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Dual Language Immersion Program

Creates a Language-Rich Environment for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

By Rob Hammel

In October 2023, a new deaf student, “Zuri,” showed up in my second grade classroom. This often happens. Parents move into and out of the district for work, and it is common to get a new student in the middle of the year without warning. Zuri’s eyes were wide when she came into the classroom, and she looked scared. Who were all these hearing children, and what were they doing? Who were these hearing adults, and what were they saying? Was she doing the right thing? She froze.

I waved Zuri over to our table, where I was about to start a small group. I told my hearing students that Zuri was new, and she would be joining our group on Fridays. One of the hearing girls immediately introduced herself in American Sign Language (ASL). “HELLO! MY NAME #ALLISON,” she signed excitedly. Zuri visibly relaxed. Her shoulders let go of some of the tension from this new place and all the new people. She smiled, waved back to Allison, and sat down on a stool. I started the group, and we discussed ways to use ASL classifiers to describe how frogs jump. Zuri did not know it yet, but she had just joined the only Dual Language Immersion (DLI) program for ASL in the United States. At OB Gates Elementary, just outside of Richmond, Virginia, we teach math and language arts in both English and ASL at the same time. We have found that we can create a language-rich environment for both our deaf/hard of hearing students and our hearing students without sacrificing content or instructional time.

Photos courtesy of Rob Hammel



Left: Hammel works with two deaf students on basic handshapes with a group of third and fourth graders.

Setting Up a DLI Program

Five years ago, OB Gates had four deaf kindergartners start at our school in the same year. We usually have one, sometimes two, but four was unprecedented. As the teacher of the deaf and the classroom teacher began to plan, the task of differentiating the instruction for these four students, all with different language needs, seemed daunting, if not impossible. They came up with a clever solution: teach the entire kindergarten class ASL. They realized they could conduct calendar time and math instruction in ASL for the entire class. These are new concepts for almost all kindergartners, so teaching them in a foreign language would not be that much more challenging than teaching math in their first language. At the same time, our principal was working on a DLI program for Chinese. Everyone combined their ideas, and our ASL DLI program was born.

Two years later, the district hired me as their first full-time ASL DLI teacher. I had worked as an interpreter in the county for more than five years. I also hold a master's degree in deaf education from Radford University. I knew that one of the biggest challenges deaf and hard of hearing students face in a mainstream school is a lack of opportunities for social and emotional learning with their peers. They also face a general lack of exposure to language itself. While hearing students overhear an abundance of information every day, deaf and hard of hearing children wait for us to teach them what they need to

know. I had seen that turmoil of isolation for deaf and hard of hearing students play out many times in my role as an interpreter. We all agreed that the first focus of our program had to be socialization.

Games in ASL Make Learning Fun

The main goal for ASL DLI at OB Gates is for our hearing students and deaf/hard of hearing students to be able to communicate as both groups develop language skills. I actually spend most of my time working with the hearing students, as they typically know the least ASL. The first year of the program, I made sure each class that had a deaf or hard of hearing student in it knew a few ASL games. I taught the kids how to play playground games, such as Red Light, Green Light, in ASL. I also taught games from deaf schools, such as The Elephant Game. Finally, I incorporated ASL into some classroom favorites like Tic-Tac-Toe and Hangman.

Even though the hearing students did not have enough signs to really communicate in the first few weeks of the program, I wanted them to still have ways to understand and relate to their deaf and hard of hearing peers. The Elephant Game was everyone's favorite, hearing and deaf/hard of hearing. To play, students stand in a circle around a person who is "it." The person in the center, "it," spins around and points to a random player. The player they point to must hold up two fists in front of their nose like an elephant's trunk. The players on either side



Above: Hammel shows the directional verb LOOK to the kindergarten class.

Right: Whole group instruction with the kindergarteners.

of them must give the elephant “ears” by reaching out a B handshape to the player with the trunk. If a player misses the pointing, or holds up the wrong elephant part, they are out. The circle gets smaller and smaller until one person is left. That person is then “it” for the next game. We played The Elephant Game over and over that first year. The students learned to pay attention with their eyes, as they must in ASL, and they learned how to have fun without speaking English. Most importantly, this game put our hearing and deaf/hard of hearing children all on equal footing for easy socialization.

Fingerspell Friday is another game that I started that first year. It has become a big hit for the third and fourth graders. The students divide into teams and try to understand fingerspelled words. Sometimes we use a website to generate the words, and sometimes I use their current list of spelling or science words. This allows the students to practice with curriculum vocabulary. Even with a random list, the students

have to recognize and spell a variety of words. Students at every reading level can enjoy this game, as they mainly need to watch for letters. The teams work cooperatively to puzzle out the words based on what letters everyone caught. The kids become extremely excited for this game every week. Of course, their receptive fingerspelling skills have greatly improved as well.

DLI Small Group Instruction Helps Students Excel Academically

The first year of the program encompassed three grade levels: kindergarten, first, and second. Our deaf and hard of hearing students in second grade got older, naturally, so we expanded into third grade for the second year. As the content got more difficult, we also made our ASL classes more challenging. At this point, there was not an available classroom in the building for me. I was extremely limited in the tools and technology that I could utilize. Most of the ASL instruction was done in a small group push-in setting. I took four to five students to a table in the back of the classroom and showed them a

slideshow on my laptop. We also used play money to “buy” food and practice math skills. I kept my instruction light and flexible so I could hold a group anywhere, at any time. We focused on the complex aspects of ASL that English does not have: classifiers, contrastive structure, non-dominant listing, and non-manuals. The plan was to get the students familiar with the building blocks of ASL so they could create sentences on their own or communicate with deaf and hard of hearing students and staff.

This year, my co-teachers and I saw the opportunities for differentiation that this small group setting offered. My co-teachers will usually create the small groups based on interventional small groups that

they need to pull for classroom instruction. We will take turns pulling the students for ASL time with me or for remediation with the classroom teacher. As the classroom teacher can only pull one or two remediation groups per day, the rest of the students had been doing independent work on their Chromebooks during that time. We thought it was simply a creative way to get in ASL instruction without making major schedule changes, but we soon saw that the students were learning a lot more than how to sign.

During math instruction, my second grade co-teacher and I realized that word problems presented us with an opportunity



to teach the structure of English sentences and ASL sentences. She reads a word problem in English, and I teach the students to sign it. We do this sentence by sentence. We talk about the ways the two languages are similar or different—how, for example, in English the question word is at the beginning, but in ASL it's at the end. ASL uses space to make a list, putting this group to the left of the signing space and this one to the right, while English uses commas. Teaching grammar in this way had a huge anecdotal impact on the students. We do not yet have data on this group from standardized testing, but anecdotally my class surpassed all other second grade classes in writing skills. Instead of a bunch of arbitrary grammar and



Above: A second grade student practices place value skills in ASL.

syntax rules, the students had a whole other language to compare and contrast. While this benefit of DLI has been documented for many spoken languages, we had no idea it would work so well for the combination of a signed and spoken language. That second year, our third grade ASL DLI class outperformed all the other classes in their standardized testing. Not only were our hearing students enjoying ASL, but they were also excelling academically. Even the underserved and at-risk students saw an increase in their test scores.

Including Families and School Staff Through ASL Classes and Events

Parents at our school showed a lot of excitement about the program. We showed off what we had learned at our inclusive school celebration that December. Classes performed songs and poems in ASL alongside performances from all of our grade levels. We also invited parents in for several special performances, during which our younger students signed nursery rhymes and songs. As an increasing number of staff members expressed interest in the program, I began teaching a weekly ASL class for adults before school.

Our second grade class also began a weekly discussion about Deaf history and culture. Beginning with the history of ASL

itself and then expanding into a wide-ranging discussion of all the ways deaf and hard of hearing people participate in our lives and culture, this weekly lesson is a highlight for me. I love to see the deaf and hard of hearing students watch a deaf or hard of hearing adult teach martial arts or climb a mountain. Our students know that deaf and hard of hearing people make a big contribution to our world. We also have a weekly Deaf Lunch for our deaf and hard of hearing students from all across the school. They have the opportunity to socialize and play games once a week, and the older students invite two hearing students to participate as well. These weekly events have made Deaf culture an integral part of our school culture.

Finally, to reach hearing students outside the classes I serve, we added ASL to the morning announcements. Our third grade students learn the Pledge of Allegiance in ASL at the beginning of the year. Once they are comfortable with it, I film them doing the pledge and add a voiceover of the assistant principal leading the pledge in English. This has become how we do the pledge all year long. Every day the assistant principal shows a different video, and a different third grader leads us all in the pledge in ASL and English. We also have a Sign of the Week and a Deaf History Month section of the morning announcements to further encourage all students to use ASL with deaf and hard of hearing students and staff.

Fully Accessible Environment Allows Zuri to Flourish

Zuri is now much more comfortable in her classroom. The shy, wide-eyed little girl who was so scared to sit at my table last year has all but disappeared. I am constantly asking her to stop signing with her friends on the carpet and to pay attention to me during our calendar lesson. While she sometimes challenges my classroom management skills, I am so proud to see Zuri socializing with her friends. She thrives in our language-rich environment, where all her peers know how to say hello, introduce themselves, and ask her to play a game.



Above: The second grade class works on their fingerspelling during calendar time.