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"The Importance of ASL Assessment for Deaf Learners"

All human languages are a rule-governed system that makes communicating thoughts and ideas possible. For many years, signed languages were not even considered to be part of human languages. Scholars considered signed languages as a form of non-verbal communication. Until recently, linguists recognize signed languages to be meeting the criteria for human language. Misconceptions of signed languages for many years have resulted in the lost opportunities to develop assessment tools on language and communication in the domain of signed languages. If we look at the availability of assessment tools for spoken languages, one could easily see a long list of available materials to assess Hearing children's language and communication. That is in much contrast to the availability of assessment tools for signed languages.

A major culprit for the cause of limited availability of language/communication assessment in American Sign Language (ASL) is due to the ignorance of what a human language entails. Even today, some people still believe that ASL is merely pictures signed in the air that are tied to a form of broken English. Therefore, ASL had not been considered to be a language of its own. The common thought of ASL was simply a signed representation of English - that the two were very similar other than the difference in modalities. Basically, many people neither knew nor understood anything about ASL. One question frequently asked is, "Is ASL really a language?"

Linguists who studied ASL have found it to be just as rich and complex as any spoken language. They also have


found ASL to have every linguistic component required in order to be recognized as a true language. ASL is now recognized to be part of the human language. It has its own grammar system and contains phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics just like spoken languages. Furthermore, facial features, such as eye brow and lip/mouth movements as well as other factors such as body orientation play significant roles in ASL as they form a crucial part of the grammatical system. In this sense, ASL is based on a visual/gestural system in which the information is expressed by combinations of handshapes, palm orientations, movements of hands, arms and body, location in relation to the body, and facial expressions. Spoken languages such as English, on the other hand, are based on an auditory/vocal system with combinations of sounds. In short, ASL is clearly not a form of non-verbal communication.

It is a sad fact that Hearing people who don't understand ASL fail to realize how important ASL is for Deaf learners who are born or become Deaf at a young age. Suppose every human being has four senses without the sense of Hearing. Everyone will communicate via signed languages. It is a very strong possibility that there is no existence of spoken languages in that human world, yet the civilization will continue to build through the human mind aided by signed languages. The grand beauty of the human mind is that when a Deaf person doesn't hear a spoken language, it is not the end of the world for that person because a signed language comes naturally to a Deaf person for human communication.

The biggest problem in the education of the Deaf is that educators don't see the value in providing tender loving care toward the development in the language and communication of ASL for Deaf learners. More often than not, educators' gross negligence of overlooking ASL linguistic and communicative development in Deaf children results in the negative long-term effects of human living. If we want to see them grow up and become well-adjusted Deaf adults, we must pay full attention to their language/communication development in ASL for a simple reason: English is a spoken language and Deaf children don't acquire it naturally; ASL is a signed language and Deaf children acquire it naturally. For Deaf children, there is nothing more important than ASL for their constant access to everyday language and communication. It is ill-advised to ignore ASL because it plays a pivotal role in promoting Deaf individuals in order to lead to happy and healthy relationships.

Should their ASL be improperly developed, who will assess, identify, and remediate them? Should their ASL be considerably delayed, who will help them? Even with many speech/language pathologists who are certified from a very large professional organization (American Speech-Language Hearing Association) working in Deaf educational settings, they don't know how to provide help to Deaf children with their ASL-signing problems. Simply speaking, speech/language pathologists from ASHA are ill-equipped to deal with ASL for Deaf children. They simply focus on helping Deaf children develop speech skills because the American society wants them to develop oral communication skills. Which is more important for Deaf children? Which one should we be more concerned for Deaf children? Oral English skills or ASL skills? The primacy of Deaf communication is ASL, not English. Therefore, we must pay full attention to their language/communication development in ASL.

Don't you know that some Deaf children sign in ASL?

-  jerky
-  too fast
-  with improper facial expressions
-  sloppily
-  ungrammatically
-  with wrong sign selection for meaning
-  with wrong articulation of handshapes
-  disfluently

Don't you know that some Deaf children face problems communicating via ASL?

- 🌸 language delay
- 🌸 language disorder
- 🌸 difficulty of comprehension
- 🌸 poor physical movements of arms, hands

Who will be there to help them? That is the very reason why ASL assessment must be provided to every Deaf child. For that reason, teachers, specialists, and others have the right information before they could ensure that Deaf children are on the right track for their linguistic and communicative growth. From there, Deaf children in an ASL-signing environment could gain self-confidence in themselves about communication abilities. They would become far better at interacting with both Deaf people and Hearing people. On the contrary, those Deaf children who are neglected often don't gain self-confidence in themselves and, as a result, become poor communicators with anyone.

At the time of this writing, we need many more ASL assessment products in order to catch up with the plethora of English assessment products. ASL assessment should automatically be part of every Deaf child's IEP. By doing so, we could track each Deaf child's ASL development more thoroughly. The article "[Language Acquisition: Where is the Sign Language Assessment on My Son's IEP?](#)" by Herminio Gonzalez, Jr. with John Covell and Jean Andrews in The Endeavor offers excellent views on this subject. The more we know of Deaf children's language and communication development in ASL through assessment, the more we can help them fulfill the most important aspect of their human living - language and communication, of course, via ASL.

[ASL Rose](#) salutes to all who have already given their time and energy into developing ASL assessment tools, who have supported the adoption of ASL assessment tools to assess Deaf children in educational settings, and who have screamed injustice at those professionals devaluing the importance of ASL assessment for Deaf learners. Let's look at the two pictures cleverly drawn by Tami Davidson. There are no examples more beautiful than the pictures of how ASL assessment could do wonders for Deaf children.

