American Sign Language: Why Is It a Fallback Language?

INTRODUCTION

Counselors often refer high school students who struggle to complete foreign language requirements to take American Sign Language (ASL) instead. Yet this practice implies that ASL is a somehow “easier” language, diminishing its value by insinuating a fallback status and unwittingly affirming the perception of deaf education’s subpar curriculum. This aspect of ASL’s reputation is not just one derived anecdotally from my own experience; Jacobowitz (2005) found that many students sign up for ASL courses because they believe that signs are representative of English words and that the class will lead to an “easy A.”¹ Since the continuation of this practice of substituting ASL as an “easier” foreign language would make no sense without scientific evidence, in this paper I explore whether ASL really is more conducive to learning than are other foreign languages. I question the attributes, language acquisition and mastery, and curriculum standards of ASL compared with other foreign languages and how the perception that ASL is a sort of fallback foreign language needs to change. ASL ought to be treated as the equivalent of a foreign language when implemented in schools and not simply as an “easier” substitute. Alternative certification programs intended to allay teacher shortages in such areas should be implemented carefully. ASL teacher certification processes should not be more lenient than those of other foreign languages.

The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages states that all 50 states currently recognize ASL as a world language. However, not all states’ foreign/world language standards adhere to the national “Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century” or the revised version called the “World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages,” and not all states’ current teacher certification requirements address ASL. Because experts who have already researched this topic feel that ASL does satisfy the characteristics of foreign language, we have an even stronger case for asking why this disparity with ASL’s status in practice exists.

In this paper, I conduct a literature review of evaluations of the ease of learning ASL versus other foreign languages. I look into standards of what constitutes a foreign language on national and state education codes available online. Because it would be too much to examine schools all across the United States, I focus mainly on secondary/high schools in California that offer ASL as a foreign language. As of 2004, California had 66 public high schools with ASL classes (not including charter, denominational, private, and vocational schools). With students who speak more than a hundred languages and dialects, California has the most diverse student population in the United States, making it a good case study for examining the state’s way of handling its foreign language programs, including ASL. Language programs in California schools are offered as early as elementary school, though more comprehensive programs are in high school, with longer contact hours dedicated to the curriculum and usually with the goal of preparation for the

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SAT II language exams, Advanced Placement programs, or International Baccalaureate programs.\(^5\)

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**CURRENT STATE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SCHOOLS**

In a 2007 study by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, bilingualism was shown to be positively correlated with intelligence, memory, cognitive development, and problem solving;\(^6\) and just two to three years of foreign language study is enough to demonstrate a marked improvement in standardized testing. Indeed, non-foreign language students did worse on the standardized tests than did those who studied foreign

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languages. Yet, despite these optimistic findings, the Modern Language Association of America reports that enrollment in foreign language courses in college has dropped by more than 111,000 spots between 2009 and 2013, the first decline since 1995.

Because there are no nationwide foreign language mandates at any level of education in the U.S., individual school districts are allowed to determine the language requirements for high school graduation. Only 11 states have world language study as a graduation requirement. As a result of such flexibility among states, some schools allow non-language courses to count as foreign language credit. In Oklahoma, students can choose between two years of the same foreign language or “of computer technology approved for college admission requirements.” In California, minimum state graduation requirements allows a course in visual or performing arts, foreign language, or career technical education to fulfill the same credit. In addition, it says, “For the purpose of satisfying the minimum course requirement, a course in American Sign Language shall be deemed a course in foreign language.” The language in this sentence seems to begrudgingly consider ASL a foreign language for the sole purpose of reaching the bottom threshold. Vocabulary of the state standards alone is already conveying the vibes of a last resort and doesn’t signal much esteem for ASL. New Jersey, on the other hand, is a state that takes the

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foreign language requirement more seriously, mandating that students either demonstrate proficiency in a language other than English or earn five world language credits to fulfill graduation requirements.12

This lack of consistency across the board is one reason why many Americans who speak a non-English language don’t attribute that language acquisition to schooling. Pew Research Center points to these varying standards to explain why only a quarter of adults in the U.S. in 2006 said they could speak a second language in addition to English: “Of those who know a second language, 43% said they can speak that language ‘very well.’ Within this subset of multilinguals who are well-versed in a non-English language, 89% acquired these skills in the childhood home, compared with 7% citing school as their main setting for language acquisition.”13 That meager percentage of school-taught foreign language learners encapsulates the shortfall of our foreign language offerings.

IS ASL A LANGUAGE OF ITS OWN?

We shall answer the question of whether ASL is a language of its own by comparing it to the standards used by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Census has made its own compilation of 381 languages14 from the *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, which lists 6,909 languages derived from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

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13 Ibid.

To keep track of all the languages in the world, and to continuously update the list, there exists the ISO, which comprises the work of organizations around the globe. The ISO hosts the International Standard for language codes under the section labeled as ISO 639, which uses internationally recognized 2-, 3-, or 4-letter codes to represent different languages and language families. The codes help differentiate between languages with similar names and clarifying when languages are referred to by different names. The duties of keeping the codes up to date are delegated to Registration Authorities around the globe. The U.S. Library of Congress, for example, has been appointed the authority for ISO 639-2 to review applications and process requests for new or changed 3-letter language codes.

For a language to be included in the ISO 639-2, it needs to have a significant body of literature in, or about, the language. The main evidence considered is as follows:

- Having at least 50 different documents in the language (not limited to text)
- Size and variety of literature in the language (written or oral)
- National or regional support, preferably explicitly expressed by an authority or standardizing body
- Formal or official status of the language somewhere is very helpful, but lack thereof is understandable if other requirements are met
- Whether the language is taught or is used to teach in formal education

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

In light of these requirements, ASL definitely meets the criteria for being constituted a language of its own. Along with ASL, more than 130 different sign languages have already been identified in the ISO 639-2, but estimates suggest that there might be as many as 400 variations. The listings in Ethnologue include only natural sign languages that are used in deaf communities, leaving out manual codes like “Signed English” or “Signed French,” which are signed versions of spoken language designed for use by hearing people.

While ASL is used only in North America, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders emphasizes that it is an entirely separately language from English. ASL is not derived from English and has structures and processes that English does not have. It has its own complex grammar, pronunciations, word orders, and nonmanual signals for things such as asking a question. While a raised pitch of voice signals a question in English, ASL users use their body language to achieve the same effect by raising eyebrows, leaning forward, and widening the eyes. As will be discussed in later sections of this paper, there are substantial historical records of ASL use in the form of video and text, lots of historical support for ASL among the deaf community, and much historical evidence that sign language was taught and used to teach long before any formalized deaf education was created.

HOW ASL MADE IT INTO CLASSROOMS

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The popularity of ASL has skyrocketed in recent decades. Enrollment grew by 208% percent between 1991 to 2006. While only 48 American universities accepted ASL as a foreign language for admission in 1991, that number jumped to 148 colleges in 2006. 1990 saw 1,602 students enrolled in college ASL classes across the U.S., whereas 2002 saw 60,849 ASL students. This is a big improvement from just 20 years ago.

There has been historical opposition to considering ASL as a foreign language. The initial opposition was rooted in several arguments that have since been overcome. Because ASL is a visual-manual language, many government officials in past decades believed that ASL was just a manual version of English, which is also why they thought it was easier. Because the main users of ASL, the deaf community in the U.S., is a subgroup of the American population and not a different nationality of people, ASL wasn’t considered “foreign.” Other criticisms targeted the lack of written literature and the subsequent inability to produce Deaf cultural or artistic traditions.

All of these misconceptions have been rejected by linguists. ASL does have its own literature, in the form of text and oral recordings. There are histories of deaf people kept since the 1980s, as well as videotapes, digital video, and other visual media recordings of deaf art and

literature traditions. “Most languages of the world are unwritten,” Wilcox said. “You can have literature without it being written.” There have been social movements centered on ASL and certain ideologies regarding visualism, manualism, deafness, and deaf-hearing relations.

Linguists like Baker-Schenk & Cokely (1980), Klima & Bellugi (1979), Liddell (1980), Padden (1981), Valli & Lucas (1992), and Wilbur (1979) asserted that ASL was a unique language in the 1970s and ‘80s. While the modality of ASL requires that it be signed, that doesn’t mean ASL doesn’t share some characteristics with spoken languages. In fact, ASL shares many things in common with spoken languages, such as phonological binary opposites, morphological combinations, and word order.

ASL as a foreign language first started gaining traction after a chain of events incited by the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children (EAHCA) in 1975, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Hoping that integration would help deaf and hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students learn hearing and speaking skills needed to be mainstreamed into American society, the law said that disabled students, previously segregated in schools for the deaf, must be educated in public schools, and that their lessons must be conducted in sign languages varying from Manually Coded English to ASL. In 1977, 46% of

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D/HH students were placed in regular, local schools. By 2002, the portion of D/HH students in local schools had increased to 91%.\(^{37}\) D/HH students’ became more prevalent in schools as well as their interpreters, thus increasing interest among hearing students and teachers who then requested ASL and American Deaf culture courses.\(^{38}\) The help of hearing students and teachers in pushing for demand of ASL courses has helped pave the way for ASL inclusion in foreign language departments in public schools.\(^{39}\) Existing ASL courses are often lumped under the Speech, Education, or Communication Departments, but Wilcox argues, “because of the pedagogical connections between the study of ASL and other foreign languages, new ASL programs should be located in foreign language departments.”\(^{40}\) In past decades, there has been increased demand for ASL courses, and not at the expense of enrollment in other foreign languages. “In fact,” says Wilcox (1989), “the popularity of ASL courses seems to have lead to increased interest in other foreign languages as students overcome ‘foreign language anxiety’ and discover the value of learning a new language.”\(^{41}\)

Garnering approval from state legislatures and state education departments commenced in varying ways across states. In California, Virginia and New York, different sources could initiate the process for applying for state approval of ASL as foreign language credit in schools.\(^{42}\) Agents who convened with state education departments to bring the matter to the table ranged


\(^{38}\) Ibid.


\(^{42}\) Ibid.
from the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), to the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA), to community leaders, to college faculty: “In California, a consortium of individual members of the Deaf community, such as Selover (1988), the California Association of the Deaf, educational institutions such as California State University at Northridge, and community organizations initiated the process.”\(^{43}\) What started out as 28 states that recognized ASL as a foreign language in 1997\(^{44}\) became 38 states in 2004\(^{45}\) and now, all 50 states.

**KNOWING ASL HELPS STUDENTS LEARN OTHER LANGUAGES**

There is a substantial body of evidence that recognizes the positive cognitive affects of learning ASL and that it might even help students learn other languages. Even for those more skeptical who say that it is not the modality of ASL itself admit that the fact that it is an additional language makes the difference and agree that learning ASL can only be a good thing.

Early childhood signers have been shown to develop motor and language skills before their spoken language peers.\(^{46}\) Motor skills develop before spoken language to begin with, so children who know signs actually produce vocabulary several months before the first words come out of their mouths.\(^{47}\) And because ASL activates left and right hemispheres of brains of deaf and English-ASL bilinguals,\(^{48}\) it supports the idea that native and nonnative signers have

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
improved perceptual, visual, and spatial abilities.\textsuperscript{49} Signers also performed better than nonsigners on memory matching games that required remembering objects and faces,\textsuperscript{50} which makes sense considering that deaf signers are more adept at identifying and matching faces in differing lighting levels and spatial orientations.\textsuperscript{51} In addition, deaf signers proved better at mental rotation tasks\textsuperscript{52} and generating mental images more quickly. They used the right hemisphere to process spatial relations rather than the left, as in spoken language.\textsuperscript{53}

A study comparing the standardized test scores of hearing first graders learning Italian Sign Language (LIS) versus those at the same school learning English and those not learning a second language showed that the LIS learners performed better than the other groups. The findings imply that learning a sign language may lead to a cognitive advancement in hearing children.\textsuperscript{54} Another study showed that when ASL learners and Romance language learners were

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\item \textsuperscript{53} Emmorey, K., & Kosslyn, S.M. (1996). Enhanced image generation abilities in deaf signers: A right hemisphere effect. \textit{Brain and Cognition}, 32, 28-44.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Capirci, O., Cattani, A., Rossini, P., & Volterra, V. (1998). Teaching Sign Language to Hearing Children as a Possible Factor in Cognitive Enhancement. \textit{Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education}, 3(2). Retrieved from https://oup.silverchair-cdn.com/oup/backfile/Content_public/Journal/jdsde/3/2/10.1093/oxfordjournals.deafed.a014343/2/3-2-135.pdf?Expires=1494221889&Signature=AbckYQz6ol-kTQCT1ExVrhULjNBimkN-Qv08MZi062cicufiYcXLIff3ImYnDipYmfhMLsvBiLMcEpsfCm8i3msXxtDX5zk0r2QeATT-thCn24nt wo2xAIfkYptWeedSPtKVVQGMMNC6ZFCvryURsoqTTJOVi-UlmYNyNrWC0D5yGTmDmhYhsZ6jcI7yAiiTz0nV0XCT9bWhlAa3GXSQrcQZHzeQJTzocfACDg3VR-roqINmVluR6inX~goTC69DGJXAn4D8SI8CasJvDagonwTK21Yn~WZxQSPbO1EKJaLP~ZhpGjNahZifZok9txb UpGV4UepKTUg_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAIUCZBIA4LVPADVW3Q
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filmed while retelling a story, the ASL learners used more gestures during their speeches, implying that ASL may have the power to improve cognitive processes linked to gesture.\textsuperscript{55}

Surprisingly, Mayberry (2006) found that hearing signers who learn ASL later in life, such as at 21 years old, did better than deaf signers who learn it at that same late stage.\textsuperscript{56} The study suggests that fluency in ASL can be attained in adulthood, though Mayberry recognizes that might be a result of hearing learners depending on handshape and iconicity (resemblance of a sign and its meaning), a habit that creates a risk of straying toward a pidgin language rather than actual ASL because sign recognition ability does not necessarily mean one is fluent with the spatial or grammatical facets of ASL.\textsuperscript{57}

Regardless of whether the language is signed or spoken, exposing children to a first language early provides a good basis for learning language later.\textsuperscript{58} For deaf children whose most accessible pathway to linguistic information is vision, learning ASL makes sense. Particularly useful on a practical level, deaf signers have more success at acquiring spoken languages later in life if they learned ASL at an early age.\textsuperscript{59} Contrary to the misconception that sign language interferes with speech development, even for those children who end up getting cochlear implant surgery, there is evidence that learning ASL beforehand facilitates rapid mapping onto speech so


they can develop spoken language more smoothly. ASL proficiency has been associated with positive impacts on the development of spoken language and English literacy in deaf students.

Plus, Wilcox (1989) notes, as with any other foreign language, there are professional benefits to learning ASL, as it opens up opportunities for employment in interpretation, other jobs where they may interact with deaf clients or customers, or graduate schooling.

IS ASL A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms “foreign language” and “world language” interchangeably, though it is important to note that there is some disagreement on the terminology. People pushed back against the term “foreign language” for several reasons. International relations and fluid geographical demarcations help blur the concepts of what is “foreign.” Armstrong (1988) and Wilbers (1987) have adopted a relative definition: “Individuals not using the language of the community are considered ‘foreign’ and their language is considered a ‘foreign language.’” Languages like Spanish and ASL, which have become so ingrained in the United States, are no longer necessarily “foreign,” but they are certainly world

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languages. In 2009, the California State Board of Education adopted the *World Language Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* to delineate standards for foreign language learning. In its introductory message, the President of the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction make the distinction between foreign and world languages nicely. They emphasize the need for students to communicate across geographic boundaries as well as “with the diverse populations that constitute California’s rich linguistic and cultural tapestry. For this reason the standards refer to world, rather than foreign, languages.”

Spanish, being the second most used language in the U.S. after English, has speakers that are adamantly against the categorization of their language as being foreign. A *Huffington Post* piece was indignant: “Take a look around. Spanish isn’t ‘foreign’ to the United States, at all. The names of many of our states and cities are Spanish — a testament to the fact that Spanish-speakers colonized many areas that later became part of the United States before English-speakers. Many of us use Spanish words when speaking English, often without being aware of what we’re doing. According to a 2013 Pew report, Spanish is the second-most spoken language in the country and many people, both immigrant and native-born, were raised speaking it.”

With so many American citizens of Hispanic heritage, there are grounds for claiming that

Spanish isn’t a foreign language at all, but one that is very American. Many people feel the same way about ASL, hence its being called a “second” or a “world” language, instead. Wilcox (1989) argues that ASL’s limited use to North America is irrelevant when it comes to its status as a foreign language. He notes that many Native American languages are accepted as foreign languages at universities, while foreign students often cannot count their heritage languages for foreign language credit. A language’s global status also is not important in the question we’re asking, he points out, citing Dutch’s recognition as a foreign language even though it holds little political sway and Farsi’s minimal support despite its current critical importance.\(^67\)

ASL has been commonly referred to as the “the fourth most-used language in the United States” since a study called National Census of the Deaf Population in 1974. Though the exact number of ASL users is difficult to pinpoint because of different categories of documentation from “deaf” to “some hearing loss,”\(^68\) estimates range from 500,000 to 2 million ASL users in America.\(^69\) As recently as 2006, Gallaudet researchers published an article to bring attention to the need to update the census for how many people in the U.S. use ASL.\(^70\)

**IS ASL “EASIER” TO LEARN THAN OTHER LANGUAGES?**

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The predecessor to the *World Language Content Standards* was the College Board-designed manual for marking different milestones in language-learning progress in 2003, known as the Language Learning Continuum in the *Foreign Language Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. The stages are described as follows:

- **Stage I (Formulaic):** Learners understand and produce signs, words, and phrases.
- **Stage II (Created):** Learners understand and produce sentences and strings of sentences.
- **Stage III (Planned):** Learners understand and produce paragraphs and strings of paragraphs.
- **Stage IV (Extended):** Learners understand and produce cohesive texts composed of multiple paragraphs.
- **Stage V (Tailored):** Learners have the competencies necessary for the advanced study of literature; performance typically achieved through university-level study.

Because there are so many languages in California, the state content standards include a disclaimer paragraph that says they were “developed to accommodate all languages and describe the various stages a learner goes through to become proficient. Therefore, the content standards are not language-specific.” Though they are not language-specific, they do go out of their way to use language inclusive of ASL: “Engage in oral, written, or signed (ASL) conversations… Interpret written, spoken, or signed (ASL) language…Present to an audience of listeners, readers, or ASL viewers… Students use orthography, phonology, or ASL parameters to understand

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words, signs (ASL), and phrases in context.” Also note the word “signs” in the description of Stage I. In contrast to the earlier mention of ASL as merely a means of “satisfying the minimum course requirement,” the fact that the content standards include language specific to ASL signals that the California Department of Education acknowledges that ASL is, indeed, a language of its own with a unique modality that is on the same level as any written or spoken language.

At the national level, the Foreign Service Institute created categories of languages based on the length of time it takes a native English speaker to become proficient in the target language. Time is justified as a measure because “[t]he amount of time it takes to learn another language and culture is linked to the linguistic and cultural differences among the languages and cultures students already know.” Category IV languages, for example, like Arabic and Chinese take significantly longer to learn than a Category I language like French or Spanish. A few languages; including ASL, Classical Greek, Classical Latin, and Native American languages; have not been assigned categories because there hasn’t been published formal research on them.

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Language learners “may require more than one year to progress from one stage to the next and may spend a significant amount of time in two adjacent stages. For example, learners of Russian, a Category III language, may require two years to move beyond Stage I in listening and speaking but longer than two years for reading and writing. Programs may focus on specific communicative modes. For example, a Mandarin program may emphasize different communicative modes in order to attain Stage III proficiency in listening and speaking, Stage II proficiency in reading, and Stage I proficiency in writing. By necessity, Classical Greek and Latin programs will emphasize reading from the very beginning of instruction. Further, it will be common in the elementary school context for learners who do not have a heritage language back-
ground to remain in Stage I for an extended period of time.”

Someone who speaks a character-based language such as Chinese or Japanese may have different strengths from someone who speaks a non-English language that uses an alphabet similar to English’s, and these different starting bases may influence how quickly one acquires English.

Though there isn’t any consensus yet, scholars have attempted to place ASL on the FSI scale anywhere from a Category II to Category IV. For ASL learners, it is very easy to move quickly through the earlier stages, but progress becomes more stagnant at the more advanced levels, when improvements in command of the language don’t manifest themselves in ways as evident as new vocabulary, but in more subtle ways, such as fluency in handshapes. ASL is certainly not easier to learn than spoken languages. Shroyer and Holmes (1982), Kemp (1998a), and Peterson (1999) all conducted studies that pinpointed the different visual-manual modality as something that has proven to be more challenging, rather than easier, for students to adopt. For those who are typically acquainted with purely oral-aural language, ASL calls for a different way of processing.

Handspeak, a site that describes itself as “made of authentic culturally Deaf people and codas who speak ASL and other signed languages as their first language,” states that at least six 3-credit ASL courses over two to three years is needed for one to achieve the beginning-

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intermediate level, and then another two years in interpreter training before becoming intermediate, and still a few more years before fluency. The American Sign Language Teachers Association’s guidelines for hiring an ASL teacher claim that, typically, “it takes a minimum of 5 years of intensive language study and immersion for any person to develop ‘advanced’ levels of proficiency.” Rhonda Jacobs (1996), the author of “Just How Hard Is It to Learn ASL: The Case for ASL as a Truly Foreign Sign Language,” feels strongly about ASL being in Category IV: “She believes an average English speaker must take 1320 hours of instruction to reach an ASL proficiency level of 2. Proficiency Level 2 indicates that a person is able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. They can handle routine work-related interactions that are limited in scope. In more complex and sophisticated work-related tasks, language usage generally disturbs the native speaker…If Jacobs’ argument is to be the case, then it would take about 8 years of ASL classes with ten contact hours per week at the elementary level, five contact hours per week at the intermediate level, and three hours per week at higher levels.”

There are, however, special circumstances when it might be easier for someone to learn ASL than a traditional spoken language. Dyslexic students are one such population. The Yale Center For Dyslexia & Creativity began tracking a dyslexic 9th grader by the name of CJ who substituted a semester of ASL at a local community college for his foreign language credit at a traditional independent school after he struggled just as much with Spanish in elementary school

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as with English. Dr. Sally Shaywitz discussed the rationale behind CJ’s choice, given that
dyslexia can make it hard for people to access the individual sounds of spoken words: “So if you
have trouble learning the sound system of your primary language,” she said, 99% of dyslexics
“will have enormous difficulties learning the sound system of a second language.” Yale
University, in fact, offers a partial waiver of the foreign language requirement to dyslexic
students.

Despite encouraging results with dyslexic students, there are challenges that typical
English speakers face when learning ASL, some of which are due to the fact that ASL uses a
completely different mechanism for expression and grammar. Hearing people often have a hard
time adapting to the fact that voice shouldn’t be used while signing, as it actually improves
signing quality and avoids the issue of overwhelming others. The culture shock that comes with
going comfortable with the ceaseless staring that comes with the practice of maintaining eye
contact during signing might also be unnerving for beginning hearing signers. The normal
practice of deaf people getting attention by tapping the shoulder might also be misinterpreted as
harassment or intimidation. Other etiquette includes being careful not to walk between people
and blocking their view of each other or accidentally “overseeing” or eavesdropping others’ ASL
conversations.

81 American Sign Language. Yale Center For Dyslexia & Creativity. Retrieved from
http://dyslexia.yale.edu/americansignlanguage.html
82 Ibid.
https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/315071
84 Ibid.
143 (3), 255-259, DOI: 10.1353/aad.2012.0157
Strangely enough, even in the face of these common challenges to learning ASL, students in a study by McKee and McKee (1992) consistently underestimated the difficulty of each facet of ASL when asked to rate the difficult of ASL features.86 The scores they gave in all categories; such as thinking in ASL, nonmanual signals, expressing thoughts easily in ASL, and focus on signers’ hands and face; were lower than what their teachers gave, making it apparent that among students there does exist a perception of ASL being easier than it actually is.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EVALUATION NEEDS TO BE BETTER

In considering why this misperception persists, we have to look at the infrastructure of ASL in our education system. Ingold and Wang (2010) nail it on the head when they say “that

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the single most important school-based factor for student achievement is a highly effective teacher. But the United States has a widespread shortage of teachers, including world language teachers. The United States does not currently produce enough teachers to staff even our current modest offerings in world languages. Our current supply system gives scant attention to world language teachers, sometimes shortchanging them in language skills and in the pedagogical skills that can only be developed through teaching practice with expert mentoring and guidance.\textsuperscript{87}

When ASL teachers do seek certification, it seems they strive for the bare minimum needed to get their foot in the door. In 2008, before all fifty states recognized ASL as an official foreign language, Rosen (2008) found disconnect between the states where ASL was formally recognized and where ASL was offered as a foreign language credit. There seemed to be no relationship between the two. Instead, what seemed to be dictating ASL offerings were state graduation requirements and college admissions requirements.\textsuperscript{88} Missouri, North Dakota, and New Mexico all offered ASL for foreign language credit when it wasn’t yet recognized because administrators in those states believed that offering those languages to their students would increase their chances of getting into college. On the other hand, though Alabama and Iowa around the same time formally recognized ASL, not a single public high school in those states boasted ASL foreign language courses.\textsuperscript{89}

Foreign language teacher candidates are traditionally required to complete a certain number of hours of study to prove their grasp of the language, but states in recent years have started to adopt language proficiency tests like the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)’s Oral Proficiency Testing (OPI) and Writing Proficiency Testing (WPT), instead. For FSI Category I languages, the minimum level teachers should attain on the speaking and writing portions of the exam is Advanced Low proficiency. FSI Category II or III languages call for Intermediate High proficiency on the writing portion. States that offer PRAXIS tests work with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to set their passing scores for each language, while other states have designed their own language tests entirely.\(^{90}\) The California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET): Languages Other Than English offers exams for 23 languages, including American Sign Language.\(^{91}\) In addition to knowing their subject well, teachers also have to know how to teach their subject well. To evaluate pedagogical competence, California has created standards called the Teacher Performance Expectations to assess beginning teachers, as well as a portfolio system of assessment. The standards cover making content understandable, engaging and supporting students, planning instruction, maintaining effective learning environments, and evaluating student learning, and professional development.\(^{92}\)


\(^{91}\) California Educator Credentialing Examinations. http://www.ctcexams.nesinc.com/tests.asp

Nationally, guidelines are less clear. Across the U.S., The National Association of the Deaf, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the American Sign Language Teachers Association of the National Association of the Deaf, the Association of Teacher Educators, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the Virginia Department of Education are currently the six organizations that provide ASL teaching standards. Jacobowitz’s analysis of their ASL Teacher Preparation Programs (ASLTPPs) led her to disappointing conclusions about their efficacy. Parts of the programs and their administration that have fallen short of expectations were the lack of an evaluation instrument to assess the ASLTPPs’ effectiveness in the first place, the lack of a standard ASL or English assessment of the faculty or students, and a lack of the programs’ contribution to improving diversity among teachers or students. With regard to teachers and teaching, Jacobowitz found teachers inadequately prepared to work with diverse students or in diverse teaching environments, only one of eight teachers had a doctorate degree, 50% of teachers were ill-trained and -supervised contract hires, and the majority were not on the tenure track at all. The scholarship that the ASLTPP faculty reported produced did not receive the same level of recognition equivalent to academic work published in English. In the curriculum itself, she discovered little variety of experiences for students, no classes on ASL legislation, and no exit examination or portfolios, and dismal career preparation in service or scholarship.

The highest degree earned by ASL teachers was shown by Rosen (2008) to be very much correlated with the minimum state degree requirements to attain the teacher certification. States

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like Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Utah, where one could not teach without a master’s degree, had a population of ASL teachers, 100% of whom had master’s degrees. In states like California, Florida, Texas, and Virginia had more ASL teachers with bachelor’s degrees than master’s degrees because only a bachelor’s degree was required to teach. Nationally, 50% of ASL teachers in public high schools had master’s degrees, a little more than 30% had only a bachelor’s degree, and shockingly, 10% did not have a college degree at all.

It is alarming to see that in some states, teacher qualifications are so low, which does nothing to help the perception of ASL’s lack of rigor as a foreign language course.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO CERTIFICATION (ACRs)

On top of the pressures created by the subpar ASLTPPs already in place, the tediousness of the long, “traditional” path to foreign language teaching certification might be a turn-off for even ASL native speakers, said Vance Ruugard, Executive Director of the Office of Teacher Licensing at the Tennessee Department of Education and President of the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification. ACRs are Band-Aids that don’t really solve the root issue. Ruugard recognizes that bilingualism is difficult to accomplish, particularly when on a fast track “alternative” certification route. The teacher shortage problem is more pronounced because the state-by-state offerings of alternative programs in specific languages is not consistent, which exacerbates the obstacles for teachers prepared by alternative routes in one state who want to transfer to work in another state that doesn’t accept those credentials. The

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The argument for alternative routes to certification (ACR) programs is that they will help recruit teachers from non-conventional pools to increase the world supply of language teachers, which is currently lacking because of high beginner teacher attrition rates, rising retirement of baby-boomer generation teachers, and the “highly qualified” mandate in the No Child Left Behind act.\textsuperscript{95} ACR program graduates make up one third of new teacher hires.\textsuperscript{96}

The federal government included ACRs in its Race to the Top Executive Summary. ACRs are defined as “pathways to certification that are authorized under the State’s laws or regulations, that allow the establishment and operation of teacher and administrator preparation programs in the State, and that have the following characteristics (in addition to standard features such as demonstration of subject-matter mastery, and high-quality instruction in pedagogy and in addressing the needs of all students in the classroom including English language learners and students with disabilities):

\begin{itemize}
  \item can be provided by various types of qualified providers, including both institutions of higher education and other providers operating independently from institutions of higher education;
  \item are selective in accepting candidates;
  \item provide supervised, school-based experiences and ongoing support such as effective mentoring and coaching;
\end{itemize}


significantly limit the amount of coursework required or have options to test out of courses; and upon completion, award the same level of certification that traditional preparation programs award upon completion.”

The National Center for Education Information released a report titled *Alternative Teacher Certification: A State by State Analysis 2005* that profiled the teacher candidates pursuing ACRs. Their findings showed the following:

- 80 percent already had a bachelors degree or higher in a field other than education
- 47 percent had a non-education job before they entered the ACR program
- 7 percent were age thirty or older
- 32 percent were racial or ethnic minorities (while 10 percent of the US teacher population were racial or ethnic minorities)
- 37 percent were men (while 25 percent of the US teacher population were men).

ACRs’ concept of cutting out a significant chunk of what is normally required for teacher certification just sounds counterproductive to begin with. Even though the intention of ACRs to expand and increase the pool of eligible foreign language teachers in needy areas such as ASL is a noble one, the fact that state-by-state ACRs are not consistent almost counteracts the effort. While standards across the nation are already so disjointed and messy, having an even messier certification process only exacerbates the negative consequences.

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ASL PAVES THE WAY FOR OTHER FOREIGN LANGUAGE CREDITS

ASL is often used as a point of reference when other subjects are seeking recognition as a foreign language. Most recently, it has come up in the fight for computer coding to be counted as a foreign language. In many of the recent news articles that have brought this debate to the table, people weighing in have referenced ASL’s entrance into foreign language departments to speculate about coding’s potential path. There are mixed feelings, with some people scoffing at comparing the two subjects while others see their statuses as intertwined.

At the University of Pennsylvania, getting ASL into the foreign language department was an uphill climb. The initial reservations to admitting ASL, said the ASL Program Coordinator, were due to some faculty being unaware that ASL wasn’t a manual form of English and that it didn’t need to be written to have formal literature. She “doesn’t really see a parallel between the coding debate and her department’s struggle,” as “ASL is a naturally developed language like Chinese, Arabic or Spanish — an argument that, in her understanding, doesn’t really apply to coding. Because of this, learning ASL provides insight into another culture, which is the objective of the language requirement at Penn.”

Just as counselors at my high school in California recommended ASL to struggling foreign language learners, in 2013, Texas passed a bill that allowed students who did poorly in foreign language courses to make up for it by taking computer coding instead. This practice of substituting in other courses is rather counterproductive, according to the co-founder of Tynker, an instructional coding company for kids, because every subject has value in the holistic

educational experience: “Many students don’t fare well with algebra but we never discuss eliminating it or … say chemistry is now counted as an algebra class,” he wrote in an email.\textsuperscript{100}

In light of the Texas decision, parental reactions frequently cited ASL as an example, both one to, or to not, follow. Some were supportive of coding. Stephanie Windeler, mother of three boys in Trophy Club, Texas, told NBC News, “Sign language is taught, and I don’t think that this [coding] is any different. The majority of kids will never use the language they learn, nor will they ever become fluent in it. Giving them the option to learn a computer language instead could possibly open door to career in computer programming that might not have otherwise been an option for them.”\textsuperscript{101}

Other parents, on the other hand, like Craig Brodsky, a father in Durham, North Carolina, “do not believe that exchanging a vocational skill for a foreign language is the same thing.” He said, “A foreign language is used for communication with other people. Sign language, while no written form, allows for communication with those who are deaf. Teaching a child computer coding is no different than teaching them HVAC repair. Our goal is to allow our child to experience all facets of life. Some they will not excel in, but not giving them the opportunity is the failure.”\textsuperscript{102}

When Florida considered a similar bill in 2016 on counting computer coding as a foreign language credit, concerns about teacher shortages and the course not qualifying for university foreign language requirements showed that ASL and computer coding had at least that much in common. The Florida bill went so far as to mandate that “each student and his or her parent must sign a statement acknowledging and accepting that taking a computer coding course as a foreign language may not meet out-of-state college and university foreign language requirements.”

Before we can use ASL as an example for other aspiring foreign languages, we need to more critically assess whether current ASL programs and certification are actually doing their job.

CONCLUSION

There should not be a discrepancy in ASL’s status as a foreign language or in ASL teacher certification. If ASL is recognized as equivalent to any other foreign language, fast-track ACR programs and poorly designed and conducted ASLTPP programs should not be acceptable replacements for traditional foreign language teacher certification. Having ASL instructors go through the same rigor of training as other foreign language teachers do can help combat the misconceptions of the general public, but especially ASL students, that ASL is easier than any other foreign language.

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