Teachers' Beliefs About ASL and Its Impact in the Classroom

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Purpose

- To explore American Sign Language (ASL) teachers' language ideologies and how those ideologies may impact instructional decisions.
- Examine if teacher beliefs, ideologies, and instructional choices influence student takeaways from the ASL class.

Background

- ASL has been taught as a world language in public schools beginning in the late 20th century and continues to gain popularity (Gallaudet University, 2022).
- In 2011, the Connecticut General Assembly passed an amendment to the Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-16b, allowing local and regional boards of education to offer American Sign Language (ASL) to meet the requirements for world language high school credit.
- World language teachers for all languages work throughout the school year to aid students in gaining and improving their language skills, along with learning about the cultures associated with the languages they teach, but ASL teachers hold a unique position because they are actively working to dismantle stereotypes students enter the classroom with, such as ASL being based on the English language (Calton, 2020).
- There are a myriad reasons world language teachers may choose to use English instead of ASL, whether that be based on personal beliefs or for instructional purposes (Campa, 2009), but we know that prioritizing the target language in the classroom is more effective than relying on the language of the school – and it's only those with speaking privilege who can make that choice.
- There is a "general sense that learning ASL from a Deaf teacher is a more highly valued experience" (McKee, 1992).

Methods

PARTICIPANTS
- 6 ASL teachers (2-TX, 1-PA, 1-AZ, 1-KY, 1-CT)
- 3 Deaf teachers, 3 hearing teachers
- Recruited through social media (Facebook) with snowball sampling

DATA COLLECTION
- Qualtrics survey used to provide study information and collect consent forms.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted on Webex
- 5 researcher developed open-ended questions:
1. How has ASL played a role in your personal and professional life?
2. What challenges do you face in teaching both ASL and Deaf culture to students who are not a part of the Deaf community?
3. What are your beliefs about how students best learn ASL? How do these beliefs influence the way you teach vocabulary, grammar, and other linguistic components of ASL? What role do culture and community play in learning ASL?
4. What is your ultimate goal for your students once the class has concluded?

For Hearing ASL teachers:
5. How do you balance your use of spoken language in ASL in the classroom? What are the advantages or disadvantages of this?

DATA ANALYSIS
- Open descriptive coding of researcher developed open-ended questions

Qualitative Results

Challenges

Code	Definition	Example
Immersion	Opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the language and culture and experience class in the target language for the majority of class time.	• "Immersing themselves into the culture, because I am online and they don't really have that opportunity to meet in person, to have those conversations might be a challenge." (Amy) • "It's a challenge to help them understand why it's so crucial that we have a primarily ASL only zone in our classroom." (Marisa)
Mental separation of English and ASL	Misconceptions and struggles students experience when learning ASL.	• "With ASL because nothing's coming out of your mouth, they have a harder time separating the two. Or they want to talk and sign at the same time because they think they can and getting that kind of like, "No, when we walk into this room, we're turning off voices, we're kind of taking our English hat off and putting on the ASL hat," I think is harder than any other language." (Ashley)

Cultural Takeaways

Code	Definition	Example
Cultural Awareness and Acceptance	Teachers' efforts, and student demonstrating empathy and allyship towards the Deaf community.	• "It's really more of awareness of Deaf culture. And deaf people as a whole because most of these people come in having never met a Deaf person in their entire lives. And so, their perspective tends to be really of a disabled-medical approach, handicapped approach, and so we are there to really show that's not the case." (Erin) • "I think that's my goal for them. Is just being better advocates and allies to the deaf community. Possibly being able to have a small conversation with a Deaf person in the community and not just make them feel like an outlier and whatnot, like helping them be more involved." (Jessica)
Cultural Lessons Built into the Classroom	Misconceptions and struggles students experience when learning ASL.	• "I think exposure to Deaf culture and the Deaf community is good. Like I'm going to be taking my students on a field trip to ASD so they can see the things they learned about firsthand because we've learned about like the history of ASL and its origins." (Marisa) • "I'll talk about how I had to rely on my mom sometimes to tell me what was happening and even in the TV shows." (Tonia)

Best Practices

Code	Definition	Example
Teaching Strategies	Explicit methods teachers use to teach ASL.	• "So when I go into a classroom, I tend to really analyze my class, my students and see kind of where they are right now in their journey of life, and then from there I create my lesson plans to be accommodating to that." (Erin) • "I think the best way to learn any language is by immersion, and especially ASL because I feel that students need to be prepared with tools to communicate with ASL outside of the classroom." (Marisa)
Thought Process	Teachers' considerations while teaching.	• "Sometimes my challenge being deaf is sometimes they might be a little afraid of me. So I typically will use a lot of humor, try to make them laugh to where they realize "Oh, she's not going to bite. She's just a normal person like the rest of us," so I try to make it fun, make them laugh, and I think that really helps a lot too." (Tonia) • "Our goal is correct grammar, but ultimately if you're understood and that you can understand what the other person is saying, you learn just by practicing." (Ashley)

Systemic Issues

Code	Definition	Example
Non-signers' perspectives of ASL	Teachers' observations of ASL perspectives from individuals outside the ASL classroom or Deaf community.	• " 'This student didn't do great in XY language. Why don't they go try ASL out?' That's a common thing that I do hear, and I do face and, yeah, I think sometimes students are surprised at how much they're struggling in ASL because they came in under the assumption that would be an easier language for them." (Marisa) • "We have an extra period on Thursdays called "Strike Time." It's kind of like a home room where we can pull students who need extra help...Typically the kids that are in my class that need help need help elsewhere, and mine kind of takes the lower rung on the ladder compared to like biology or US history or stuff like that." (Ashley)

Preliminary Discussion/Implications

Initially, findings seem to indicate…
- Both hearing and Deaf ASL teachers face a lot of the same challenges in regard to immersion in the classroom and students struggling to separating English and ASL.
- Deaf culture is an important topic for all ASL teachers, hearing or deaf, and the goals and methods in teaching that vary.
- Only Deaf ASL teachers raised concerns about systemic issues in relation to their classes.
- There are a variety of teaching strategies used but all teachers aim for students to be allies to the Deaf community with less emphasis on language fluency.

Limitations

- Small sample size (6 participants)
- Understudied topic; minimal prior research

References

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