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# Supporting Deaf and Hard of Hearing Preschool Students' Emerging ASL Skills: A Bilingual Approach

*By Julie Mitchiner and Michelle Gough*

What do the signs *elephant*, *robot*, *wings*, *soar*, *swim*, and *stomp* have in common? If you are unsure, check with your deaf or hard of hearing preschooler. Asked to brainstorm “signs with the B-handshape,” a class of deaf and hard of hearing preschool children came up with every one of the above signs—and of course they were correct. After a week of B-handshape study, the children identified these B-handshape signs as part of a language activity that focused on exploring American Sign Language (ASL).

Helping young deaf and hard of hearing children explore ASL and English is one of the important jobs with which the preschool teachers who work with those children are tasked. Learning ASL and English, the children will become bilingual, fluent in the two languages they will use throughout their lives.

Working with two languages requires planning. Teachers need to work together to decide when and how to use each language. This enables teachers to avoid the use of simultaneous communication (i.e., signing and talking at the same time). Instead, teachers incorporate what is called “concurrent use of ASL and English,” which means using specific strategies to incorporate both ASL and English into teaching (Baker, 2006; Gárate, 2012). For example, when students read a book in English, they use both languages as they translate the English text to ASL. This practice has been termed “translanguaging” (Garcia, 2009).

There are two broad categories of ASL and English bilingual methodology: 1) concurrent use of both ASL and English, and 2) language separation (Gárate, 2011; 2012). Both categories are equally valuable. Therefore, teachers schedule times when they will use ASL only, times when they will use English only, and times when they will alternate between both languages. Separating the use of ASL and English allows young learners to study the functions and purposes of each language and to strengthen their receptive and expressive skills (Ibid.).

*Photos by Zhou Fang*



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### The Power of Conversation

Dickinson and Tabors (2001) found that conversation—in the home and at school—plays an important role in fostering children's early literacy skills. In a three-year longitudinal study, they looked at the influences on literacy development in hearing preschool children beginning when the children were 3 years old. Then they looked at the way children handled language through their emergent literacy skills—including how they handled telling stories and interpreted print (including environmental print), and how they understood aspects of the alphabet and vocabulary. The researchers showed that positive interactions between adults and children as well as engaging in literacy practices at home—including the use of new and varied vocabulary, extended conversations, and developing language through play—were predictive factors to children's literacy skills. In other words, if family members talk with their children,

**Above:** Deaf and hard of hearing preschool students brainstorm signs with the B-handshape, including *elephant*, as part of a language activity.

vary their vocabulary in conversation, and read to their children, the children are likely to learn to read and write on par with or ahead of other children.

Of course, maintaining conversations and providing language-rich experiences with deaf and hard of hearing children is as important as providing these experiences to hearing children. When explanations and interactions are visible, deaf and hard of hearing children are supported in building vocabulary and understanding about their world. Further, these conversations are even more important for deaf children because they miss out on easy access to sound-based information around them.

### Teaching ASL The Whole-Part-Whole Model

When planning ASL instruction, we follow





**Left:** As a way of helping students explore ASL, teachers video them playing with handshapes and signs. The students watch themselves on video immediately afterwards.

immediately afterwards. As they become comfortable, they start to combine smaller parts to make a sign or a phrase.

We also explore nonmanual communication. Nonmanual communication—the points, smiles, and shrugs of everyday life—are the basic tools of all children. However, for those who use ASL, these tools of the face and body have a

linguistic purpose, and this is what we begin to teach preschoolers.

One of the five mouth movements that have a linguistic meaning in ASL is what linguists call the *cha cha* mouth movement, used as an adverb to designate that something is done with particular force. For example, if we want to sign *a man works*, we might sign *man* and couple it with the sign for *work*, signing *work* using the straightforward up and down movement of the closed dominant hand. If we want to sign *a man works very hard*, we may make the same signs, but now the closed hand makes a circular movement for *work*, coupled with the mouth movement *cha cha*; it is the mouth, not the hand, that has refined the sentence and carries the meaning *very hard*. With support, children pick up quickly the linguistic nature of *cha cha*. In fact, it was the class that came up with much of the above example. The children also noticed that *cha cha* could be used in conjunction with the sign *chat* to mean *chatting for a long time* and in conjunction with the

the holistic approach drawn from the Whole-Part-Whole learning model (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Swanson & Law, 1993). Instead of pulling parts of the language out of their natural context, we allow learners to first experience the language in its complex and meaningful entirety. From there, children become motivated and engaged to explore ASL grammar, often through conversation with guidance from the teachers. Students study the parts of ASL and how they work together grammatically. Using this knowledge and their new grammatical skills, children create new stories, songs, and expressions and gain a deeper understanding of how language functions.

### Full Richness in Every Class The Whole of ASL

Children are exposed to ASL as an intricate and complete language through various ways, such as through language-rich learning activities, interactions with adults and peers, and viewing stories in ASL through storytellers or video clips.

Dramatic play areas and other early childhood centers can facilitate imaginary play to initiate conversations and discussions about ASL grammar. For example, as part of the daily curriculum, deaf and hard of hearing children see and tell stories, converse with each other and educated adults, view videos, experience units of learning, and engage in dramatic play—all in ASL.

### Handshapes, Classifiers, and Markers The Parts of ASL

Children explore the five parameters of ASL grammar: handshape, location, orientation, movement, and nonmanual markers. We focus on one ASL parameter at a time for a week.

Students begin with exploring nonmanual markers, and then they talk about handshapes. Teachers use stories, videos, or pictures of different handshapes and nonmanual markers for children to copy and identify. The children play with these handshapes and signs and analyze their formation. They record and watch themselves on video

signs *dog walks*, in which the hands reflect the dog's paws walking on the ground, to mean *dog's paws hitting the ground very hard as he walks*. We point out that while the mouth movements are the same or similar in each sentence, the English translation is different.

## Handshapes

There are approximately 40 handshapes in ASL, and these handshapes make up most of the signs. With young children, we focus on seven basic handshapes. These handshapes are named after the letters and numbers that they most resemble: *B, A, S, C, O, I, and 5*. The teacher shows a picture of a handshape on the SMART Board, and the children brainstorm different nouns and verbs that the handshapes can be used to represent. For example, the teacher might show the handshape 5 on the SMART Board, and the children then name signs that use this handshape (e.g., *mother* and *tree* for nouns, *fly* and *swim* for verbs). The teacher and the children use this opportunity to play with handshapes, usually selecting two or three. The teacher checks the children, making sure they use the correct handshapes (e.g., one of the children needed assistance because he was using the G-handshape instead of the A-handshape in signing the word "game"). A favorite handshape game is "A Big Box," in which pictures of handshapes are pulled out of a box and the children must think of different signs that use that handshape.

## Classifiers

We also teach children about classifiers. Classifiers are handshapes used to represent categories of nouns reflecting their shape and size. The teacher notes how a person standing upright can be represented by the 1-handshape, the extended forefinger. The same 1-handshape can be used to represent a long and thin object like a pencil, a pole, a stick, or a knife. When the sign is used to mean "person," it may be moved vertically and pick up speed to

show how a person moves with increasing speed. We also show how facial expression combines with this sign to indicate the person is walking very quickly. Further, we show how, when both hands make the 1-handshape and use it as a classifier, a signer can show two people walking together side by side, two people meeting face to face, or two people bumping into each other.

With preschoolers, teachers focus on three basic classifiers:

**Descriptive classifiers**—Used to describe objects or people, descriptive classifiers allow children to describe the size and shape of objects around them. While describing the shapes, the children were prompted to use appropriate grammatical expressions (e.g., nonmanual markers) to match the descriptions of the size.

**Semantic classifiers**—Used to represent noun categories, semantic classifiers are sometimes familiar to children. The children enjoy using the 3-handshape as a classifier to visually represent different types of moving vehicles. We focus on this classifier after showing a short video of a car, and children use it to show how the car speeds up or moves at a leisurely pace.

**Locative classifiers**—Locative classifiers represent the position of objects in a specific place or the movement of objects within a place. Children use locative classifiers to explore where the objects are located in the classroom, and then they discuss how to describe each object's specific location. The class also developed an activity in which the teacher shows different pictures of a cat lying on a chair, under the bed, and inside a basket using the bent V handshape as a classifier. The teacher models how to use these classifiers in appropriate ways, and then the children practice describing the position of objects in different locations.

# Tips for the Preschool ASL Classroom

By Julie Mitchiner and Michelle Gough

The following four tips can be used to facilitate children's ASL development in a preschool ASL classroom setting:

- 1. Follow the child's lead.** Children have a natural curiosity about the world, and by pursuing topics and activities that pique their interest, parents and teachers will find children more motivated to learn new vocabulary.
- 2. Model a variety of ASL handshapes and classifiers.** Young children benefit from watching others. Invite Deaf community members to the classroom to tell stories and recite poems in ASL.
- 3. Use books, photographs, and real objects as a springboard for creating stories, poems, and games in ASL.** Use real materials and pictures to help facilitate discussion, allowing children to use ASL creatively and to explore its characteristics. For example, children can practice describing real objects using classifiers.
- 4. Provide many opportunities to explore and play with ASL.** Children can explore ASL during transitions from activity to activity, during mealtimes, and during those moments of incidental learning as well as during a set ASL time. Don't forget to share ideas and strategies with families to practice at home.



### Putting It All Together Returning to the Whole of ASL

Each time children learn and practice grammatical skills, they are prompted to produce stories, games, poems, and songs using the features they learned. Through modeling and prompting, the teacher shows children how to keep track of beats and rhythms through body movement. The class develops handshape stories or poems using only one or two handshapes or they use a pattern, a “handshape text,” alternating between two handshapes. For example, one class created a story about a bear by describing its physical characteristics and behaviors using only the C-handshape. The children swayed their heads and shoulders with animated facial expressions while they signed *ears*, *nose*, *sleeping*, and *crawling*—all with the C-handshape. The children then came up with different animals and handshapes to make similar animal poems. They created ASL songs, counting songs, and weather songs. A favorite presentation was “My Day Song,” in which children relayed what they did all day—from waking up in the morning to going to bed at night.

As we teach our children about ASL, we are amazed at their creativity and understanding. We also recognize the benefits of teaching them the features of ASL at a young age. Early knowledge of how ASL works allows them to develop metacognitive and metalinguistic capabilities and to transfer conceptual and linguistic knowledge from ASL to their second language, i.e., English

(Cummins, 2006). This practice supports Cummins’s theory of linguistic interdependence, where bilingual individuals transfer conceptual and linguistic knowledge across languages to increase proficiency in both languages.

In the long run, these activities will not only increase our children’s ASL skills but also support their emergent literacy

development. We are excited to see our young students develop pre-literacy skills and sign language skills—and have a good time, too.

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