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A Curriculum for ASL:
Empowering Students by Giving Them Ownership of Their Learning

By Melissa P. Herzig

There is a need for teachers to facilitate literacy in American Sign Language (ASL) and to put as much focus on developing students' ASL skills as they usually do on developing their English skills.

In response to this need, I have created a curriculum—Creating the Narrative Stories: The Development of the Students' ASL and English Literacy Skills—that teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students may find useful. The learning theories that support this curriculum and the practices it delineates empower and motivate students as they develop skills in both ASL and English, the two languages they will use for the rest of their lives.

Teachers want to enable students to develop skills to be lifetime learners. This means teaching them to read, write, communicate, and think critically. In some classrooms of deaf and hard of hearing students, this means more focus on English, less focus on ASL, and a distinct lack of focus on fostering students' development of ASL as an academic language. This is a mistake.

Support for an ASL Curriculum
Teaching deaf and hard of hearing children to read and write is important, but equally important is teaching those children to be independent, self-reliant, and successful. The overarching concern of wise and dedicated educators is empowering students to be

Photos by Zhou Fang and courtesy of Melissa P. Herzig
Illustrations courtesy of Melissa P. Herzig

Above and left: In the Creating the Narrative Stories curriculum, students are encouraged to sign narratives from their personal experiences and to record the narratives on video.

responsible for their own learning, to learn how to seek information, and to know on what areas they need to work.

According to Wilbur (2000), one of the causes of deaf children's problems with reading and writing is that "students are so overtly concerned about the structure of individual sentences that their paragraphs are stilted." Wilbur suggests that students become overly cautious as they write, and this results in a lack of complexity and creativity in story structure. Teaching that focuses on generating correctly phrased sentences can result in learners that manage parts of speech and word order within individual sentences but overgeneralize the strategies they learn so those strategies become counterproductive.

Wilbur (2000) also suggests three reasons why the sentence learning practices do not work:

1. **The students are not receiving enough language input at home and in the environment.** This causes students to overgeneralize the rules of grammar, which is a major factor hindering full development of English skills in deaf children. Without sufficient language input and experience, students are not able to recognize mistakes.

2. **Sentence structures taught in isolation are not conducive to effective writing.** Wilbur and Nolen (1986b) found that students' comprehension was better when structures were presented in a meaningful context than when they were presented in isolated sentences.

3. **Teachers, recognizing students cannot be taught every variation of English structure, choose what structures they will teach.** Deaf students, without the easy access to information outside of the classroom that allows them to contextualize their experiences, sometimes only know a structure if it has been taught.

Most deaf students do not have sufficient ASL skills, partly because 90 percent of deaf children come from families who do not use ASL in the home. These children often come to school language deprived. They have little exposure to ASL, and they certainly do not have enough ASL skills to help them understand what they are learning in English. Acknowledges Wilbur (2000): "Limited [ASL] input is a major factor hindering full development of English skills in deaf children."

Skilled teachers know that students benefit from clear instruction in ASL and the differences between English and

Essential Terms in Learning Theory and Bilingual Literacy

Key Learning Terms	Definitions	Activities
Metacognition Awareness	Thinking about thinking, knowing what we know and what we do not know.	• Know-Want to Learn Chart: Share what students know about story structure. • The students will pick a strategy that works for them to plan the story (e.g., draw picture, outline, web-form, talk about it). • They will plan and monitor their learning process, identifying what they need to learn and develop using rubrics or a checklist to evaluate or assess self and others. • They will be responsible for knowing what they understand or do not understand; they will know how to ask for help or find ways to understand the lesson better.
Metalinguistic Awareness	The ability to consciously focus attention on the rules of language and reflect on its nature, structure, and function.	• As the students go through the "writing" process (signing, revising, editing, final draft), they will get some ASL mini-lessons from the teacher or the ASL/bilingual specialist. • After creating an ASL story, they can create an English version. They will get mini-lessons on how to write the ASL version in English from the teacher or the ASL/bilingual specialist.
Cooperative Learning	Students work in groups to complete tasks collectively with academic goals. The aim is to organize classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences.	• The students will work cooperatively by watching their stories told in ASL on video or reading each other's papers and sharing suggestions for revisions.
Motivation	*Intrinsic motivation:* Driven by an inner desire to learn and to work on tasks. Work for self instead of for rewards.	• The students will use rubrics as guidelines, and use their metacognitive skills to plan how they can reach their goals. • They will choose the topic themselves for their narrative stories. • They will also work with their peers through cooperative learning.
	Extrinsic motivation: Driven by an external reward system. Work for ribbons and praise.	• The students will create final products for their digital library that others can view. Some ideas on how to showcase their work: ➢ Publish their work using e-books. ➢ Create VL2 Storybook apps through the VL2 Storybook Creator program. ➢ Create a video with captions added. ➢ Display their ASL literacy or bilingual literacy during story time for parents or other grade groups.

ASL throughout the day. It is not enough to provide ASL lessons on Fridays or in the mornings during warm-up exercises; it is not enough to teach ASL separately from English reading and writing. ASL must be taught in conjunction with other subjects throughout the hours that students are in school.

Supporting ASL Skills Through Narratives
A Look at the Curriculum

In the Creating the Narrative Stories curriculum, deaf and hard of hearing students are encouraged to sign narratives from their personal experiences and to record the narratives on video. Teachers and students view the videos and analyze their use of

ASL in class. Sometimes students pick one of their favorite narratives to share with classmates. As they watch themselves on video, they, their teachers, and their peers discuss ASL and edit their production. Teachers also provide individualized lessons about ASL. Depending on what skills students need to develop, teachers may focus on role shifting, eye gaze, or facial expressions.

After the individualized lesson, students work on revising and expanding their own stories, improving their use of ASL, and retelling the story. Once the story is recorded on video, students learn how to write the same story in English. It is at this point that they compare English and ASL syntax and learn how they differ. Teachers present several strategies that enable students to write in English the story they have told in ASL. The same principle can be applied to other subject areas or different types of presentations (e.g. history).

ASL/Writing Workshops Empowerment at the Center

In this curriculum, ASL/writing workshops—in which students write in English while conducting academic discussion in ASL—are critical. These workshops may go a long way towards helping students learn how to transition between the two languages. The goals of developing literacy and empowering students through ASL/writing workshops are:

• to gain awareness of and develop skills in ASL,

• to help students distinguish between the structure of ASL and English,

• to promote student ownership of both languages by letting them express their personal experiences and prior

knowledge in their personal narratives,

- to allow students to be responsible for their learning, and
- to improve students' academic language and social skills through cooperative learning.

Repeated ASL/writing workshops support the acquisition and development of ASL skills. Curricula in schools and programs for deaf and hard of hearing students should treat ASL the same way the general school curricula treats the English language—as an important academic subject of study. This does not mean ignoring English, of course, as students are also encouraged to develop their English skills through written work and reading remains critical.

Tips for Translation
What Students Need to Know

Students need to know that one sign does not equate to one English word; students also need to understand the importance of classifiers, those signs that include components of adjectives, nouns, and verbs.

Here are some examples of English sentences that students might want to discuss:

- *"The person is walking away."* This sentence can be rendered with a single handshape, the 1-handshape that represents a person. Made with the extended pointer finger, the handshape is turned away from the body and moved outward, indicating that the person is facing the opposite direction and moving away from the person signing.

- *"Dalmatians have many spots."* While signers might render this sentence using the signs *many* and *spots*, they would communicate more effectively by indicating "many" by signing *spots* in a repeated way all over the body.

- *"A child threw the ball."* To sign the previous sentence, students must consider the size and shape of the ball (e.g., soccer ball, football, baseball). They add this information by indicating size and shape with classifiers and correct facial expression.

Once students understand these concepts, they are able to use them to translate their ASL narrative into English and write their rough draft. Their English draft, like their ASL draft, will be critiqued and edited by them, their classmates, and their teachers. Just as teachers took advantage of editing the ASL narrative to teach ASL, they now take advantage of editing the written narrative to provide lessons in English grammar.

By requiring students to talk about themselves and relate their personal stories, teachers bring out students' prior experiences and get them to connect learning in the classroom to the world outside. In addition, "personal narrative writing, with its ready supply of subject matter, is often an excellent starting point for reluctant writers" (Kemper, Nathan, & Sebranek, 1995).

## Learning Theory and Bilingual Literacy Essential Terms

Several key terms are embedded in supporting the students' development of ASL and English literacy and individual empowerment. Understanding these terms may help not only with teaching but also with understanding the theory behind teaching:

1. **Metacognitive awareness**—This simply means the ability to plan and monitor learning, including what is understood and not understood, and what skills need to be developed. Metacognitively-aware students can question themselves and reflect on their prior knowledge while experiencing a lesson. These students are empowered and held accountable for their own learning.

   A curriculum should encourage students to collaborate with peers or teachers, set up goals for themselves, develop a plan for how to acquire skills in ASL or English, and improve their communication and social skills. Students have diverse learning styles, so instruction in class cannot be "one size fits all." Strategies and approaches need to be individually tailored to allow each student to proceed at his or her own pace. "It is difficult for learners to become self-directed when learning is planned and monitored by someone else" (Blakey & Spence, 1990).

   Once the students are aware of what learning strategies are effective for them, they become less dependent on teachers. The teachers need to be aware of what strategies or approaches the students prefer and "to present repertoires of strategic approaches by involving them as collaborators in developing the knowledge and processes needed to attain common goals" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

2. **Metalinguistic awareness**—This means not only using language but understanding how to use language. Studies of hearing students found that they could not develop reading competence beyond fourth grade level when they did not have metalinguistic awareness in English (Nippold, 1998).
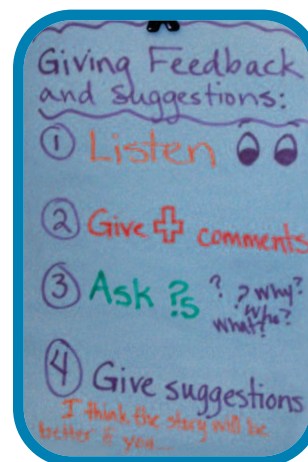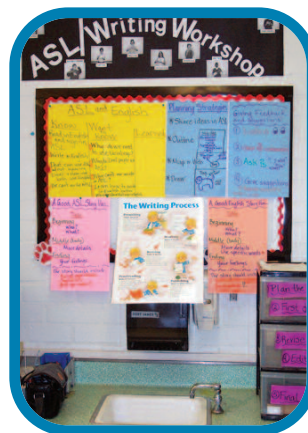
Below and right: Samples of student work.

Tracking their Progress

Name _____
Date _____

Checklist of ASL Story Steps

☑ 1. I used planning strategy to create a story.

☑ 2. I signed the rough idea of this story on videotape.

☑ 3. I learned some new ASL storytelling skills

☑ 4. I asked my friend for feedbacks and suggestions. (Use revision chart).

☑ 5. I proofread my story. (Attach ASL story editing checklist) And I also asked my friend for help. (Use Editing with a Friend form.)

☑ 6. I revised and edited before signing the story for second time on videotape.

Pick one:
☑ I enjoyed making this story.
☐ It was hard making this story.

The students used this checklist to help guide them through this workshop. After they have completed a specific activity listed, they mark a check in the box. When they have done all the steps, they may check one of the boxes that best described how they felt while creating this story.

My name: _____
Date: _____

ASL Story Editing Checklist

Title: _____

☑ 1. I watched my story again to see if it made sense.

☐ 2. I used classifiers to tell what animal looks like.

☐ 3. I used right facial expressions.

☐ 4. I showed or signed my story to a friend to see if it made ... sense.

☐ 5. I filmed the story on videotape.

... I think my editing skills are

Improving   Pretty Good

I need to improve I need improve ... I need sign clear.

...tes from the peer-editing session, the students added ...s to this editing form. While editing, we look at the ...isn't relevant to the content or the story line unlike the ... boxes that aren't checked means the student is lacking ...o work on them.

First Report Card

Title: "Doe" 's Report Card   Name: Maley 13 ...

Numerical Scores: 3 Great
2 Ok-Ok
1 Needs more work

Content:	Score:	Comments:
Focused on one topic		
Clear beginning, middle, and ending	3	
Used classifiers for description	2	
Good facial expressions	1	Because I'M not good at it
Story makes sense	3	

Comments: I like my store

When they are done with peer-editing, filling out the Revision Chart and Editing Checklist, the students filled out their own report card and evaluate themselves. This form empowered students to take responsibility for their own learning progress. They are aware of their own weakness and what they need to improve before signing their final story on videotape. In this sample above, this student knows they need to learn and practice more with their classifiers and to make sure his story line has a clear beginning, middle, and ending.

Research indicates that the problem that deaf students have in learning to read and write stems partly from their lack of understanding of how either ASL or English works (Wilbur, 2000). ASL needs to be understood and appreciated before the students can fully translate from ASL to English.

Students can be encouraged to develop their metalinguistic skills through the analysis of the ASL skills they use to create their narratives. First students brainstorm the stories with others, and then they develop their own narratives. The expression of ideas in their stories is emphasized. Editing focuses first on content.

3. Cooperative learning—Cooperative learning activities (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) give students reason to use academic language for functional purpose. Students work cooperatively when they converse with peers, share and edit videos of their signed narratives, read and edit each other's papers, and offer comments and suggested revisions.

Using cooperative learning boosts students' social and academic language. Peer interaction is one of the important variables in developing language and communication skills, and research shows that peer communication helps develop students' motivation in learning. During peer conferencing, students develop the social skills necessary to work with each other.

In addition, cooperative learning fosters mutual rather than competitive learning (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). It gives each student a voice. The students work together in groups, give feedback, and interact with each other. The cooperative learning approach is excellent for making the classroom equitable by grouping students with various levels of skills together. During peer conferences when students give each other feedback, they become more analytical and their motivation to understand what they are learning increases. Students often enjoy chances to work with their peers. They know they are supported; a safe harbor is created in which the students can take risks in learning new skills (Brandt, 1995). Through cooperative learning, students have the chance to use their prior knowledge and apply their metacognitive skills to make what they have learned more meaningful.

4. Motivation—In the ideal classroom, skilled teachers know how to use both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation:

- *Intrinsic*. The teachers cannot teach and the students cannot learn if they are not motivated to do so. Intrinsic motivation comes from within. Few students like to show people what they cannot do— and when they are asked to do what they cannot, they feel discouraged and overwhelmed. Students should be encouraged to show the knowledge they bring to the classroom through the experiences they share in their narratives. Teachers base lessons on what students already know, affirm that success is within the students' grasp, and use scaffolding to assist students in developing mastery. They also share clear expectations and use modeling to assist students in accomplishing tasks.

- *Extrinsic*. Extrinsic motivation can mean not just providing students with rewards and punishments but also with an audience to recognize their work. With an audience, students have a purpose for creating stories, and the lessons they learn become meaningful. "Actual writing for a real audience and

real purpose is a vital element in helping students to understand that they have an important voice in their own learning processes" (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986). When students know their voices can be heard, they understand the power of language—and this motivates them to succeed.

"In depth examination of the work of highly creative people reveals a blend of both types of motivation" (Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995). The tasks students are learning need to be meaningful. They should not practice endlessly filling in the blanks on worksheets. Students need to know that what they are learning has some relevance to their lives and is worth learning.

Creating Stories

Students, with teacher guidance, can create their own stories through the National Science Foundation's Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning's Storybook Creator app (*www.vl2storybookcreator.com*). Students can film, edit, draw, include photographs, and write their own scripts to make storybooks using this exciting new app. There

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is no programming experience required. Students get first-hand experience in how app development works and how stories are created. They deal with every aspect: plot, characters, signers, translating from ASL to English, modifying concepts, editing, working on art and graphics, and then putting it all together.

Empowering Students

The Creating the Narrative Stories curriculum empowers students, allowing them to take a greater role in their own education. The curriculum content allows development of both ASL and English literacy skills, which will benefit students throughout their lives. From choosing their topics and becoming experts in them, to helping others improve their work, to reflecting on the grading process, and sometimes even giving themselves grades, students are active participants and decision makers in their own learning … and they are motivated to continue on their educational journey.

For more information about and to obtain the ASL/English workshop curriculum, contact Melissa Herzig at melissa.herzig@gallaudet.edu. *For more information about the Storybook Creator app, contact Melissa Malzkuhn at* melissa.malzkuhn@gallaudet.edu.

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