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American Sign Language as a Foreign Language

American and International Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, complex language that employs signs made with the hands and other movements, including facial expressions and postures of the body. No one form of sign language is universal (NIDCD, 2000). However, International Sign Language has been developed so that people may communicate between nations. International sign language is composed of vocabulary signs from different sign languages that deaf people agreed to use at international events and meetings (Lapiak, 2001). In general, sign language can be used to break down the barriers between the hearing and deaf communities.

Here in the United States, American Sign Language is the primary language of an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 Americans, including deaf native signers, hearing children of deaf parents, and fluent deaf signers who have learned ASL from other deaf individuals (Wilcox, 1989). ASL is said to be the fourth most commonly used language in the United States (NIDCD, 2000). Because of this, students are increasingly learning sign language in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms around the country. Most of the time it is offered in speech, education, or communication disorder departments rather than in foreign language department. One reason for this is the fact that there is a limited amount of licensed sign language teachers. Qualifications for these teachers include a formal background in second language pedagogy, experience teaching ASL, and verifiable proficiency in ASL (Kanda & Fleischer, 1988).

Teaching Options

There are numerous ways that American Sign Language can be taught in schools. In some, the foreign language teachers took courses in ASL, and then taught the students. Other high schools bring in already trained teachers who are proficient in ASL (National Center on Deafness, 1996). Some schools use the Internet for educational means by either purchasing software and following the program, or by finding free web resources (Lapiak, 2001). There is also the option of purchasing videos used for interactive sign-language courses (Interax Video Sign Language Course, 2000).

States' Actions

Many States consider American Sign Language (ASL) a foreign language. Foreign language credits are received for these classes, and they count towards the requirements of high schools and universities in those states (see Figure. 1). Other states are in the process of passing legislation on this issue. There are additionally states that allow schools to use their own discretion as to whether foreign language credits should be given for classes in ASL (National Center of Deafness, June 1996).

ASL As a Foreign Language: The Debate

There has been a marked swell of support in recent years for the instruction of American Sign Language as a foreign language. Many colleges and universities, both private and public, are beginning to recognize the study of ASL and deaf culture as legitimate academic pursuits and are starting to accept ASL in fulfillment of their foreign language entrance and exit requirements. As noted above, some states have also taken the step of recognizing ASL as a foreign language in their public schools (Figure 1). Such action, however, does raise some legitimate questions.

Most notably, some in academia question whether it is appropriate to consider ASL a foreign language or a second language due largely to the fact that ASL is indigenous to the United States and most people who communicate through ASL read and write in English. As Professor Sherman Wilcox of the University of New Mexico notes, however, although ASL is spoken exclusively in the U.S. and Canada, other languages, such as Navajo, are spoken exclusively in the U.S. and are recognized as a valid second language for study (Wilcox, n.d.). "The controversy comes from people who don't understand the nature of sign language," says Susan Gass, co-director of the Center for Language Education and Research at Michigan State University. "Probably, you won't find any controversy among linguists" (Conover, 1997).

Proponents of ASL as a foreign language such as Wilcox additionally point to the rich cultural life of deaf people in response to the criticism that ASL does not have a full and distinct culture associated with it. "Deaf culture is now recognized and studied by anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and others interested in culture and cross cultural communication" (Wilcox, n.d.).

Wilcox notes further, "because of its unique modality—visual/gestural rather than aural/oral—many people wrongly assume that ASL is fundamentally different than spoken languages." There is a great deal of research dealing with ASL which demonstrates that its grammar is radically different from English; it contains structures and processes which English lacks (Wilcox, n.d.). In post-secondary education, however, some foreign-language departments do sometimes balk at the designation of ASL as a "foreign" language, especially those that emphasize literature. For example, in 1997 at Clemson University, the foreign-language department was open to the proposal that ASL be considered a foreign language, but they asked that proponents prove that the deaf community had its own unique culture (Conover, 1997).

In recent years sign language has additionally become recognized as a legitimate and distinct language on an international scale. In 1988, the Parliament of the European Community recognized the indigenous signed languages of the twelve member states as legitimate languages, making note of the fact that 500,000 citizens of member states use their national signed languages as their first language (Wilcox, n.d.).

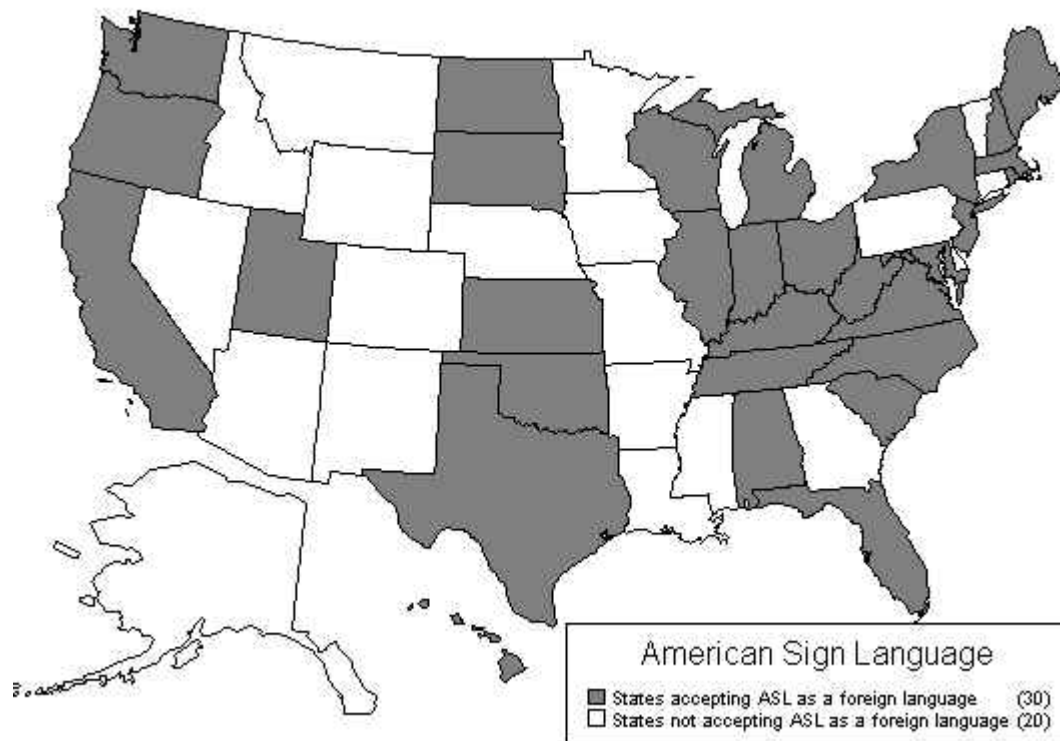


Figure 1: States Accepting ASL as a Foreign Language in Schools Statewide

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