

Why Is Learning American Sign Language a Challenge?

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In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in American Sign Language (ASL), the language used by Deaf Americans. As a result, an unprecedented number of schools and agencies now offer ASL classes. This welcome development signals growing awareness of and respect for the American Deaf community and ASL. Unfortunately, misconceptions persist about ASL. One major misconception is that it is an easily learned, picture-like language. This understanding is due partly to the fact that some of the first basic signs learned may be thought of as iconic (e.g., signs for eat, sleep, and drink). This even leads some new ASL learners to believe they can become instructors after one or two classes. This mistake is not made among people learning a spoken language. ASL is a complete and complex language, with all the nuances and subtleties of a spoken language. Like all languages, it is not mastered easily beyond a basic level. Mastery requires extensive exposure and practice. Presently, there is no consensus on where ASL might fall on a learnability continuum for native English speakers. Nonetheless, this article posits that learning ASL should be approached with respect and with the knowledge that mastery only occurs over a substantial period of time.

The true intent of this paper is not to discourage people from learning ASL but to help ASL learners do a reality check. The public has the general impression that it is very easy to learn ASL, but that is not the case. Rhonda Jacobs, who wrote "Just How Hard Is It to Learn ASL: The Case for ASL as a Truly Foreign Sign Language," recalled an incident:

One deaf friend, who learned to sign as an adult, when asked how long it takes to learn to sign, responded "Oh, it's easy - took me two weeks." I stopped breathing for a moment as I reached to pick my heart up off the floor (1996).

Not only should ASL learners experience a reality check, but ASL teachers need to realize the difficulties of successfully teaching the target language. To make matters worse, a great number of people who take two or three ASL classes want to become teachers of ASL. I have received numerous telephone and letter inquiries on how to teach ASL from people all over the USA.

Many people have called me at my office to inform me that they just took one ASL class and now they want to know how to teach the language.

ASL has been established as a distinctive language separated from other languages. It contains the linguistic components that constitute a sophisticated, independent language. Just how challenging it is to master ASL? Let us consider how long it takes native English speakers to learn other spoken languages. As discussed by Jacobs, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and Defense Language Institute (DLI) have grouped languages into four categories in terms their level of difficulty for native English speakers to learn. The degree of difficulty is based on how long it takes to learn the target language before reaching a proficiency level of 2 on a scale of 0 - 5 in the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI). Speaking Proficiency Levels are as follows:

Speaking 0+ (Memorized Proficiency)

Speaking 1 (Elementary Proficiency)

Speaking 1+ (Speaking Proficiency, Plus)

Speaking 2 (Limited Working Proficiency)

Speaking 2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus)

Speaking 3 (General Professional Proficiency)

Speaking 3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus)

Speaking 4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency)

Speaking 4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus)

Speaking 5 (Functionally Native Proficiency).

Commonly taught foreign languages (Spanish, French, Italian, and German) are the easiest for English speakers to learn, and therefore are in the Category I as determined by the FSI and DLI. The other three categories are rated as more difficult for English speakers to learn (see Figure 1). According to Watson, it takes about 480 hours of instruction for an average English speaker learning Spanish, French, Italian or German to reach level 2 speaking proficiency (1993 as cited in Jacobs, 1996).

Into which of these four categories does ASL fall? Francis, of the Foreign Service Institute, proposed that ASL should fall into Category II (1980). Jacobs argues that ASL should fall into Category IV (1996). She believes an average English speaker must take 1320 hours of instruction to reach an ASL proficiency level of 2. Proficiency Level 2 indicates that a person is able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. They can handle routine work-related interactions that are limited in scope. In more complex and sophisticated work-related tasks, language usage generally disturbs the native speaker. The individual can handle with confidence, but not with facility, more normal, high-frequency social conversational situations including extensive, but casual, conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information. The individual gets the gist of most everyday conversations but has some difficulty understanding native speakers in situations requiring specialized or sophisticated knowledge. The individual's utterances are

minimally cohesive. The linguistic structure used is usually not very elaborate and not thoroughly controlled; errors are frequent. Vocabulary use is appropriate for high-frequency utterances, but unusual or imprecise elsewhere. If Jacobs' argument is to be the case, then it would take about 8 years of ASL classes with ten contact hours per week at the elementary level, five contact hours per week at the intermediate level, and three hours per week at higher levels (Walton, 1992 as cited in Jacobs, 1996). However, there is no proof of the number of hours of instruction required for ASL learners to reach the proficiency level of 2 in the LPI. It is imperative that we take into consideration the length of time required for one to reach the target proficiency.

The time required to achieve a unit increase on a meaningful scale such as the Language Proficiency Scale depends heavily on one's starting point on the scale regardless of the language involved. A learner will take considerably longer - probably three times - to progress from minimal professional proficiency (S3) to full professional proficiency (S4) as it took him to get from limited working proficiency (S-2) to S-3. In fact, it takes substantially less time to progress from scratch to minimal professional proficiency (S-3) than it takes from S-3 to full professional proficiency (S-4) (Francis, 1980).

This means it requires more time for an intermediate level ASL learner to reach the advanced level than it does for a beginning level ASL learner to reach the intermediate level.

The LPI is used as an assessment tool to determine language proficiency levels. After Francis' 1980 report, adaptations of the LPI were made: the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) and the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI). These evaluation tools are basically similar in that interviews are utilized to assess one's sign language skills. Gallaudet University, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, California State University at Northridge, and St. Joseph School, Language and Culture Cen

ter held a professional gathering in June 1997. Their main objective was to distinguish the differences among the various proficiency interviews. They found that not all the proficiency interview tools gave similar ratings. Further discussion was planned for 1998 to establish a standardized assessment tool.

It is widely known that, regardless of an ASL teacher's skill, there will always be some students who are simply unable to master ASL. Ninety percent of foreign language students do not succeed in their pursuit of second language proficiency (Brown, 1991). Reasonably enough, learners often wonder what it takes to master a language. What are the learning factors that they lack? H. Douglas Brown, a renowned expert in the area of second language acquisition, discusses how difficult it is to learn a target language:

The bad news is that the task ahead of you is difficult and even grueling. You won't succeed through any sort of painless, neatly packaged program of cassette tapes (videotapes for ASL). And there is no teaching method out there that is foolproof. Nor can you be guaranteed success if you study under the world's best language teacher (1991).

Challenging Factors

In my "An Acculturation Model for Learners of ASL" (1998, in press), I explain the factors that facilitate the process of acquiring ASL through formalized classroom instruction. This is based on Schumann's Acculturation Model.

In this paper, I want to discuss the factors that contribute to the difficulty in learning ASL. The factors I believe hamper the acquisition process are: social dominance patterns and attitude (Schumann, 1978); transfer of the grammar of one's native language (L1) into the grammar of one's target language (L2) (Towell & Hawkins, 1994); congruence (Schumann, 1978); language shock (Schumann, 1978); culture shock (Adler, 1972 as cited in Brown, 1980); and two types of motivations (Schumann, 1978).

Social Dominance Patterns and Attitude

If ASL learners manifest a superiority complex in terms of politics, culture, technical knowledge, or economic status when interacting with users of ASL, or if the former feel inferior under the same terms, then the chance of acquiring ASL is minimal. If both parties share the same status, then ASL acquisition is enhanced (Kemp, in press). ASL learners may not feel accepted when they try to socialize with Deaf people who use ASL (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). Beginning signers often complain that native users of ASL sign too fast. Another way of saying this is:

The impression that hearing people have - that the door is spinning too fast for them to join in - is partially accurate, for when Deaf people use their own language among themselves they use it at their own pace. When they behave differently from hearing people, they are following customs of the DEAF-WORLD. The DEAF-WORLD has its own rate of spinning; it may slow down now and then, here and there, for some "outsiders," but when it returns to speed, it is the newcomer's responsibility to keep up. In this respect, is it really any different from any other culture? (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996).

Evidentially, Deaf culture is different from any other culture. The problem with the perception of ASL, in my opinion, is that Americans are so monolingual (Brown, 1991) that they probably think Deaf people are much the same as hearing people except they don't hear. In reality, there is Deaf etiquette. For instance, hearing people must become consciously aware that:

There are many other (some, to the hearing, rather strange) points of Sign etiquette. One must be very conscious of eye-lines and visual contact; and avoid inadvertently walking between people and interrupting this contact. One is free to tap on shoulders and to point - not done in hearing circles. And if one finds oneself overlooking a room full of signers, with three hundred Sign conversations clearly in view, one makes a point of not "overseeing" or eavesdropping, of only seeing what one is meant to see (Sacks, 1990).

Another factor strongly related to the social dominance pattern is attitude. If ASL learners reflect a negative attitude toward ASL users, then that negative attitude can be transposed back to them. In other words, mutual respect is essential to successful acquisition of ASL as a second language. The general perception of hearing people is that Deaf people are disabled. Deaf people may become defensive and offended when labeled as handicapped. A negative attitude possessed by either party can create obstacles to second language acquisition and to potential interaction between two parties. Again, mutual respect is of utmost importance in second language acquisition.

Properties of L1 Grammar Transferred into L2 Grammar

One of the common tendencies of ASL learners is to sign in sentences that follow the grammatical structure of English. Studies have shown that second language learners tend to transfer some linguistic rules from their first language into the language they are learning (Ogden, 1989 as cited in Towell, 1994). For instance, native Spanish speakers tend to transfer the Spanish linguistic rule for "no" into English instead of using the word "don't." I have encountered Spanish speaking people during my visits to Latin America and the Caribbean and often seen Spanish linguistic rules transferred into either English or ASL. For example, if someone told me they didn't have whatever I was asking for, they would say, "I no have..." To say "don't have" in Spanish would be to say "no hay." Towell and Hawkins discussed these interesting phenomena: Transfer seems to affect all linguistic levels: phonetics/phonology (pronunciation), syntax (the construction of sentences), morphology (the internal structure of words), lexicon (vocabulary), and discourse (the communicative use that sentences are put to) (1994).

The transfer of English linguistic properties into ASL can be observed in ASL learners. For example, on the syntax level, ASL signs may be structured in such a way that they can be transliterated word for word in English, or signing may take place in such a way that directionality is absent (for instance, if signing - "My mother gave me the book" - it would appear the signer gave

the book to an invisible person if a directional verb was not used). Likewise on the morphology level, the addition of prefixes such as pre- and post- will be used to sign premarital, posttest, or suffixes such as -ing, -ed, or -ment will be added to "going", "looked", and "movement." In the lexicon, signs may be misused to represent a different meaning, such as "I GOT IT" instead of signing "I UNDERSTAND." Finally, on the discourse level, how something is signed may be different from how it is said in English, even though the concept is exactly the same. For instance, I am often criticized for signing in English sentences when communicating with Deaf people, despite the fact that I am fluent in ASL. This is probably because I grew up in a non-signing environment and I, at times, unconsciously transfer English grammatical rules into ASL grammar.

Congruence

If the culture a person wants to enter is different from his native culture, he is bound to face obstacles in mastering the language being studied, thus cultural contact is minimized. The reason for the minimal contact is that if a culture appears to be more foreign to the second language learner, then it is difficult for the learner to become accustomed to that culture and learn the language (Schumann, 1978). For example, I had a great deal of difficulty in reading Hebrew and Arabic while in Middle East. It was because my eyes are so used to reading from left to right. Hebrew and Arabic must be read and written from right to left. Not only that, I found Middle Eastern customs very foreign. It was impossible for me to learn the language used in that part of the world. As for entering into Deaf culture, if one is not deaf, one must forego the use of hearing and voice. For hearing people, the use of one's hearing and voice is instrumental in acquiring a spoken language. Transferring the use of ears and voice to eyes and hands for communication can be traumatic for some people. With this in mind, one can point out that Deaf culture can be very foreign to hearing people. Cultural behaviors such as attention-getting techniques, back-channeling, and eye contact while communicating can be observed in the D

Deaf community and taught in ASL classes (Smith, Lentz, & Mikos, 1988). Such behaviors are not observed in the same manner when two hearing people communicate with each other in spoken English. As mentioned previously, hearing people may not feel accepted when they make attempts to make contact with Deaf people.

Language Shock

When a person is using a new language, he or she may feel uncomfortable or ridiculous (Schumann, 1978). Communicating in ASL requires the use of hands, which can be quite an adjustment for new learners, especially when they are told not to use spoken English at the same time. They are accustomed to hearing their own voice and depending on their ears to monitor themselves while communicating. This is probably why some ASL learners tend to sign and speak at the same time. Hearing their own voice while they sign gives them a sense of narcissistic gratification (Schumann, 1978). If they do not speak while signing, they may begin to wonder if they are sending an intelligible and sensible message in sign language. There is no way they can monitor their non-vocalized messages, as their eyes have no way of doing the monitoring simultaneously.

Motivation

There are two types of motivation for learning a second language: instrumental and integrative (Schumann, 1978). Those who want to learn ASL for the purposes of getting jobs, promotion, salary increases, etc., are instrumentally motivated. Those who want to learn ASL for the sake of socializing with Deaf people, like a coworker, neighbor, potential lifetime partners, etc., are integratively motivated. For those who are instrumentally motivated, the chance of acquiring ASL and reaching a desired or required proficiency level is minimal according to studies (Schumann, 1978). They will reach the level that is required of them and that is it. For example, if an agency requires secretaries to reach a proficiency level of 2, they will attend classes until they

have satisfied the expected goal. Once the goal is attained, there is a tendency to discontinue attending classes. However, those who are integratively motivated seek out opportunities to interact with Deaf people and maintain high levels of signing and cultural contact. Frequent contact with Deaf people can facilitate the learners of ASL to acquire the language.

Summary

The Second Language Acquisition (SLA) experts note:

For most of us the acquisition of second languages is less spectacular. If we are past the age of 7-10 years the acquisition of an L2, in marked contrast to the way we acquired our first language (L1), can turn out to be rather slow, laborious, and even intelligent L2 learners, tend to stop short of native-like proficiency. This 'stopping short' has been referred to as fossilization (Selinker, 1972) or incompleteness (Schachter, 1990). It is one of the noticeable characteristics of second language acquisition (SLA). Even after many years of exposure to an L2, in a situation where the speaker might use that L2 everyday for normal communicative purposes, even to the extent of 'losing' the native language, it is not uncommon to find that the speaker will have a strong 'foreign' accent, use non-native grammatical constructions, and has non-native intuitions about the interpretation of certain types of sentences (Towell, 1994).

It can be discouraging to learners of ASL as a second language to come to the realization that it takes longer to go from the intermediate to the advanced level than it does to go from the beginning to the intermediate level. Perhaps this is analogous to what airline passengers may feel when the aircraft is taking off. There is a sense of high speed as the jet takes off and this lasts for about five minutes. The jet is at the speed of about 300-mph when on the runway and as it reaches the cruising altitude, it is at a speed of about 600-

mph. When the jet reaches that speed, the passengers do not have the same sense of motion they did at take-off. Likewise, when native English speakers enroll in beginning ASL classes, they learn a great deal in a short time. However, as the time goes on, their sense of progress is lost. Actually, as long as ASL learners continue exposing themselves to the target language, learning still occurs, though it may not be as obvious as it was at the beginning.

There are four stages of acculturation that second language learners go through while entering a new culture. First is a sense of euphoria and excitement. Secondly, culture shock sets in, which means:

the individual feels the intrusion of more and more cultural differences into the image of self and security. In this stage, the individual relies on and seeks out the support of fellow countrymen in the second culture, taking solace in complaining about local customs and conditions, seeking escape from one's predicament. Culture shock for learners produces feelings of estrangement, hostility, indecision, frustration, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, even physical illness (Larson & Smalley, 1972 as cited in Brown, 1980).

In the third stage, gradual recovery or culture stress occurs. In other words:

...some problems of acculturation are solved, while other problems continue for some time. But general progress is made, slowly but surely, as the person begins to accept differences in thinking and feeling, slowly becoming more empathic with those in the second culture (Larson & Smalley, 1972 as cited in Brown, 1980).

Finally, there is full recovery, which means the learner accepts the new culture and self-confidence is restored (Brown, 1980). New ASL learners have indicated that it is very easy to learn the language. This supports Brown's view that there is a sense of euphoria among these people. Perhaps this is why a person told Rhonda Jacobs it was easy to learn ASL. As time goes by, the realization set

s in that learning ASL is a very long journey. One wonders at what point in the journey did this person make such a statement. Did it occur during the first part of her learning ASL? In reference to culture shock, there is a sense of rejection among some ASL learners if they depend too much on Deaf people by asking them to please slow down their signing or by asking them to use voice while signing. It will take time for them to go through the recovery process before they regain their confidence and go back to mingling with Deaf people in the community.

Does this mean we should lower our expectations for ASL learners in terms of what proficiency level they should reach? In my opinion, the answer should be no. At minimum, Deaf professionals and people who work with them should gain a better understanding of what it takes to acquire a second language from a theoretical viewpoint. At the same time, we should provide support to people learning ASL as a second language and recognize that the learning process is quite challenging. Nonetheless, we must maintain high expectations for learners to attain proficiency; certainly beyond level 2.

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