Sign Language in the Language-teaching Classroom

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Deaf and hard-of-hearing students are entering mainstream schools and mainstream society. A knowledge of Sign Language may aid teachers and hearing students in communicating with, and creating a more friendly environment for, these students. Three teachers, neither specialists in Deaf Education nor experts at Sign Language, hope to introduce the audience to different languages (i.e., ASL and JSL/NS (American Sign Language and Japanese Sign Language/Nihon Shuwa) and a different culture (i.e., Deaf Culture). They will also demonstrate some strategies for introducing Sign Language into the classroom.

アブストラクト：聴覚障害や難聴の学生が一般の学校や社会に入ってきています。耳の聞こえる教員や学生にとっても、手話の知識があると、コミュニケーションや、環境作りに大いに役立ちます。3名の教員は、聴覚障害者教育の専門家でも、手話の達人でもありませんが、1つの独立した言語である手話（すなわちASL：American Sign LanguageとJSL/NS：Japanese Sign Language/Nihon Shuwa）とその背景にある文化を紹介し、語学の教室内で手話を導入する方策を紹介します。

Introduction

In this article we will give a brief overview of sign languages, focussing on American Sign Language (ASL). We will explain the concept of thinking visually, familiarize participants with some ASL grammar rules, show how ASL can be used as the content of a web search activity and will demonstrate some practical strategies for introducing SL activities into a classroom of hearing students.

Overview

As there are many spoken languages there are also many sign languages. As spoken languages have evolved in various ways, so have sign languages. Although there is not an English Sign

Language, there are varieties of British Sign Language (BSL) and American Sign Language (ASL). They differ significantly (e.g., the manual alphabet of BSL employs both hands while ASL uses only one), perhaps because 60% of ASL is based on French Sign Language (FSL). Also, there is also the very controversial (among educators and the deaf community) Signed Essential English (SEE), which is the signed version of standard spoken English. Japanese Sign Language /Nihon Shuwa (JSL/NS) is, like ASL in North America, used by deaf people. And for signing Standard Japanese there is Nihongo Taio Shuwa, which may be considered as comparable to SEE. In this article we will focus on ASL.

Characteristics of ASL

As a language, one of the most fascinating characteristics of American Sign Language is its grammatical freedom and grammatical structures. How can a language have both of these seemingly contradictory features? This becomes clear when one gets accustomed to the three basic features of ASL. First, ASL is visual. As will be pointed out below, you must see the signer to understand the message. Second, ASL is spatial. Signers create meaning in the space in front of them. Third, ASL is gestural. The hands form signs that articulate the thought.

"ASL is radically different from English" (Wilcox, 1991, p.1) although many people might think it is the gesture-version of English. ASL is a visual-spatial language and uses light waves in the form of signs, but spoken languages such as English and Japanese use sound waves in the form of spoken words (Fant, 1994, p.17). In ASL, there are "signers and watchers" compared to "speakers and listeners" in a spoken language. In ASL, signs are made with hands, but facial expressions, body movements, and efficient use of the space around the signer are all very important

(Fant, 1994, p.18). In a spoken language, gesturing helps but is not the sole means to communicate with people. In ASL, verbs do not change to show tense or time. By using time indicators, such as yesterday, tomorrow, last week, etc., we can easily understand. Spoken languages require different tenses and complicated rules to use them. This is one reason learners of English feel it is very difficult for them to master the target language.

However, to say that ASL is only gestural is a misconception. Hand gesture is only one component of ASL. Other components include facial features like a raised eyebrow to indicate an emotional state and the lip-mouth movement. These components make up a crucial part of the grammatical system of ASL as a sign language.

EL2 learning and ASL

ASL has a very complex grammar. Nakamura (2002) indicates that whereas spoken languages are made up of one serial stream of phonemes, a sign language can have multiple things going on at the same time. This multiple segmentation makes the study of sign language exciting for linguists but sometimes frustrating for students to learn. ASL for instance has its own morphology. It has its own rules for the creation of words. Its phonetic structure consists of the rules of hand shapes. Its grammar is very unlike that of spoken languages. This will be explained further below. In terms of syntax, for example, ASL has a topic-comment structure, whereas English has the S-V, S-V-O patterns and their variations.

Thus, from an English learner's point of view, here are some points about learning ASL as compared to learning English. In ASL the learner must watch the signer to *listen*. That makes

taking notes rather difficult. Even if one has time to take notes, drawing or writing to record finger and hand movements is not easy to do in the classroom. One solution is to make use of video devices. To become fluent in signing, you must have flexible fingers, good hand coordination and overall good motor skills. If, for example, you learn to sign by facing the teacher, you may become confused about which hand or fingers to move, etc., because signing is not a mirror image.

On the other hand, there is no worry about pronunciation in ASL, which is usually a big obstacle for learners of English to overcome. The word order in ASL is from the general to the specific, from the large to the small, similar to Japanese. Whereas, the word order in English is from the specific to the general. The word structure in ASL is concise, without complicated grammar, e.g., the regular/irregular verbs in English.

Applications of ASL in the classroom

(1) One way to teach ASL in the ESL classroom is through content-based learning. This means to teach ASL and the rules of signing in English in an English language class. What exactly are the rules of signing? To be able to speak a foreign language, students have to learn the basic rules of the language. To be able to sign, students have to learn first of all the ten basic ASL grammar rules. Here is a sample of some of the rules. The first ten rules of ASL grammar consist of the following. Rule #1: Topic/comment structure. Rule # 2: Indicating tense with time adverbs. Rule # 3: Formulating simple YES/NO questions. Rule # 5: Constructing information-seeking questions. For more of the rules and their application, please refer to Stewart, 1998.

(2) Another way to introduce ASL in a language class is as follows. Students in the English language classroom are usually very interested in watching the teacher speak in English while signing simple words or phrases in ASL. ASL can also be offered as a topic, for example, in a web search activity in English. ASL-related websites often have good designs, which include drawings, and still and moving pictures of signs, to attract students' interests. If you teach computer-related English courses, one way to combine both English and computer science is to offer writing projects using multimedia. In such a project, you can have your students videotape signs and include them in their writing projects, e.g., a web page in English with sound files and moving picture files to highlight signing in ASL.

(3) ASL can also be an essential part in teaching Intercultural Communication in English. First the students are made aware of the importance of non-verbal codes in communication. The teacher can start off with Birdwhistell's claim (1970), "in ordinary face-to-face conversation, the verbal components carry about 35% of the social meaning of the exchange. Non-verbal components carry the other 65%." The teacher stresses in class the important role non-verbal codes play in speech, for speaking people (Ikeguchi, 2003). For example, students are made to think how many gestures and non-verbal communication they use in daily life like "a stare," "an affectionate smile," "pushing the hand quickly to the side," and many others. All these convey meaning, although meanings differ from culture to culture. In sign language too, non-verbal codes convey the message. It is the medium as well as the message. At this point, the teacher emphasizes that learning ASL is learning not only another language. It involves learning another culture, as well as learning another medium. From hereon the teacher continues to teach the culture of the deaf and the blind (Baker & Cokel, 1997).

(4) Recently, ASL study has not been limited to its linguistics. Perspectives on both the theoretical and practical applications of the principles of second language learning have been shared by educators, using ASL and English. For instance, the First National Conference on Bilingual and Bicultural Education explored the fundamentals of creating a bilingual educational environment for deaf students, using American Sign Language and English. Also, other useful software, topics, such as the use of ASL in teaching reading and writing, the transition from a total communication school to a bi/bi school, and communication issues and the deaf community have been examined. Papers from keynote speakers Dr. Robert Johnson, Dr. Scott Liddell, and Dr. Carol Erting are included, as well as papers from Dr. Peter Paul, Dr. Michael Strong, and Marie Jean Philip. For details on ASL and ESL, see the Sign Language Linguistics Journal.

Useful classroom activities

Here are some simple SL activities which have worked quite well.

(1) Introductions: As many Japanese students are somewhat familiar with Japanese Sign Language, the activity is begun with a simple introduction (*Hajimemashite. Watashi no namae wa.....*) in JSL/NS. The teacher then models his/her own introduction (Nice to meet you. My name is.....) in ASL. (The question, "What is your name?" ("Your name, what?" in ASL) is also introduced at this point.) The ASL manual alphabet is distributed and students practice introductions in pairs. After the practice, pairs are made from students in different parts of the classroom and they perform the exercise in front of the class.

(2) Greetings: General greetings and those for the different times of day (e.g., "Good morning." "See you later." "See you next Wednesday.") are modeled and practiced.

(3) Apologies: Students are required to sign ("Sorry to be late.") if they are tardy.

(4) Numbers: The ASL numbering system is taught. After practicing in pairs students practice counting up and down rows.

(5) Puzzles: A puzzle (e.g., crossword puzzle) is distributed and students work on it. A student at the board listens to the answer spoken by another student but the ASL manual alphabet is used for the spelling.

(6) Songs: After the lyrics and signs have been taught and practiced the teacher and students go "caroling" to school offices. ("We Wish You A Merry Christmas" has worked well.)

(7) Basic Class Communication: Expressions such as, "I understand," "Yes," "No," "OK," are taught.

(8) Directions: Vocabulary for asking for and receiving directions is taught using the activity, Roadmap Made Easy: "Why Me Lost Why."

The above are basic activities which are used as supplementary activities in many language-learning classrooms. The addition of the sign language component can take some of the tedium out of, and add a little excitement to, the exercise. Students have found them enjoyable. And so have we. Many ASL exercises can be done both individually by students in and outside of the ASL class. Some of the useful websites that can help with exercises and activities are listed below.

* A Basic Dictionary of ASL Terms: <http://www.masterstech-home.com/ASLdict.html> (very useful site with moving pictures for sign demonstration)

* Lesson Tutor: <http://www.lessontutor.com/ASLgenhome.html> (with many lessons with handwritten illustrations. Light to download.)

* ASL University: <http://www.lifeprint.com/> (with still photos, but very clear and easy to follow and practice.)

* ASL Fingerspelling: <http://sherecom/scott.net/asl/> (You can practice finger spelling but exercises are a bit fast for a novice.)

Conclusion

The Monbugakusho Directive No. 148（学校教育法施行令一部改正について／*gakkou kyoiku hou sekourei ichibu kaisei ni tsuite*/Revision of the School Education Enactment Law）of April 24, 2002 gives very strong impetus to allowing impaired (e.g., blind, deaf) students who are not multi-impaired to be mainstreamed throughout the national educational system. In this presentation we offer teachers some suggestions which may help prepare them and their hearing students for the day when a deaf or hard-of-hearing student will be sitting among them. And apart from any educational/academic considerations, it should be borne in mind that for many deaf people their major means of communication with society on the person-to-person level is through sign language. Through the introduction of sign language into mainstream classrooms teachers can perhaps take a small step in bridging the societal gap between people who can speak and hear and those who cannot.

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Other useful materials

ASL Video Series: Robinson's Home: Day Lesson 1 (1994). Carlsbad, CA: DeBee Communications, Corp.

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