American Sign Language (ASL) instruction: Implications of not having a writing system & possible insights for spoken language instruction

David Quinto-Pozos, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Linguistics
University of Texas at Austin

Outline of talk
- Information about American Sign Language (ASL) and its community of users
- Brief history of ASL instruction
- Common ASL instructional strategies for assessing students and providing material for literary study
- ASL instructional focus: developing socio-pragmatic competence
- Implications for spoken language instruction

Information about ASL
- A visual-gestural language with roots in early 19th C. French Sign Language (LSF)
- Grammatically distinct in various ways from English (e.g., tense and aspect systems, copular constructions, and articles/determiners)
- Linguistic analyses began ~ 1960
- Characteristically simultaneous in structure as opposed to spoken language, which is highly sequential

Deaf community
- Roots in education (residential schools for the Deaf)
- No reliable estimates of number of users, though commonly cited as ~500,000 (for discussion see Mitchell et al., 2006)
- Comprise many of the ASL teachers at community colleges and universities
- Invested in the teaching of language and culture to hearing people who may interact with Deaf people

ASL instruction
- Began in earnest in the 1970s and 1980s
- Mid-1970s: establishment of the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
- Shortly thereafter, ASL began to be recognized as a language that could fulfill a foreign language requirement
- Enrollments have increased dramatically—particularly since the end of the 1990s

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From MLA report: Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin [2010, December]
Public high school enrollments 2002-2005 (Rosen, 2008)

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Not. Figures are rounded to the nearest ones.

ASL curricula

- Some commonly-used curricula generally follow the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach
  - Vista Signing Naturally (an example of a functional-notional syllabus, according to Lentz, Mikos, & Smith 1988)
  - Bravo ASL (Cassell, 1997)
- Other commonly-used curricula focus more on grammar and linguistic rules
  - Learning American Sign Language (Humprhies & Padden, 2004)

Common techniques for aspects of ASL instruction

- Administering and evaluating assessments
- Assigning and evaluating homework
- Building literary knowledge and skills
- Common theme: use of videos for source materials and for documenting products

Assessments in ASL instruction

- Comprehension (i.e., “listening”) portions:
  - In ASL 506 & 507, nearly weekly assessment (11 total combined quizzes and exams)
  - Instructor signs test phrases/items
  - Student responses appear in a variety of formats (e.g., marking up visuals, multiple choice, true/false, short answer [in English])
  - Pre-recorded video with ASL prompts

Assessments, continued

- Production portions:
  - Designed for creation of extended discourse (e.g., a narrative) or a dialogue
  - Students video-recorded in instructor’s offices in lower level courses
  - Frequency:
    - 506: 4 exams
    - 507: 3 exams
    - 312K: 2 exams
    - 312L: 2 exams
  - Video files are digitally created for each student that allow fair review and documentation of skills

Homework assignments in ASL instruction

- Comprehension (i.e., 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 Bienvenu 2009, Schornstein 2005): need step-by-step instructions for students
  - Topic examples:
    - cultural/ethnographic report (ASL 507)
    - Deaf history research report (ASL 312L)
    - Monologues and dialogues
A few points about literary study

- Oral narrative traditions are common throughout the world’s languages and cultures
- Language art encompasses various aspects of delivery such as meter, rhythm, rhyme, image, and other poetic devices (see Frishberg 1988 for discussions of ASL language art)
- Unfortunately, some people consider oral literature as being less prestigious than written literature

Genres of ASL literature

- One classification proposed by Frishberg (1988):
  - Oratory: e.g., patterns of dinner speeches, keynote addresses, conference addresses, commentaries on video blogs (V-logs), etc.
  - Folklore: e.g., storytelling, narrative, jokes/humor, ABC stories, etc.
  - Performance Art: e.g., poetry, theatre, works scripted in ASL, etc.

Video blogs (VLOGS)

- Online discussions that are driven by video-based commentaries.
- Various languages represented, including many videos in ASL.
- General clearinghouse: http://www.aslvlog.net/
- Popular vlog: http://www.joeybaer.com/?p=68

Literary study in ASL instruction

- Live presentations (e.g., by instructor or visitor)
  - Oratory, folklore, poetry
- Viewing pre-recorded ASL videos or V-logs:
  - Historical films (oratory style)
    - e.g., ASL from the early 20th century (Veidt oration)
  - Narratives (folklore style)
    - Bird of a Different Feather (Ben Bahan, writer & performed)
    - For a Decent Living (Amy Luapele, writer and performed)
    - The Run Story (Harry Connolly, ASL Lecturer)
    - Poetry (performance art)
    - Works of Clayton Valli, Patrick Graybill, Ella Mae Lentz, etc.
- Creating a student video
  - Narrative based on research project (i.e., report)

ASL instructional techniques

- Assigning tasks that require language use that may be representative of real-life interactions (including oratory styles of ASL use)
- Learning communication norms as a primary goal rather than focusing only on grammatical & linguistic phenomena
- Developing socio-pragmatic competence

Socio-pragmatic competence

- The appropriate usage and selection of language in accordance with context and the ability to understand the social conventions that govern communication.
- “The social conditions placed on language in use” (Thomas, 1983, p. 99)
Socio-pragmatic competence and visual-gestural language

- Examples of necessary knowledge & skills to learn:
  - how to obtain one’s attention visually
  - how to use eyegaze for attending to a signer
  - how to use eyegaze when producing signed language
  - how to depict multiple characters within a narrative
  - how to interrupt another person appropriately
  - how to use back-channel feedback
  - how to use gesture to complement signs & grammar

Implications for spoken language instruction

- 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
- Role of video recordings for assessing students (e.g., homework assessments or unit assessments)?
- Role of oral traditions of language use?
  - e.g., joke telling/humor, poetry slams, etc.
  - What other genres of oral tradition are found within spoken languages?