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CLASSROOM USE OF ASL BY TEACHERS

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Abstract. Although increased use of American Sign Language in educational settings has been reported as a consequence of thirty years of research, there has been no confirmation of such use. A survey of teachers of 4,500 hearing-impaired students selected at random from a data base on more than 50,000 such students provides empirical evidence that ASL is still not extensively used in teaching. Of some 1,888 teachers so surveyed, 140 when asked directly replied that they used ASL in the classroom. However, a series of questions asking about specific communication behavior successively reduced this number to 25 teachers who may be using ASL in the classroom and to 5 who probably are.

Linguistic research on American Sign Language (ASL) began 30 years ago (Stokoe 1960), but there is still no quantitative empirical information about how this research has affected deaf education. Some linguists, e.g. Lee (1982) and Cokely (1983), have claimed that as a result of linguistic research on ASL classroom use of this language is increasing, especially among deaf teachers. Lee states, without giving numbers or explaning how she reached her conclusions:

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Although many deaf people believe that English is "better" than ASL, many are realizing the true linguistic status of ASL [so that] their attitudes and therefore their use of ASL are changing. It does not seem at all inappropriate for deaf instructors to use ASL when giving lectures, as is occurring more and more frequently. There are at least several high schools and universitites where entire courses are being taught in ASL by deaf instructors. (Lee 1982: 142f)

The purpose of the present study is to examine empirically the kind of classroom communication used by teachers of hearing-impaired students. From these data we draw several conclusions about proclaimed versus actual use of ASL by these teachers.

Data for the study were collected in the spring of 1985 by the Gallaudet Research Institute's Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies (CADS). The population for the study was drawn from those programs supplying data to the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth, a survey that collects demographic and educationally relevant data on over 50,000 hearing-impaired students.

From the 1983-84 Annual Survey data base, 4,500 students were randomly selected and assigned to one of three subject area stratification groups: reading, math, and social studies. Questionnaires were sent to the programs enrolling these students, with instructions to distribute them to the reading, mathematics, or social studies teachers of the targeted students. This stratification was made to ensure that teachers in a variety of academic contexts were represented in the data base. Because sampling was done on individual students, some teachers received two or more questionnaires, but duplicate responses from them were not put into the data base, the primary aim of the analysis being to describe the background characteristics of teachers and their communication

patterns. Responses with missing or incomplete answers to relevant questions were also eliminated from the data base. The resulting file contained information on 1,888 teachers.[1] The great majority of these teachers were hearing (89.1%); of the rest 6.7% were deaf and 4.3% hard of hearing.

Direct questioning. One way to determine language use in the classroom is to ask teachers what language they use. One of the questions in the survey asks teachers who signed to name the type of signing they used in the classroom:

> The following list consists of phrases which have been used to characterize types of signing. Which of these best describes the signing that you use when teaching this student? (Choose only one.)
>
> A. American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan)
> B. Pidgin Sign English (PSE)
> C. Seeing Essential English (SEE I)
> D. Signing Exact English (SEE II)
> E. Signed English
> F. Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE)
> G. Other

One hundred forty teachers claimed to be using ASL. These 140 teachers comprised 7.4% of the total number of 1,888 and 11.3% of the 1,238 teachers who reported signing to their students. Once we examined the responses of these teachers to certain other questions, it became difficult to accept their answers at face value. Many of the 140 teachers claiming to use ASL answered other questions in ways that suggest it is extremely unlikely that they are in fact using ASL; e.g. a large proportion of the 140 reported that they were hearing (57.9%), that they had little or no social interaction with deaf adults (47.8%), that they did not learn their signs from deaf parents (87.1%), and that they learned how to sign in formal sign language classes (46.4%). Moreover, many of the 140 teachers also said

that they normally speak when they sign (67.9%), that they would normally fingerspell or use a separate sign for at (50.7%) and is (47.3%) when they communicate with their students in the classroom.

In addition, teachers' descriptions of the communication policies of their schools indicated a great deal of confusion about ASL, English, and "total communication." The level of confusion over terminology and communication practice in the classroom may be gauged by the statement one of the teachers made in responding to this survey. In describing the communication policy of the school district, this teacher wrote:

Our policy follows the view that sign language is speech or specifically manual speech and American Sign Language is English. We use only ASL signs and put them in straight English syntax. Some words are only fingerspelled in Sign Language. We use the formal ASL usage and not the colloquial form used in everyday life of the deaf. The students will develop that naturally when they start to sign fast. Our specific announced policy is use of Total Communication in which we look at it as a synonym for the simultaneous method.

Indirect questioning. As a check on direct questioning about communication preference, the questionnaire also asked specific behavior-oriented questions that would indirectly assess language use by teachers. These five questions, listed below, were designed so that the answers would ultimately eliminate the false positive answers of those teachers who could not logically be using ASL.

The first question in the series is:

1. When you are teaching this student in the classroom instructional context, do you normally sign?

   A. Yes
   B. No

We can assume that teachers who answer "B" -- that they do not normally sign in the classroom -- cannot be using ASL as their normal method of communication, because using a sign channel is prerequisite to using ASL. The 650 teachers who answered "B" to this question can be eliminated from possible users of ASL. For the 1,238 teachers who reported signing ("A"), other questions are needed to determine whether they are using ASL or some other variety of signing.

The second question asks:

2. When teaching this student in the classroom, do you normally:

   A. Speak and sign at the same time
   B. Sign only
   C. Other

We can assume that teachers who answer "A" -- that they normally speak and sign -- cannot be using ASL because there has been no research to demonstrate that it is possible to speak one language (English) and simultaneously sign a language with a different morphological and syntactic structure (ASL). The 1,156 teachers who answered "A" to this question can be eliminated from possible ASL users. For the remaining 82 who reported signing without voice, other questions are needed to determine whether they are using ASL or another variety of signing.

The third question in this series is fairly detailed. (Note: "the named student" and "this" student in question 3 refer to the selected student who was taught by the teacher answering the question.)

3. Read the following two English sentences:

He is looking at me.
I am looking for him.

A. When communicating the meaning of the two English sentences above to the named student in the classroom, indicate how you would communicate each of the following:

(a. Would fingerspell; b. Would use separate sign or gesture; c. Would include as part of another sign; d. Would omit)

He	(a, b, c, or d?)	I	(a, b, c, or d?)
is	(a, b, c, or d?)	am	(a, b, c, or d?)
look	(a, b, c, or d?)	look	(a, b, c, or d?)
-ing	(a, b, c, or d?)	-ing	(a, b, c, or d?)
at	(a, b, c, or d?)	for	(a, b, c, or d?)
me	(a, b, c, or d?)	him	(a, b, c, or d?)

B. When communicating the meaning of the two English sentences above to this student in the classroom, indicate how you would normally sign the following words:

(a. Would use the same sign for each; b. Would use a different sign for each; c. Would not sign one or both of these words)

He and Him (a, b, or c?)
I and Me (a, b, or c?)
Am and Is (a, b, or c?)
Look in both sentences (a, b, or c?)

We can assume that teachers who fingerspell or use separate signs for English inflections like -ing or function words like is, am, and at in these sentences could not be using ASL, a language in which these grammatical features of English do not occur. But note that some ASL signers in some situations do sign 'look for' with two separate signs, even as English expresses it in two words. Of the 82 signers who report that they sign without voice, 45 fingerspell or use separate signs

for the inflections and function words in question 3. The remaining 37 teachers either sign HE LOOK ME or delete HE and/or ME. Since HE LOOK ME could be either ASL or English-like signing, we still need two more questions to determine which teachers are using ASL.

The fourth question in the series is:

4. The following list consists of phrases which have been used to characterize types of signing. Which of these best describes the signing that you use when teaching this student? (Choose only one.)

   A. American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan)
   B. Pidgin Sign English (PSE)
   C. Seeing Essential English (SEE I)
   D. Signing Exact English (SEE II)
   E. Signed English
   F. Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE)
   G. Other

Of the 37 teachers remaining after the tests of the first three questions, 25 claim ("A") to be using ASL. We assume that the 12 teachers who claim "B" are not attempting to sign ASL, even though they may be incorporating ASL characteristics in their signing.

The fifth and final question in the series asks:

5. If you sign only, do you use lip movements for most or all English words?

   A. Yes
   B. No

We believe that it is highly unlikely that teachers who answer "A" to this question are using ASL. Although these signers do not use voice, they mouth most or all English words while signing. This form of communication might be classified as sim-com (simultaneous communication) without voice. While it is true that this kind of signing can incorporate a number of ASL characteristics that often do not occur in strict

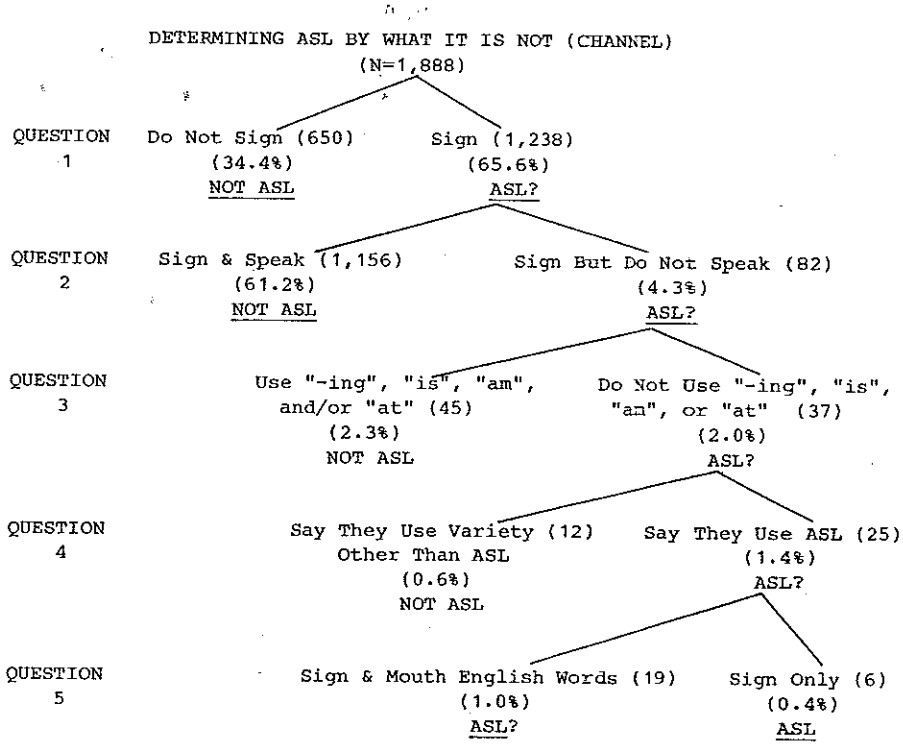
sim-com, it is normally not possible to consider this type of signing to be ASL because there is still strong influence from English word order, and sometimes from English morphology, on signing. Of the 25 remaining teachers who report signing without voice, 19 teachers reported mouthing most or all English words and six reported signing without mouthing. As a result of the last question, we believe that 6 teachers only are likely to be using ASL. Up to 19 other teachers may be using ASL, although further evidence would be needed to demonstrate that these teachers can mouth most or all English words and still sign in ASL. [2]

In summary, these five specific behavior-oriented questions have served as a logical tool to define ASL users as those who remain after logical elimination of teachers who cannot be using ASL. The tree diagram below represents the results of defining ASL use by eliminating what it is not.

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated that ASL is not widely used in the classroom by teachers. In fact, actual use of ASL is much lower than reported use of ASL. While 140 teachers out of 1,888 claim that they use ASL, only 25 of them may be using ASL, and only 6 of these are probably using it. This research has also shown that direct questioning of teachers about language and communication practice is less accurate than indirect questioning that attempts to ask behaviorally oriented questions such as, "Do you normally speak when you sign?"

It is clear from conferences such as this one[3] that linguistic studies of American Sign Language have had a significant impact on researchers, interpreters, and teachers and students in sign language classes; but there is no empirical evidence to support a significant

increase in awareness of ASL or its use in the education of deaf children. Many teachers still do not know the difference between ASL and English, nor do they tend to use ASL as their primary method of classroom communication.



NOTES

1. In an earlier study based on the same data, Woodward, Allen, and Schildroth (1985) reported the total number of teachers providing usable data as 1,760. Because we used different variables for analysis in the present study, we were able to include an additional 128 teachers in our analysis.

2. [There is a possibility of misinterpreting the question 5, because there are no English words in ASL, when its signs are understood to be its words. A respondent might thus suppose that "most or all English words" refers to only those proper names and English terms without specific ASL equivalents used in ASL as foreign words. These might well be mouthed by an ASL signer, just as an English speaker might report using a French pronunciation when the utterance includes a French word or phrase. Ed.]

3. This paper was presented at the American Sign Language Research and Teaching Conference in Newark, California, April 1986. Its production was supported in part by Sign Language Research, Inc.

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