

What is American Sign Language?

When it was suggested that ASL be my topic tonight, I realized that I'd be handling a piece of hot coal! I will state what I believe and perceive, and try to avoid the pitfall of being sidetracked into the many side issues.

I know for sure that I'd not be what I am today without ASL. My parents were deaf and very emphatic in their opposition to pure oralism. I suppose it was because they had been acquainted with so many oral adults who had dropped through the cracks. By monitoring my progress in school, they made sure that I did not "waste time" trying to learn oral skills. They were personally acquainted with the school superintendent, so they usually got what they wanted. As a result, I was an oral ignoramus, but I graduated from school when I was fourteen.

ASL should be treated in a very generic way. The term makes it clear that it means a language of signs used in America. There are many styles of sign language used, but all of them should be regarded as simply deviations of ASL. Look at English. There are many different styles of English being used in the world — Cockney English in London, Black English in America, or the English spoken by people who live in Brooklyn, N.Y. are some examples. While they may be difficult for the average English speaker to understand, they are all called English.

I believe that deaf adults should be bilingual. Our conversational language should be ASL and our written language, English. We are not alone in having this dual situation. Look at the Asians. They have distinctly separate languages for conversation and for writing.

If we would only apply the bilingual approach and make it clear to deaf children that English and ASL are two different languages with entirely separate rules, I am sure that they would pick up English with less difficulty. If ASL is compromised by using it in English order, the students can become needlessly

confused between the two languages. I see no problem in using ASL to teach English, if the children keep in mind that the two languages should be kept separate. Research has proved that deaf children or deaf parents acquire better English in a shorter time than others, and their usual approach is bilingual.

I have my doubts about coded signs. English-supported signs might be helpful — along with ASL — in teaching literature and composition. My past experiences have convinced me that using ASL to connect with thoughts expressed in literature or to test reading comprehension is very effective. I believe that it would be much more advantageous to also use ASL for other subjects, since it has so much conceptual power.

During the century that hearing educators held sway over the education of deaf children, they embraced the oral philosophy without any facts or results to back up their oppression of the children. Today, supporters of ASL/English approaches are still hard-pressed for facts and research conclusions to support our thinking. Never mind the fact that by living deafness 24 hours a day, we should know best!

I believe that we should be conscious of the fact that Gallaudet University is an enclave full of individuals — both deaf and hearing — who are above average in intelligence and cultural appreciation. They tend to distance themselves from everyday, blue collar-type deaf people. Yet, Gallaudet is supposed to serve these people also. We should be aware our needs — including communication needs — differ. Knowledge and skills in their chosen trades or profession have greater priority to them than precise English. This is not meant to depreciate the need for acquiring good English, and ASL would be a great tool in teaching that language too.

Deaf youngsters are not exposed to usage of English as much as hearing youngsters are. However, I do not

believe that this situation would be greatly helped by the use of coded signs. I can only offer the suggestion that a greater amount of time be used in reading and writing English, to compensate for the loss of incidental overheard exposure to that language.

I know that a great number of students enter Gallaudet with little or no acquaintance with ASL. I believe that we should stand proud of ASL as our own language and as a great facilitator of communication among persons with hearing problems. Therefore, I believe that these persons should be immediately enrolled in ASL classes and taught the language — just as is done with hearing students who come to Gallaudet. With ASL as our basic language, we would be assured of open and clear communication in our own university. Any deviations in ASL should be accepted as comfortable adoptions to meet the needs of particular cultural groups.

This, then, is my philosophy of communication. I offer this description of me given by Dr. Gilbert Delgado in my book as my qualifications: "...he is deaf from head to toe..." ☺



EDITOR'S NOTE: *This was a presentation by the late Leo M. Jacobs (above) at the banquet of the California Chapter of Gallaudet University Alumni Association (GUAA) in 1980. At the time, he was a retired teacher from the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley and President of the National GUAA.*