

Hands up for ASL Literature in K-12 Education

By Brad S. Cohen, Pauline M. Ballentine, Ernest C. Willman,
Brian W. Leffler, Holly V. Metcalf, and Ashley N. Greene

During the summer of 2022, Ashley Greene, a professor at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, and a co-author of this article, began a discussion on American Sign Language (ASL) literature with her doctoral students. The students, most of whom had backgrounds in K-12 deaf education or ASL education, explored what ASL literature means, how such literature can be identified and classified, how technology has changed its nature, and how it can be used in the classroom. The discussion was not easy, and a consensus was not reached. Pauline Ballentine, a long-time teacher and researcher and co-author of this article, was among Greene's students. After several weeks of daily discussion, we—teacher and doctoral students, all of whom helped author this piece—concluded that the problem lies partly with the educational system.

The educational system in the United States focuses little to no attention on ASL literature—a disservice, we believe, to deaf and hard of hearing children. The result is a lack of inclusion of important materials in K-12 education and a lack of tools to help teachers know how to use this literature in the classroom.

Several factors contribute to this lack of attention, including:

- An educational system that holds the belief that English is superior to ASL (Greene-Woods & Delgado, 2019) and, therefore, that exposure to English literature is more important than exposure to ASL literature
- An educational system designed to help deaf and hard of hearing children become “normal” (normally hearing, that is) people

*Photo by Matthew Vita, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center
Illustrations courtesy of Brad S. Cohen, Pauline M. Ballentine, Ernest C. Willman,
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Right: Working with ASL literature can help students develop critical thinking skills and build a bridge from insights they glean with ASL to insights they glean through English.



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- Ignorance of culturally Deaf people’s language and culture
- Ignorance of the depth, breath, and importance of ASL

Suppressing ASL in Class Historical Roots

The assumption that English is superior to ASL can be partly traced to the years of oppression of deaf individuals, particularly through medical perspectives of what it means to be deaf (Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992; Padden & Humphries, 1988). While this perspective has held sway for centuries, a notable shift occurred in 1880 when educators got together at an international conference in Milan, Italy, and proclaimed that spoken language should be the primary language of deaf children. Thus began a long era of emphasizing speech and lipreading skills in deaf education and the suppression of what we would today call a Deaf identity. This even led to the misconception persisting to the present day that the use of signed language in the classroom

would hinder the development of English literacy (Simms & Thumann, 2007).

Today, the language in most classrooms for deaf and hard of hearing students is written and spoken English; most students spend the majority of their schooling learning English grammar, English literature, and English-based poetry as teachers and educational systems tend to disregard ASL grammar, literature, and poetry. In fact, any language that is not English, such as ASL, is labeled “foreign” even though many native ASL users are born to Americans and themselves American citizens (Hinton, 2016). Further, bilingual students—whether bilingual in ASL and English, or Spanish and English, or another language—tend to be treated as irregular and abnormal (Palfreyman, 2005). Too often bilingualism is regarded as a condition that teachers must “cure” (García & Kleifgen, 2010).

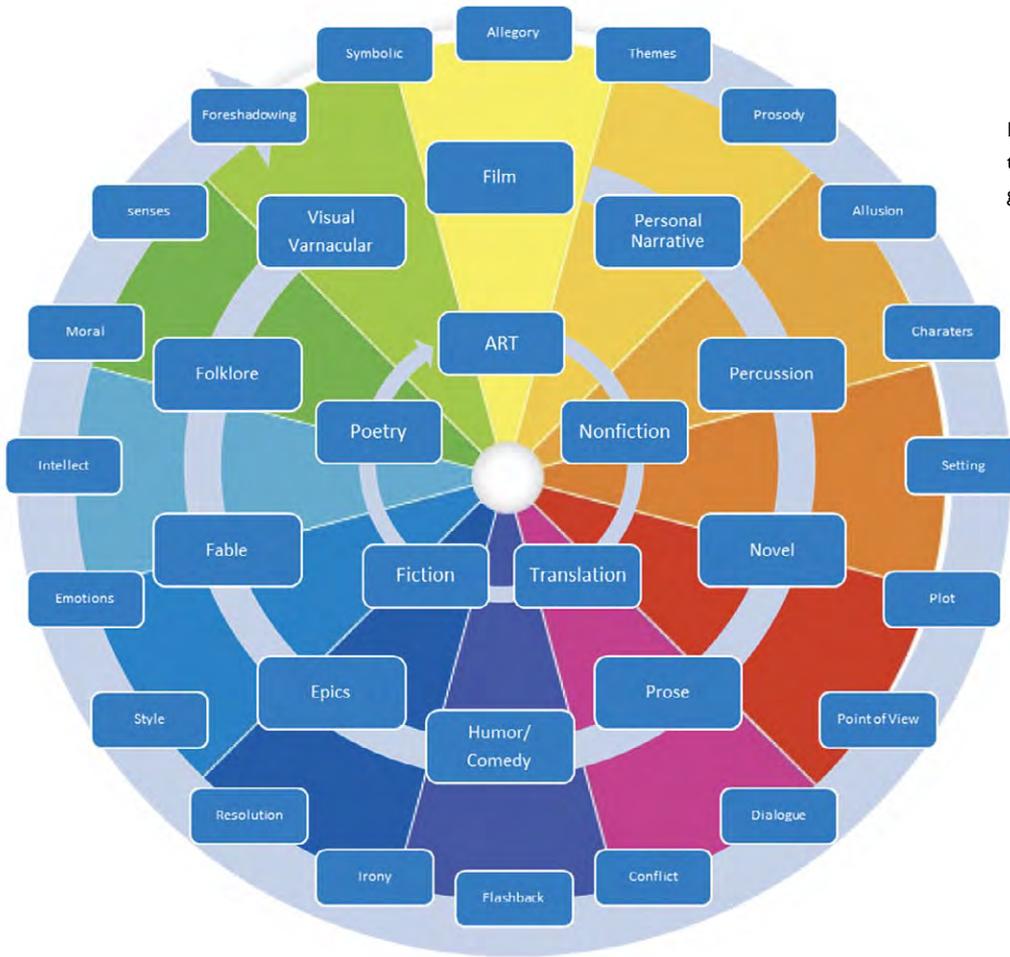
While deaf and hard of hearing students often become naturally bilingual (Scott & Dostal, 2019), most are tested, evaluated, and labeled in terms of their English proficiency with little to no regard for their proficiency with ASL.

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The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at bcohen2@lamar.edu.



Left: The ASL Literature Wheel allows teachers to categorize a piece of ASL literature based on genre, form, and elements.

into deaf education assists in students’ access to the curriculum; its incorporation is an equity issue.

In the same way hearing students are exposed to various kinds of literature in printed English, so should we ensure Deaf students are exposed to various kinds of literature in ASL. This exposure is especially important as literature—in any language—provides a basis through which many individuals begin to understand society and culture; it influences our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Mouny et al., 2013). Literature is also a people’s cultural and linguistic expression (Keshavarzi, 2012). For deaf education to remain fixated on only English literature suggests that the culture, society, attitudes, and beliefs of our deaf students are not a priority.

ASL Literature Searching for a Standard

Literature serves as a means to foster language and conceptual growth, encourage creative expression, nurture the development of critical thinking abilities, and simultaneously cultivate a sense of pleasure and delight in linguistic expression (Ada, 2003). However, the very definition of ASL literature seems to be in question depending on who is involved in the dialogue. It is widely accepted that ASL literature is “poetry, stories, plays that reflect the bicultural experience of deaf Americans” (Byrne, 2013), but what of written works? And who decides?

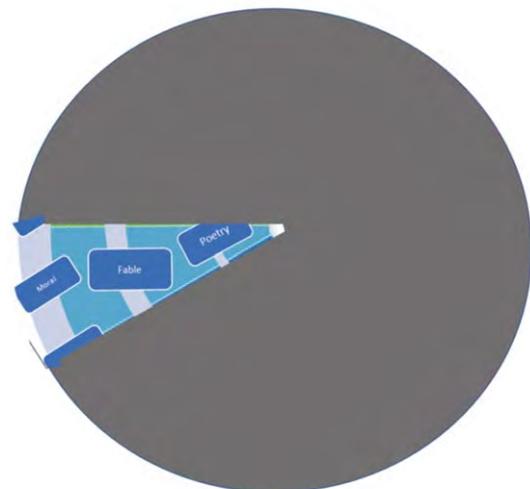
The ability to preserve narratives within Deaf culture, transmit the collective Deaf experience, or share values held within the Deaf community is not a focus of K-12 teaching. Focused exclusively on English, educational programs concentrate solely on enhancing literacy skills in deaf and hard of hearing children (Marschark &

Knooks, 2012). However, Deaf cultural literacy is an essential understanding of values, heritage, and collective experiences that enable us, as Deaf individuals, to comprehend and interpret the connections between ASL literary works and our own lives (Christie & Wilkins, 1997; Ridloff, 2018).

There is a double loss as ASL, important in its own right, can also provide students with a strong foundation to transfer their linguistic competency in ASL to a second language (Chen Pichler & Koulidobrova, 2015). Working with ASL literature can help students develop critical thinking skills and build a bridge from insights they glean with ASL to insights they glean through English. Further, incorporating ASL literature

ASL Literature Defining the Indefinable

Historically, the definition of “literature” has been wedded to preserved text, and in the years prior to filmmaking, preservation of signing was impossible. The only way individuals could experience ASL was through person-to-person contact. This changed in the late 19th century, and by 1913 deaf and hard



Right: Viewers can categorize a literary work by selecting the category that best fits it from each layer of the wheel.

How? Where? Why? ...

Introducing the ASL Literature Wheel

By Holly V. Metcalf, Ernest C. Willman, Pauline M. Ballentine, Brad S. Cohen, Ashley N. Greene, and Brian W. Leffler

In an effort to help teachers present literary works in ASL to deaf and hard of hearing children, we developed the ASL Literature Wheel. This wheel allows teachers to identify categories of literature in a user-friendly format. It uses various colors to make the components interesting and visual.

The ASL Literature Wheel consists of three different areas—or layers—that guide the analysis and understanding of ASL literature. The three layers are: genre, form, and elements. Within each of these layers, additional categories are delineated. These categories include:

- **Genre**—The first layer, on the inside, is *genre*, and there are five categories: art, nonfiction, translation, fiction, and poetry (Bahan, 2006; Byrne, 2017; Leigh et al., 2022; Peters, 2000). Genre comprises the category the students identify first. For example, a piece will be categorized as “nonfiction” if it portrays real-life experiences or events.
- **Form**—The second layer, in the middle, is *form*, and there are 10 categories: film, personal narrative, percussion, novel, prose, humor/comedy, epics, fable, folklore, and visual vernacular (Bahan, 2006; Bauman, 2003; Christie & Wilkins, 1997; Peters, 2000; Rose, 1994). As students explore further, they reflect on the way the material is presented. Perhaps a piece already classified as “nonfiction” will be further defined as “personal narrative” if it is based on a personal experience.
- **Elements**—The third layer, on the outside, is *elements* and there are 20 categories: symbolic, allegory, themes, prosody, allusion, characters, setting, plot, point of view, dialogue, conflict, flashback, irony, resolution, style, emotions, intellect, moral, senses, and foreshadowing (Bahn, 2006; Byrne, 2013). This allows students to identify different literary elements presented in ASL literature. For example, perhaps the piece already classified as “nonfiction” and “personal narrative” will contain elements of “allegory” and “irony.”

This approach allows for a thorough exploration of the ASL literary work and enables teachers to design effective lesson plans that convey the nuances and significance of different pieces of literature to students. It supports both teachers and deaf and hard of hearing students as they think about which genre, form, and elements to apply to ASL literature. It also allows consistent instruction on how to analyze ASL literature, and it fosters a dialogue between teachers and students, which then promotes their ability to create their own pieces of ASL literature.

We developed the ASL Literature Wheel in response to the lack of tools for teachers who want to incorporate ASL literature into the classroom, particularly in a classroom with deaf and hard of hearing children. Recognizing that many teachers do not receive training in teaching ASL literature, we came together as a team to discuss how to promote and support them. We agreed on three things:

1. We wanted a single tool that had everything in one place. We did not want educators having to come up with their own materials to supplement what we gave them.
2. We wanted to incorporate the idea that ASL literature is varied and automatically differentiate the material.
3. We wanted the tool to be user friendly and inexpensive.

Using the ASL Literature Wheel, teachers can categorize a piece of ASL literature based on its genre, form, and elements (e.g., they may categorize a piece as “nonfiction,” “personal narrative,” and identify elements of “allegory” within it). This approach allows for a thorough exploration of the ASL literary work and enables teachers to design effective lesson plans that convey the nuances and significance of different pieces of literature to students.

At this time, the utilization of the ASL Literature Wheel in K-12 educational settings remains unexplored. However, we hold the conviction that its application could yield substantial advantages for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Presently, our research team is diligently engaged in a data-centric initiative aimed at assessing and scrutinizing the efficacy of the wheel as a pedagogical tool for imparting ASL literature, along with its consequential influence on student learning outcomes. Our aspiration is to shed light on its potential in enhancing literacy proficiencies among K-12 students, and we eagerly anticipate the dissemination of our findings within the academic community.

of hearing individuals were filming in sign language in part to preserve a language they felt threatened by the 1880 Milan conference (Veditz, 1913). Still, ASL literature was considered dependent on personal delivery (Byrne, 2013). At this stage, three elements determined if a work constituted ASL literature: a talented presenter, a strong narrative, and a responding audience (Bahan, 2006). The audience was as important as the presenter, as the presenter tailored the narration to the audience's response (Bahan, 2006).

Today, technology provides new avenues for the creation, preservation, archiving, and dissemination of ASL and ASL literature. These changes open up possibilities for ASL literature to reach wider audiences and contribute to an enduring legacy. Recording ASL literature ensures its longevity, allowing future generations to engage with and appreciate works from today's Deaf artists. This shift potentially brings ASL literature closer to the characteristics found in the literature of other languages (Hibbard, 2015). The role of the "teller" has become sometimes less

significant. With the ability to capture and store ASL performances, the emphasis now lies in the nature and quality of the presentation and preserving these works for future generations.

ASL Literature Today Classroom Integration Is Vital

With new definitions of ASL literacy growing and the body of recorded literary works resembling more closely that of other languages, integrating ASL literature into classrooms is vital. Literature serves as a platform for students to share experiences and enhance their language skills, providing opportunities for learning and language exploration (Bahan, 2006; Wilbur, 2000). ASL literacy and literature not only contribute to the development of critical thinking skills but also encourage creativity and offer a constructive outlet for expressing thoughts and emotions (Lederberg, Schick, & Spencer, 2013). Watching and analyzing ASL narratives and presentations in videos provides students with a powerful tool for their own

storytelling, cultural exploration, and insights into different perspectives. By offering ASL literature within the classroom, educators create a rich learning environment that promotes language preservation and cultural understanding as well as nurtures students' intellectual and emotional growth.

Educators have begun to recognize the depth, breadth, and inherent importance of ASL and that it is on par with any other language regarding human expression. Progress has been made. More materials are available. K-12 ASL Content Standards have been developed to ensure deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, and deafdisabled children acquire and learn ASL in much the same way that hearing children acquire and learn English (Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, 2018). The goal is access and equity. However, within most classes for deaf and hard of hearing children, ASL literature is still not prioritized, and sometimes it is totally ignored. Much work remains to be done.

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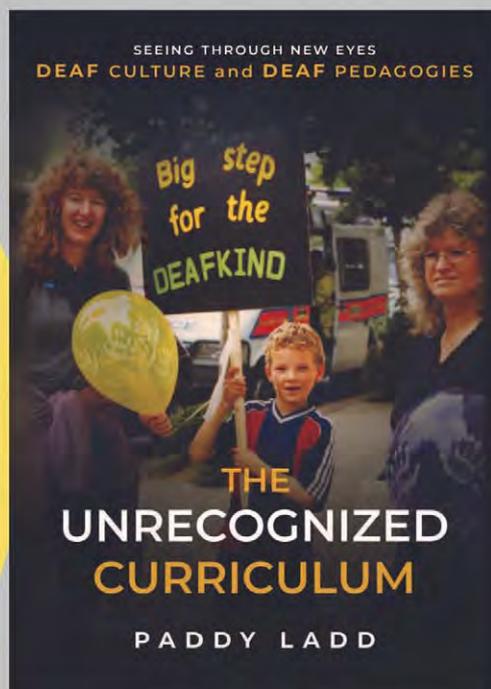


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