Jay, 2021). If you lived in New York, you would be unable to communicate with Deaf people from St. Louis, as your "home" sign languages would be varied when compared with one another. While there may be some similarities between communication methods, interactions would be limited. This unstandardized approach began to change in 1814

when Thomas Gallaudet took an interest in attempting to educate his neighbor's Deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell.

Alice was the daughter of Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, a wealthy surgical ophthalmologist. Dr. Cogswell and Gallaudet could see that Alice was bright, but they were unable to observe exactly how bright she was due to the communication barrier between them. Gallaudet wanted to find a way to properly educate Alice, and with Dr. Cogswell's financial assistance, Gallaudet traveled to Europe to observe and study various schools for the Deaf that had been established there. He met Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard, Jean Massieu, and Laurent Clerc in England, and they invited him to Paris where their school, the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, was located (DawnSignPress, 2016). This school advocated for Deaf students learning a signed language in addition to core subjects instead of forcing students to acclimate to hearing culture by learning to communicate with a spoken language they themselves would never be able to hear. In Paris, Gallaudet learned French Sign Language (LSF) from Clerc and later asked Clerc to come back with him to America to start a school for deaf students, which Clerc agreed to do. On the boat ride back, Gallaudet taught Clerc English and they began creating American Sign Language, also known as ASL.

Upon arriving in America, Gallaudet and Clerc founded the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, today renamed the American School for the Deaf, which is still located in Hartford, Connecticut. The school opened in 1817 as the first free public school for the Deaf with Alice Cogswell as one of its first students, and by the end of the school's first year of operation there were 31 students enrolled (DawnSignPress, 2016). The school's opening allowed for the standardization of a signed language in America that all Deaf

people could learn. Thus, ASL became the unofficial official language of the Deaf and hard of hearing community within the United States.

Despite this standardization across America, ASL was not properly recognized as a language and instead viewed as a lesser substitute for spoken English until well over a century later. William Stokoe's linguistic research, outlined in his 1965 *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*, recognized ASL's unique grammar, syntax, structure, and morphology. Stokoe's groundbreaking findings proved that ASL was not simply a signed form of English, but a different language entirely (Chamot, 2003). ASL did not duplicate any characteristics of spoken English in any core language areas. At this time, linguists were forced to accept ASL's status as a language, as it met all the criteria that separate languages possess. Still, ASL's status as a language has been an uphill battle within the linguistic and legislative worlds.

In the 1980s, state legislatures and education departments began formalizing curriculum for ASL classes and instructor certifications along with help from the Deaf community, who pushed to be a part of this movement. Before the Deaf community's involvement, there were instances of instructors teaching modified forms of sign language, a lack of proper curriculum, and a plethora of unqualified instructors (Gray, 2018). The Deaf community's involvement helped to standardize what and how ASL should be taught, and created a baseline of what certifications a proper instructor should possess. This collaboration also reconceptualized deafness for education purposes and increased interpreters in general educational settings (Rosen, 2015, p. 6), revolutionizing not only ASL education for hearing students but Deaf and hard of hearing students as well. Today, there are six major organizations that have put forth standards for teacher certification and teachers of teachers certification. Most often, standards

within these organizations can be placed into four main categories: language skills, teaching, scholarship/knowledge, and service/other professional initiatives (Jacobowitz, 2007). While it is never specified whether these standards are designated for ASL teachers instructing hearing or deaf students, most of the organizations do state that their standards are aimed at K-12 programs. As of 2016, only 46 out of 50 states fully recognize ASL as a language within their state legislation (National Association of the Deaf, 2016). Some states recognize ASL only for foreign language credit in school and not as an official language, as contradictory as this may seem. While this is progress, there is still much to be done to fully recognize ASL as a language in schools and in formal legislation as a language.

Despite this lack of recognition, students at the elementary level have had the opportunity in many schools across the globe to learn signed languages for quite some time. Numerous studies have been conducted with children aged preschool through second grade that investigate the cognitive benefits of learning a signed language. One study observed first and second grade students learning Italian Sign Language, or LIS. Students met with a native LIS speaker once a week and were taught by a teacher familiar with LIS. Capirci (1998) discovered the following:

These results indicate that exposure and participation in a sign language program enhances nonverbal cognitive development. The data also show that the control group caught up to some extent over the summer vacation, while the experimental group shows a performance plateau. This plateau suggests that the accelerated growth in nonverbal cognition was strictly related to the sign language course. (p. 139)

Capirci's findings prove that students learning a signed language gain more nonverbal cognitive benefits than those just learning a second language. Children exposed to LIS scored much higher on the Raven PM 47 test (measures educable ability) than their non-signing counterparts.

Students also developed increased spatial construction and organizational skills. Furthermore, these gains were not produced by simply learning another language, as proven when children learning a second spoken language showed growth comparable with children who were not learning a second language at all. Daniels 2004 research study utilized Marie M. Clay reading placement measures to find student achievement levels when learning British Sign Language, or BSL. The subjects were kindergarteners instructed primarily in ASL within their general education classroom. Data suggested that the expressive English skills of these kindergarten students did not decline, despite their lack of English in the classroom. Daniels concluded that:

All children scored higher on national curriculum tests which measured reading and spelling. An assessment based on collated academic evidence showed that instruction in BSL provided hearing children fine access to the curriculum, as well as offering additional benefits. Specifically, sign language increased students' enjoyment and motivation and helped them listen, look, and concentrate. This new aptitude to attend was credited with expediting concept development (p. 88).

Four major areas of language development were measured, which included receptive and expressive English vocabulary, ASL ability, and a student's reading level. Students learning BLS had better vocabulary knowledge than their non-signing peers, and within this student group, knew how to sign exceptionally well for their ages. In yet another study, students learning ASL displayed rapid development of reading comprehension skills on the SAT-9 reading subtest. DeLana's 2007 study found that "for students in middle school and high school, the greatest gains occurred after the age of 12 years" (p. 79). Learning a signed language, whether younger or older, helps students increase their reading comprehension skills and spatial reasoning skills, among other cognitive abilities.

Knowledge of the benefits when hearing children learn ASL has been around for much longer than originally thought, however, and includes more than advantages for a developing brain. Daniels notes that Thomas Gallaudet himself advocated for Deaf children's siblings to learn ASL, as this increased communication for both siblings and allowed the hearing child to improve their language proficiency and vocabulary (1995). When siblings of Deaf children learned ASL, this would provide additional social interaction opportunities for the Deaf child. Gallaudet was well aware of how hearing people learning ASL could help increase inclusivity for the Deaf community while he was creating the language. Teaching ASL in public schools helps give Deaf and hard of hearing students more opportunities for interactions with hearing classmates. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, all students should be educated in the least restrictive environment. Being unable to communicate with peers should be seen as a legitimate barrier to students, just as using a wheelchair or having a learning disability currently are a barrier. Schools provide accessible ramps, restrooms, parking and more for students who use wheelchairs. Modifications and/or accommodations are granted to students with learning disabilities. Offering ASL courses would only enhance the learning experience (academically, socially, and mentally) for Deaf or hard of hearing students. Public schools should strive to actively look for ways of improving every student's educational experience. Offering ASL courses promotes cultural awareness amongst students and educates students on Deaf culture, increasing student awareness of the cultural diversity they may have not known is present within their school.

When creating ASL curriculum for beginning students, it's important to teach signs in groups. First, the ASL alphabet and numbers should be learned, as these are foundational for any further achievement. Next, it is common to teach students introductions and pleasantries.

After these basics, it's important to keep student areas of interest in mind. When students learn words that they may use to communicate with friends and peers outside of class, they are more likely to practice their signing. Most often, students can be observed signing in school cafeterias or holding small, quick conversations in the hallways (Rosen, 2014, p. 369). Allowing students to state their preferences on certain topics, such as "My favorite.... is" or "I dislike..." gives them simple conversations to have with other students. Teaching students colors, foods, animals, clothing items, and other small categories also helps them to group like words together when studying. Perhaps more important than signs or facial expressions themselves is Deaf culture. When teaching ASL, it is imperative to expose students to the culture of the people who use the language. Deaf culture is dynamic, and there are certain conversational norms that are juxtaposed to most spoken languages. For example, most Deaf people are fine with someone lightly tapping their shoulder or waving a hand to get their attention. When seeing a Deaf person interacting with hearing people, it's important to ask them if they need help before translating for them. Another lesser known aspect of Deaf culture is name signs. A name sign is used in place of a person's fingerspelled name during conversation, and can only be given by a Deaf person. Most often, name signs relate to a personal quality or physical trait of the name-bearer. Deaf culture also has unique art and art forms. ASL literature (the telling of ASL stories) and De'VIA art (visual art that gives insight to the Deaf experience) are both artistic genres that help students better understand the culture. When students better understand Deaf culture, they are more likely to receive higher grades. As Rosen notes, "Learners who did not attain high levels of ASL proficiency held negative, more medically-oriented attitudes towards deaf people" (2015, p. 101). Educating students on Deaf culture helps dispel negative attitudes about deafness. Another factor to consider when planning an ASL course is incorporating community

involvement into some aspect of the class. Have students learn how to sign the script to a play or musical the school is performing, then have them act as interpreters for community members who come see the show. This increases exposure of community members to ASL and helps promote inclusivity at events the community can attend.

As important as curriculum is to student success, pedagogy often dictates the levels of achievements ASL students obtain in the classroom. Teachers should strive to keep best practices for student achievement in mind when conducting classes. A basic factor in student success is ensuring that ASL (not English) is solely used within the classroom (Rosen, 2015, p. 111). Language immersion has time and again been proven positive when attempting to teach students a new language. In ASL classrooms, it is reasonable to allow students to write questions out to the teacher or have the teacher communicate expectations in a written format, as there is no official written version of ASL. Most often, English is used. Maintaining a silent classroom when learning ASL both helps students stay immersed in the language and better helps them to understand Deaf culture. It is considered rude to speak in front of a Deaf person when one knows ASL, and good habits can be practiced in the classroom. Having students sit in a circular seating arrangement helps all members of the class to see each other when signing, and promotes communication in ASL. Encouraging students to be engaged when in class is another pedagogical idea designed for student achievement. Students should be in the moment, interacting with classmates and the instructor during class time. This maximizes their exposure to others signing, and allows students to work on both receptive and expressive language skills. However, teachers *should* encourage students with learning disabilities to take notes during class (Rosen, 2015, p. 74). Students with learning disabilities are the only group that displays improved grades when taking notes about how new signs look during class. As these students

and other students learn new signs, there are ways to introduce new vocabulary that lead to higher student success rates. When introducing new signs, teachers should strive to help students think in kinesthetic terms. Instead of assigning an English word to a sign, try associating images with hand signs. Another beneficial way to do this is the “chaining” method, where teachers show students a word or image on the board, fingerspell that word, then show students the sign.

Below are a set of examples using this method by Parker (2012):

(THEORY) + (T-H-E-O-R-Y) + (THEORY)

initialized sign + fingerspelling + initialized sign

(H-O-N-O-R) + (HONOR) + (H-O-N-O-R)

fingerspelling + initialized sign + fingerspelling

(duty) + (point) + (DUTY) + (D-U-T-Y) + (DUTY)

printed word + pointing to word + initialized sign + fingerspelling + sign

(grubs) + (G-R-U-B-S) + (point)

printed word + fingerspelling + pointing to word

(poem) + (P-O-E-M) + (point) + (P-O-E-M)

printed word + fingerspelling + pointing to word + fingerspelling (p. 9)

Chaining when first presenting vocabulary forces students to associate signs with ideas, not direct translations of words in a different language, assists in remembering signs more easily. As shown above, it is also important to fingerspell words when teaching them to students.

Fingerspelling effectively uses ASL to introduce new vocabulary instead of relying on English or images to present information.

Offering ASL courses in secondary public education can provide students with many benefits, including cognitive advancements, increased inclusivity, and elevating awareness of the

cultural diversity present within schools. Though ASL is a young language with a history of doubt from linguists, ASL has proven it possesses a unique set of morphology, syntax, structure, and grammar. Teaching a signed language in secondary education would supply students an additional set of academic enhancements that they would otherwise not receive when learning merely a spoken language. ASL's popularity has skyrocketed within the past two decades, and the demand for proper educational courses for the language is at an all-time high. With all the benefits that ASL affords its learners, it's time to start letting high school students sign in America's public schools.

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