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"The Use of ASL in Teaching Reading and Writing: Classroom Issues and Strategies"

by Pamela R. Conley

Outline:

- 1) Background
- 2) Issues
- 3) Strategies
- 4) Conclusion

I. Background Information:

I draw upon my own experiences as a teacher to talk about the use of ASL in teaching reading and writing. I have been teaching reading and writing for 13 years.

In recent years, educators and researchers have argued for bilingual-bicultural models in Deaf Education. Many proponents of this approach believe that if ASL is well established as the primary language, then English literacy can be achieved. Relationships between ASL and written English have challenged educators Sue Livingston, Michael Strong & Philip M. Prinz and Peter V. Paul in the last two or three decades. They have taken a lead in analyzing the role of ASL in facilitating deaf students' literacy. Livingston has focused on grammatical features with emphasis on teaching techniques and classroom structures. Paul has done much of his work on reading theories and how these theories can be transformed into practice. The recent work of Strong and Prinz is powerful; their studies have shown that ASL can help deaf students achieve English proficiency. However, there has been a lack of extensive research showing the links between ASL and English literacy. What I am saying is that despite its progress and the mounting evidence, the research on ASL and English literacy needs to be expanded. In this presentation, I will share with you the issues about ASL and English literacy and describe the relevant research on ASL and English literacy and the connections between that research and the strategies I use in teaching English through ASL.

It's often reported in the literature that average deaf students graduate from high school with reading and writing skills at the fourth-grade level. For some reason, this proven statement about deaf people's illiteracy has bothered me a lot. I finally found out why it has bothered me so much. According to Roger Carver, many traditional models in Deaf education inform educators and parents that deaf people will have problems mastering language. "This expectation can and does exacerbate the deaf child's handicap" (2). Some deaf students who are placed in my writing classes have had the history of having the difficulty gaining control over important linguistic features of written English. However, they do improve their writing skills significantly upon completion of writing courses. I decided to analyze my own instruction and explanations that support the students' endeavors in becoming better readers and writers.

II. Issues

Let me share with you some of my teaching experiences that I see as noteworthy as they relate to ASL. I'll also condense the theories that I believe will clarify this discussion about the use of ASL in teaching reading and writing.

Inappropriate signs used to teach about English can be confusing for students. Inconsistency in teachers' signing English-related concepts is surprisingly common. For example, "audience" for writing actually means "readers," not as in people attending to watch a play in theatre." Another example is the term

"thesis," which can be signed as "title." Students don't bother to distinguish nuances, especially when lectures are lengthy.

Many students coming to my classes come from different communication backgrounds. Some groups of students communicate by interchanging between Spoken English and SEE. Other groups alternate between PSE and ASL. Sociologist Barbara Kannapell describes variations in communication styles in the Deaf community. There are six categories; they are: ASL monolinguals Deaf people comfortable expressing themselves only in ASL with no skills in English; ASL dominant bilinguals- Deaf people are more comfortable expressing themselves in ASL than English and understand ASL better than English; Balanced Bilinguals Deaf people who feel comfortable expressing themselves in both ASL and English and understand both languages equally well; English dominant bilinguals Deaf people more comfortable expressing themselves in English than in ASL and understand English better than ASL; English monolinguals- deaf people comfortable expressing themselves only in English and having no skills in ASL; and Semi-linguals- Deaf people who have some skills in both ASL and English, but have not mastered both languages fully.

Adapting written English for high school and college students has been a widespread practice of educators in Deaf education. Robert Hoffmeister argues that attitudes toward Deaf people and curricula reflecting the expectations levels in schools are the reason why we haven't seen increases in academic achievement (p. 101)! Rewriting materials involves changing syntax, vocabulary and idioms. I vehemently oppose to this practice. Students have this tendency to ask me for my notes on topics and issues discussed in class rather than consult the required texts themselves.

Negative attitudes about learning English have been one of the ongoing issues I have confronted as a teacher of writing. I work with 30 students every quarter. About 8% of them come to class unwilling to study English. They usually have so many weaknesses in writing. Challenges I face as a teacher is how to set priorities, how not to overwhelm the student, how to give honest feedback/evaluation without destroying the student's motivation. The evaluation does not reward motivation. It rewards the final product, not improvements made to the final draft.

It is hard to teach when the students have little understanding of the real world. Writing assignments on social topics that are unfamiliar are difficult for deaf students. Often they collect my insights on the social topic before beginning their work. When I read their work, I find their ideas just exactly like mine. They imitate my thoughts and arguments in their writing. What does this show you? Some students have been spoon-fed throughout their education while growing up. This indicates a lack of control over their destiny. Other examples include majoring in a field of study that their parents want them to major in and getting calls from parents about their children's progress in school.

Many students have this tendency to correct errors found in their drafts that are noted by the teacher. They do not go beyond what their teachers ask them to do in order to improve their writing. Some students believe that good writing equals good grammar.

The teaching of reading and writing to foreign students does differ from the teaching of reading and writing to American deaf students. Cultural differences are due mostly to the rhetoric.

III. Strategies

Keeping in mind the major principles of theories about literacy as well as the principles of ASL, the following strategies are helpful in enhancing the development of deaf students' English proficiency.

Communication in the Classroom

Most importantly, deaf students learn visually. They learn by the eyes. Don't ever forget this NUMBER ONE principle!

The teacher needs to show that ASL is not superior to spoken/signed English, and vice versa. You'd be

surprised by the reactions of students to this concept.

It is important to fingerspell new terms. Students often stop me whenever I fingerspell the new term, sign the word, and then fingerspell it again. I tend to spell out new or special terms before and after signing to ensure that students see what term is being discussed. I also write it on the board.

Talking with non-ASL students informally to encourage participation in class. When college students enter the LAS writing sequence, their language base may be different than their ASL classmates. For example, oral students are often prevented from participating comfortably and fully in classroom conversations because of their limited proficiency in ASL.

Allow students to participate in conversations. The more students communicate, the more likely they are to increase fluency in written English. The more they communicate, the more likely they take responsibility for communication and learning.

Students use ASL to talk about what they learn and their progress in written English.

Reading/Signing

Dr. Sue Livingston believes that "in order to build literacy skills, students need to see written text and its interpreted meaning in ASL simultaneously." (Desiree Duda, p. 7 in NETAC Networks, Winter 2001).

Small Group Discussions

The collaboration of the group can contribute significantly to the student's reading comprehension process. Through the group-discussion format, students also learn to respect communication diversity that exists in the class.

Students are assigned predefined roles within their groups. Students are sometimes divided into groups according to reading and writing abilities. Sometimes not. I often set up the groups on the basis of both the student requests and my own assessment.

Group discussions can help improve the reading skills of "at-risk" students. Poor and reluctant readers tend to be motivated by embarrassment that they are grouped with proficient readers.

Group Presentations

Presentations are often lively, informative, and heated. They often contain an assortment of personal insights and well-supported evidence from the text.

Peer Feedback

The feedback students receive on their papers is crucial to the learning process. Peer feedback can improve the student's ability to express their insights in written English more clearly. Students read each other's drafts carefully. They then respond to questions provided by the instructor. They finally share their findings in ASL.

One-On-One Conferences

Conferences are set up to address various purposes. Initial conferences are important because they enable me to talk with students with attitudinal problems about English. Even though their opposition to learning written English does not disappear overnight, students often leave the conference, feeling encouraged by the fact that their teacher went through similar struggles. Other purposes of conferencing include discussing specific reading and writing skills or weaknesses, clarifying homework assignments, and inspecting works in progress.

Creating appropriate writing assignments

Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, writing theorists who believe that students are most likely to learn how to express what they know and feel if the teacher finds ways to stimulate the students' inherent ability and need to write. This group does not believe that writing has strategies and formulas. On the other hand, the other camp called the "classical school" believes that writing is cognitively based and has cognitive processes like other problem-solving operations (p. 443).

"Focus on the writing process, not on the written product" is the maxim in the writing profession, according to Maxine Hairston of the University of Texas (p442). The primary purpose of conferences emphasizes a high degree of student involvement. I ask students to pay attention to their planning, drafting, and specific skills areas to help them understand how the writing process really works. For example, if I see that the draft displays serious organizational problems, I'll ask the student if she or he has followed the general outline required for that assignment. Another example is explaining to students why they're doing the assignment can help them understand the big picture.

I create writing assignments that contain the following:

- a clear explanation of what I want students to do.
- a clear purpose of the assignment.
- a clear explanation of the logistics
- a clear explanation of policies and grading criteria

Reading Materials for Background Information

To help students with no background knowledge on the social issue or topic, I provide them with additional readings. Appointments are often set up to discuss these readings in detail. Or I advise them to consult experts for further information.

Paul's research indicates that successful language acquisition is dependent on both models "top-down model" and "bottom-up model". The interactive model describes reading as a task that involves the processes using features of text as well as background knowledge. Paul notes that deaf students have similar experiences and knowledge as hearing counterparts do, but they are not based on the same language found in the text.

Reasons why the English language is hard to learn

"The bandage was wound around the wound."

"We must polish the Polish furniture."

"Mrs. Jones is annoyed by children and adults who chew gum."

vs.

"Mrs. Jones is annoyed by adults who chew gum and children."

IV. Conclusion

I will have accomplished the purpose of this presentation if it has shown you in specific and practical ways how ASL can support the students' efforts in developing their written English skills.

There is no recipe for using ASL to teach English successfully. Each teacher is different. However, teachers can try to incorporate a wide range of teaching methods activities that require students to take a more active role in collaborating about written English. A study by Lou, Strong, and DeMatteo suggests that "consistent linguistic input" benefits students academically and intellectually (Strong and Prinz 44). In other words, communicating as much as possible is the key to literacy.

Unfortunately, research on teaching reading and writing through ASL to deaf students has been seriously limited. As educators strive to incorporate ASL into their teaching and classrooms, they should keep in mind that a variety of approaches and models exist and are valid.

For each new faculty member or teacher, an experienced teacher should be assigned to act as an adviser in matters related to teaching English through ASL.

ASL-English Literacy Resources

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