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## Research on ASL pedagogy: Where do we start?

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## My background

- a learner of ASL in the classroom, became an interpreter then a signed language linguist
- now do research on adult and child use of ASL
- adult work: constructed action, register variation, trilingual (Spanish-ASL-English) interpretation
- child language: atypical signed language acquisition
- experience as ASL coordinator (University of Pittsburgh, University of Illinois, University of Texas)

## Outline for presentation

- A snapshot of ASL instruction
- What can ASL pedagogy research contribute to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)?
  - (a) Aspects of visual-gestural language
  - (b) History of the Deaf community and its role in teaching ASL to hearing learners
  - (c) The use of video and computer-based technologies for language learning

## A snapshot of ASL instruction: Popularity

### Interest in ASL is ever increasing

- 2009 MLA report: nearly 92,000 students in colleges and universities
- presumably will surpass German to become 3<sup>rd</sup> most commonly taught language in US (behind Spanish and French) in colleges/universities
- 2005-06 high school data: over 73,000 students

## Reported post-secondary enrollments through 2009

Table 5  
Enrollments in the Twelve Leading Languages, Excluding Latin and Ancient Greek, in Selected Years

Enrollments	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995	1998	2002	2006	2009
Spanish	178,689	389,150	379,379	533,944	606,286	656,590	746,267	822,985	864,586
French	228,813	359,313	248,361	272,472	205,351	199,064	201,979	206,426	216,419
German	146,116	202,569	126,910	133,348	96,263	89,020	91,100	94,264	96,349
ASL	-	-	-	1,602	4,304	11,420	60,781	78,829	91,763
Italian	11,142	34,244	34,791	49,699	43,760	49,287	63,899	78,368	80,752
Japanese	1,746	6,620	11,506	45,717	44,723	43,141	52,238	66,605	73,434
Chinese	1,844	6,238	11,366	19,490	26,471	28,456	34,153	51,582	60,976
Arabic	541	1,333	3,466	3,475	4,444	5,505	10,584	23,974	35,083
Russian	30,570	36,189	23,987	44,626	24,729	23,791	23,921	24,845	26,883
Hebrew <sup>a</sup>	3,834	16,567	19,429	12,995	13,127	15,833	22,802	23,752	22,052
Portuguese	1,033	5,065	4,894	6,211	6,531	6,926	8,385	10,267	11,371
Korean	168	101	374	2,286	3,343	4,479	5,211	7,145	8,511
Total	604,496	1,057,389	864,463	1,125,865	1,079,332	1,133,512	1,321,320	1,489,042	1,588,579

From MLA report; Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin (2010, December)

TABLE 3  
Number of Students Enrolled in ASL Classes in Public High Schools, by Year

	Number of Students		
	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Arizona	2,446	2,446	2,446
California	8,132	9,178	11,174
Connecticut	71	71	71
Florida	10,614	11,103	12,656
Illinois	638	826	762
Indiana	2,180	2,233	2,375
Maine	1,117	1,794	1,563
Maryland	319	425	610
Massachusetts	290	290	592
New Jersey	248	564	773
New York	5,789	6,548	6,668
Ohio	4,222	6,090	6,009
Oregon	113	92	142
Pennsylvania	NA	NA	624
Texas	10,018	12,400	15,208
Utah	638	954	925
Virginia	2,868	2,868	2,737
Washington	7,140	7,374	8,139
National Total	56,783	65,196	73,473

Note. Figures are rounded to the nearest ones.

Public  
high  
school  
enrollments  
2002-2005  
  
(Rosen, 2008)

### Snapshot: Various commercially available curricula are used for ASL instruction

- *American Sign Language* (or "The Green Books") (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980)
- *Learning American Sign Language* (Humphries, Padden, & O'Rourke 1980; Humphries & Padden, 1992, 2004)
- *Signing Naturally* (Smith, Lentz, & Mikos, 1988, 2008; Mikos, Smith, Lentz, 1992; 2001)
- *Bravo ASL!* (Cassell, 1996)
- *Master ASL!* (Zinza, 2006)
- *ASL at Work* (Newell, Sanders, Holcomb, Caccamise, and Peterson, 2010)

### Snapshot: Materials for augmenting commercial curricula

- Classifiers
  - *Classifiers: A Closer Look* (Lessard, 1996)
- Fingerspelling
  - *Fingerspelling 1 & Fingerspelling 2* (Signs for Intelligence)
- Numbers
  - *ABC 1-2-3 : Fingerspelling and Numbers in ASL* (Mendoza, 2006)

### Snapshot: Classroom-based research

- It is difficult to locate reported research studies on the topic of classroom-based research of ASL instruction
  - very few articles in refereed journals
  - presentations about signed language pedagogical research are not common at SLA-focused conferences
  - models and theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) do not commonly reference ASL and visual-gestural language learning
- Various factors may prevent research from occurring (e.g., other instructor duties, instructor familiarity with research techniques, etc.)

### Snapshot: comments on research & teaching resources

- Rosen (2010): "...there is no empirical study of the impact that pedagogies in ASL as a second language have on learning..." (p. 352 )
- Thoryk 2010: "[i]nstead of addressing efficacy, current ASL materials predominantly rely on generalized, short-phrase references to 'natural settings' or amorphous 'standards'; inclusion of anecdotal claims and testimonies; and vague references to 'field testing' without providing access to any real data" (pp 100-101).

### Snapshot: current practices

- Informed by linguistic intuitions and cultural beliefs of instructors and curricula developers
- Many instructors are daily users of the language
- Informed by years of experience: what seems to work
- Yet, various methods that have been employed have generally not been examined empirically

### Snapshot: ASL instructors

- Many ASL teachers are Deaf (or hard of hearing)
- A notable portion of ASL teachers are hearing, some of whom are late learners of the language
- Deaf instructors are often invested in the teaching of language and culture to hearing people who will likely interact with Deaf people

### What might research on ASL pedagogy contribute to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)?

Possible broad themes for research:

- a) Linguistic differences (including processing) between visual-gestural language and auditory-oral language
- b) History of the Deaf community and its role in teaching ASL to hearing learners
- c) The use of video and computer-based technologies for language learning

### (a) Visual-gestural language: Unique linguistic contributions

- Use of space for various functions
  - Syntactic relations
  - Topographical relations (e.g., use of classifiers as a “map”)
  - Use of the body for portraying actions of a character (i.e., constructed action)
- Iconicity of some signs
- The visual processing of phonology, grammar, etc.

### Ideas for some linguistic-focused research topics

- To what extent should English (written, signed, or even spoken) be used?
- English appears commonly in homework and fingerspelling; is this useful? detrimental? irrelevant?
- Does visual iconicity serve as a bridge for remembering lexical items (for adults)?
- Can an emphasis on classifiers and constructed action mitigate the influence of English in ASL learning?

### An example of research on a linguistic question

- Buisson (2007), *American Annals of the Deaf*
- A study of the efficacy of English glossing and ASL learning
- An online glossing program, 66 beginning learners of ASL
- Lessons provided on glossing conventions and grammatical rules; a control group had different task
- English and ASL grammar pre- and post-tests given to all participants
- The glossing lessons significantly improved the ASL grammatical knowledge of the beginning learners in the experimental group (2 S.D. higher in ASL grammar test)

### Another example: spoken vs. signed language learning

Possible benefit for spoken language teaching:

- Look at the role of multi-modal cues as part of L2 learning and the development of socio-pragmatic competence
  - e.g., studies of gesture and adult learning of French
  - e.g., potential visual clues regarding articulation

### (b) Deaf vs. non-Deaf ideologies: Unique interactions between instructors and students

- ASL instruction is part of a complex history of how Deaf and hearing people have interacted over the years
- Various factors could potentially affect how ASL is taught (and how it is learned)
  - A history of hearing oppression and power differentials
  - Differences of what is valued by the two groups
- Should hearing students learn *about* ASL before learning ASL?

### Ideas for some socio-cultural focused research topics

- Is it better to learn *about* Deaf people and signed language *before* actually learning the language?
  - Peterson (2009): attempt to clarify some of the myths and misconceptions that beginning students have about Deaf people, their language, and the learning of ASL
  - This might help to identify people who should rethink taking an ASL course
- What is the effect of different types of motivation (e.g., personal, religious, etc.) on language learning?

### (c) The contribution of video and computer-based technologies

- Videos can be used for comprehension and production assessments
  - E.g., pre-recorded video prompts for comprehension assessments
  - E.g., focused objectives for production assessments
- Videos can be used for homework assignments
- Videos allow for documentation of language development in the absence of a writing system
- Videos must be used for building literary knowledge and skills

### Homework assignments in ASL instruction

- Comprehension (& responding to prompts)
  - Viewing video-based ASL sources (e.g., *Signing Naturally*, 2008 edition)
  - Preparation for an in-class quiz or discussion
- Production
  - Creation of video assignments (also see Blenvenu 2009, Schornstein 2009); need step-by-step instructions for students
  - Topic examples:
    - cultural/ethnographic report
    - Deaf history research report

### Idea for research on video-based techniques

- Question about whether there is a significant benefit of reviewing and evaluating one's own language production while learning a new language:
  - Do students who watch (and evaluate) their own video assignments (ASL production) benefit more than those who only watch (and evaluate) the assignments of their peers?

### Another idea for research on video-based techniques: Narrative skills

- Question about whether there is a significant benefit 3-dimensional information over 2-dimensional information for language learning.
  - Do students who learn a narrative from a live signer engage in more accurate use of space than those who learn a narrative from a video?

### An example of research on video-based techniques

- Thoryk (2010); *Sign Language Studies*
- A study of fingerspelling and ASL learning
  - Investigated the efficacy of a fingerspelling curriculum for the acquisition of fingerspelling skills
  - Commercially available teacher text and two DVDs
  - Test (experimental) group and control group

**What can ASL pedagogy research contribute to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)?**

Some of the broad themes that can be explored:

- (a) (Unique) aspects of visual-gestural language
- (b) History of the Deaf community and its role in teaching ASL to hearing learners
- (c) The use of video and computer-based technologies for language learning

**Implications for spoken language instruction**

- Much for us to learn about language teaching and learning
- This could benefit spoken language instruction
- ASL has much to share with the world about language instruction, but it can likely also learn from other teaching traditions