

SIGN LANGUAGE IN ESOL

Masayo Yamamoto

Abstract

Recent research implies that, under certain conditions, English may be taught more effectively when it is used as the medium of instruction than as the subject. This paper explores the possible use of sign language as an activity in ESOL classrooms to be conducted in the medium of English. The physical and graphic qualities of sign language may make it uniquely useful in linking previous experiences to the target language without reference to the native language, thus breaking the translation cycle which hinders expressive use of the target language.

Introduction

In Japan, English is taught in the public schools beginning at the junior-high level. From my teaching experiences, I find that by the end of the first semester students can be classified into two groups: those who are still curious about English and are interested in studying further, and those who already find themselves humiliated and confused, have begun to detest English and have given up further devotion to its study,

Masayo Yamamoto received her M.A. in English as a Second Language from the University of Hawaii in 1981. She is currently teaching English on a part-time basis at Tezukayama Junior College, Nara, and Osaka University of Economics & Law. She is book reviews co-editor for the *JALT Newsletter*.

except as another chore to be done. Even if the actual difference in language proficiency is not great, the motivation gap is very real, becoming more pronounced with increasing years of study. In searching for something to bridge this gap, I have begun to consider the use of sign language as an additional technique for the ESOL classroom.

Why Sign Language? Some Rationales and Justifications

One of the most interesting finds to come out of recent research is some confirmation of the notion that English used as the medium of instruction is more valuable for the mastery and retention of English language skills than the study of English per se (Lambert & Tucker 1972; Saegert, Perkins & Tucker 1974; Tucker & D'Anglejan 1974; Harrison, Prator & Tucker 1975; Krashen & Terrell 1983). The implications of these studies are very profound in terms of both teacher qualifications and curriculum design. One implication would seem to be that teachers' non-linguistic skills, talents or knowledge (e.g., auto mechanics, cooking, etc.) may find valid expression in the ESOL classrooms. Another implication is that the subject chosen for teaching via the English medium should be interesting, relatively unfamiliar to all the students equally, and a subject in which progress is easily observable even by the students themselves. Sign language could fit these criteria.

The use of sign language for ESOL teaching may give the poorer students — and the better students, as well — the opportunity of a new challenge and, by returning all the students to an equal footing again, might be able to alleviate the humiliation factor, at least temporarily.

Despite its current state of theoretical disrepute, the translation method still prevails in Japanese school systems, as well

as in many other foreign language teaching situations. This method has some economic and administrative advantages: non-natives can teach without actually being good speakers themselves and it is relatively easy for the non-native teacher to evaluate the students' mastery of assigned material. Also, in Rivers' words, "[t]he teacher does not need to show much imagination in planning his lessons since he usually follows the textbook page by page and exercise by exercise" (Rivers 1968:17). We need not dwell upon the defects, however, for Rivers again sums them up concisely: "... communication skills are neglected; there is a great deal of stress on knowing rules and exceptions, but little training in using the language actively to express one's own meaning, even in writing" (Rivers 1968:17). Students who have been taught through the translation method tend to translate each word into their native language; the thrust of recent research is to strongly suggest that this cycle be broken.

The question is, in order to break the cycle, how to build direct links between new L2 vocabulary and previous experiences. To the students, a new word is little more than a meaningless sequence of sounds or letters. The crucial difference between the native language and a foreign language, however, is the fact that words may evoke past experiences more easily in the mother tongue. The native speaker encountering a new word in his own language may vividly recall experiences in his mother tongue to relate this new word to, but the foreign student must build up links somewhat artificially and purposefully, not naturally and spontaneously. One way to build up these links is to establish a route via the first language, which is, of course, the translation method. Breaking the translation cycle involves building these links directly. Meaningful experience is seen as a very important — perhaps the most important — factor for learning (which is, of course, what ESOL theoreticians have been saying for years, but which is not easy to implement).

Among ways of increasing the number of meaningful experiences in the language classroom, those involving physical activity have been in the forefront of the "new methodologies."

For example, the drama approach offers alternative attempts to achieve the mission without the intermediate translation step. Via writes:

The drama method offers a chance for the students to use and understand the language from the gut level. They can become involved in the situation and discover the how and why of the language. They are learning through the experience of communicating in the language; thus, their understanding of the language is greatly enhanced. (1976:6)

And Maley and Duff say:

Drama attempts to put back some of this forgotten emotional content into language — and to put the body back too. (1978:2)

Asher, who is the leading advocate of Total Physical Response (Asher 1969, 1972; Asher, Kusudo & de la Torre 1974), believes that meaningful experience helps to link new vocabulary items directly to the set of concepts which are internalized in each individual. Asher words it as follows:

It seems clear . . . that most students (about 80%) can rapidly internalize the linguistic code — the structure of the language and vocabulary — when language is synchronized with actual movements of the student's body. (Asher, Kusudo & de la Torre 1974:26)

Sign language may also be a useful tool for breaking the translation cycle. If we could enable the student to internally

visualize an input more graphically (Hall 1976), we might be able to tap the internalized concepts without going through the mother tongue.

Before formally proposing the use of sign language as a TESOL tool, allow me first to present a brief technical description of it, so that its unique advantages may be more easily appreciated.

The Sign Language Systems and Sign Categories

A. The Sign Language Systems

“ . . . There is no such thing as a single Sign Language. The terms [sic], Sign Language, refer to any and all gesture languages” (Fant 1972:iii). Although there are many sign languages in the world that might be considered for use as a TESOL activity, considering all of them is beyond the scope of this paper. By *sign language* here I wish to limit my meaning to the language used exclusively by deaf people in the United States. The prototype language of deaf signs was introduced to America in 1817 by Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc from France, where it had been developed and refined for about 60 years at the Abbe de l'Eppe's school for the deaf. At present there are two main patterns of sign language used most by deaf people in the United States: Siglish and Ameslan.

1) Siglish (Signed English)

Siglish was promoted to teach English to deaf people. It follows the grammatical order of English. It substitutes signs for English words and uses fingerspelling frequently. “It is English presented visually on the hands, rather than orally by the voice” (Fant 1972:iii).

2) Ameslan or ASL (American Sign Language)

Ameslan has its own syntax, different from that of English. The signs convey concepts and facial and body expressions play a very important role to convey meanings. Fingerspelling is little used.

In order to avoid confusion, hereafter I will use the term *SIGN* in upper case letters to refer to either of these two systems. In lower case letters, *sign* will refer to the visual representation of a word or letter.

B. Categories of Signs

Signs may be categorized into three groups, depending on the closeness of the relationship between the signs and their referents.

- 1) Natural signs: those which seem to be universally understood without any explanations; very close to mime.

<i>eat</i>	<i>drink</i>
<i>hear</i>	<i>push</i>

- 2) Signs requiring some explanation:

- a) Basic signs requiring some explanation but whose forms exhibit a reasonable resemblance to their referents.

<i>teach</i>	<i>hot</i>
<i>learn</i>	<i>cold</i>
<i>training</i>	<i>water</i>

- b) Signs consisting of combinations of other signs; some are rather conceptual.

student = *study* + *person*
agree = *think* + *same*
disagree = *think* + *opposite*

Sign Language

wife = female + marriage

gentleman = male + fine

sister = female + same

- 3) Arbitrary signs: those whose forms do not have any evident relationship to their referents.

careless

color

skillful

queer

The layman's initial impression might be that most signs are mime-like and not arbitrary, but in reality, most of them "are not so iconic that a nonsigner could immediately guess their meaning. Historically, signs have become less pantomimic over time, becoming more systematically related to each other and assuming more arbitrary shapes and positions" (de Villiers & de Villiers 1978:238).

Deaf people depend predominantly on vision. Therefore, the visualization of SIGN is a crucial aspect. SIGN might be described as a language with built-in facial and body expressions in pictorial images. In fact, SIGN may be characterized as having three aspects, all vital to effective communication: (1) the signs themselves, (2) facial and body expressions, and (3) imagination — the visualization or pictorialization of situations. Therefore, an idea may not be properly conveyed merely by signing the proper sign:

Head movement and facial expression can completely change the meaning of a sign. For instance, when the sign for "like" is accompanied by a pleasant expression it is clearly indicative of enjoyment, while exactly the same sign accompanied by a negative shaking of the head will portray dislike. Deaf persons do not focus so much on reading each other's hands as they do on reading the face and the overall body language. (Riekehof 1978:9)

A Suggested Application of SIGN

How can SIGN be applied to the teaching of English? I would like to propose one application, which would be to teach one of the SIGN systems using English as the medium of instruction. It is most important that English be spoken during instruction. It is also important that the students' native language not be used; otherwise the value of English as the instructional medium would be lost. Probably in the beginning, a modified direct method would be used: lots of pictures, miming and actions would be required in order to convey the sign's meaning. The difference here is that the teacher should keep the running English commentary while teaching the signs. The result is that the students would in fact be acquiring English as they concentrated on the signs they were supposed to be learning (cf. Krashen & Terrell 1983:55, on the topic of "comprehensible input"). For example, here is the procedure for signing *satisfy*:

Both open hands, palms down, are placed against the chest, right above the left, and pushed down. (Riekehof 1978:75)

The teacher would perform the action while giving the instructions in English. Then the teacher would require the students to perform along with him/her, in the classical TPR manner. After that, the student might be asked to perform without the teacher, merely following the instructions. This proposal is twofold: it may be seen, on the one hand, as an ESOL activity on the order of using English as the medium to teach another subject and it could be viewed, on the other hand, as a specialized form of TPR. It would provide both "teacher talk" and visual aid for comprehensible input, and at the same time physical activity for meaningful experience.

Sign Language

The choice of which SIGN system to teach should remain with the teacher: Deaf people seem to feel more comfortable with the high-speed, more abstract and less redundant Ameslan system, but other people, especially hearing signers, may feel more at ease with the more detailed Siglish, which is a visual representation of English. Regardless of which system is taught, however, the teacher will not be able to completely ignore fingerspelling. In SIGN classes for hearing persons learning to communicate with the deaf, vocalization is not used for spelling out the word along with the spelling hand-signs, but it is used for pronouncing the word syllable by syllable in time with the hand. It seems wise to follow this precedent in the ESOL SIGN class, too, in order to present both eye and ear with more real language stimuli. For example, *book* should not be vocalized as /bi:-ou-ou-kei/ but as /buk/.

Possible Problems in Implementing the Use of SIGN

A. Teaching Training

The most predictable problem would be teacher training. Because the technique is still largely untried, the teachers' burden would be heavier than before. This means that teachers wishing to try SIGN as a TESOL technique would have to exert considerable effort; it is obviously not a technique that every teacher would wish to adopt. On the other hand, many other techniques now commonly in use required a significant amount of teacher training and exertion for the sake of enhanced professionalism. To begin with, the teachers themselves would have to know how to sign to a reasonable extent. Sincere there are not many people who know SIGN outside of the United States,¹ intensive workshops would be needed. According to Riekehof:

...One should usually count on a period of 1 or 2 years before attaining an adequate level of competency. To become a proficient interpreter for the deaf, an additional learning period of 1 or 2 years is required. (Riekehof 1978:8)

One or two years, as Riekehof suggested, might be necessary for a person to communicate with deaf people. However, teachers who want to use SIGN as a device for helping their students learn English more effectively would not necessarily have to be that skilled. Furthermore, although it would be preferable for teachers to attain an adequate level of competency, necessary training in SIGN depends on the extent to which each individual teacher may want to apply it.

B. Selecting and Applying a Particular SIGN System

No matter how long or short the training, without understanding the underlying principles involved, SIGN will become just another chore. The teacher must understand the basic principles, be aware of the specific learning difficulties, and know how (in what way and for how long) to apply SIGN to solve the problems at hand.

As noted above, SIGN refers to Siglish or Ameslan. The two systems use basically the same signs, with the following exceptions: (1) there is some variation in the signs which refer to concepts, and (2) each system has signs which the other system lacks, the most notable example being the signed representations of morphemes such as *-ing* or *-ness*, used in Siglish but not in Ameslan. The main difference between the

¹Even in the U.S., SIGN is basically used only for communication among the deaf or between deaf and hearing people who have been specifically trained in SIGN. However, to my surprise "it is estimated that ASL is used by more than 500,000 deaf and hearing people in the United States alone. This makes ASL the fourth most frequently used language in the country (after English, Spanish, and Italian)." (Terrace 1979:67)

Sign Language

two systems, however, is that each has its own syntactic frame.

Which system or what combination of systems to use in any given situation is left to the individual teacher's discretion. Teachers trying to make use of SIGN by basically focusing on concepts may choose the Ameslan system, since it is the more heavily concept-based. Of course, the immediate problem is that Ameslan has its own syntax, which is different from that of English, so its usefulness may be limited.

ASL uses one sign concept to cover several English words. Example: Although the phrase "after a while" contains three words, it is made with one sign representing the concept "later." The sign for "past" can also mean "in the past," "once upon a time," or "a long time ago," depending on how large the sign is made. (Riekehof 1978:11)

On the other hand, if the teacher wants to focus on grammar, Siglish should be a natural choice, since it was invented to teach English syntax to deaf people.

Siglish is the method being promoted by some educators, formalizing signs into a system that parallels the English language exactly through the use of markers (prefixes, suffixes, plural endings, tenses, and various word-form changes). Also included are signs to designate articles and infinitives. This use of English along with signs, markers, and fingerspelling is generally supported for classroom use in order to give students an exact representation of the English language. (Riekehof 1978:11)

Unfortunately, deaf people say it is legalistic, redundant, unnecessary for comprehension, and boring to watch. Siglish tends to slow communication.

Bearing this in mind, different possibilities exist: One system can be used exclusively or features of each system can be

used alternately, in a sequence, or in combination. Arbitrary signs can be avoided. Coherent planning is necessary, however.

Although fingerspelling is not often used in the Ameslan system, it should be very useful for ESOL purposes and could easily be taught under either system applied. Students may see it as fun and it might make them more intently aware of spelling. It should be kept in mind that, as previously noted, words pronounced in syllables as they are fingerspelled would provide more real language input than the mere vocalization of the spelling would.

Although it may be difficult to achieve, the use of SIGN as a language learning activity may be effective. At this point it is still only a suggestion and closer consideration is necessary before it could be used as an English teaching activity.

Summary and Suggestions for Future Research

This paper has presented a proposal to teach sign language in the medium of English as an ESOL activity. The rationales for this proposal are (1) that some (though not all) signs are highly graphic and may thus help to break the excessive dependence on translation into the native language, (2) that signs may help to form links between new English vocabulary and the student's previous experiences, and (3) that activating one's body may help the student internalize the linguistic code. The paper discussed an application of sign language and considered two possible problems in implementing the proposal: teacher training and the selection of a particular SIGN system.

Future research should center on gathering objective data regarding the efficacy of sign language teaching within language classrooms, to test the writer's subjective assessment of it as a workable language learning/teaching tool.

REFERENCES

- Asher, J. J. The total physical response technique of learning. *The Journal of Special Education*, 1969, 3, 253-262.
- Asher, J. J. Children's first language as a model for second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1972, 3, 133-139.
- Asher, J. J., Kusudo, J., & de la Torre, R. Learning a second language through commands: The second field test. *The Modern Language Journal*, 1974, 1-2, 24-32.
- de Villiers, J., & de Villiers, P. *Language acquisition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Hall, E. T. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1976.
- Fant, L. J. Jr. *Ameslan: An introduction to American sign language*. Northridge, California: Joyce Motion Picture Co., 1972.
- Harrison W., Prator, C. , & Tucker, G. R. *English-language policy survey of Jordan*. Arlington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975.
- Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, S. J. *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. San Francisco: The Alemany Press, 1983.
- Lambert, W. E., & Tucker, G. R. *Bilingual education of children*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1972.
- Maley, A., & Duff, A. *Drama techniques in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Riekehof, K. L. *The joy of signing: The new illustrated guide for mastering sign language and the manual alphabet*. Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1978.
- Rivers, W. M. *Teaching foreign-language skills*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Saegert, J., Perkins, S. J., & Tucker, G. R. A note on the relationship between English proficiency, years of study,

- and medium of instruction. *Language Learning*, 1974, 24, 99-104.
- Terrace, H. S. How Nim Chimpsky changed my mind. *Psychology Today*, November 1979, 65-76.
- Tucker, G. R., & d'Anglejan, A. *New directions in second language teaching*. Paper presented at the Inter-American Conference on Bilingual Education, Mexico City, November 1974.
- Via, R. A. *English in three acts*. Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976.