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American Sign Language: Innovations in Teaching and Learning in One of the Most Popular Languages in the United States

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With the skyrocketing interest in American Sign Language (ASL) courses and the increase in programs in two- and four-year institutions offering ASL, it is important to understand ASL as an autonomous language independent of English. Studying ASL can, alongside other benefits, offer perspective on American life and culture and provide dynamic employment opportunities in the sectors of education, government, and business by way of interpretation, now in high demand. While Spanish and French have been the two most-studied languages since 1998, ASL made the jump to third place in 2013, surpassing German, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese (Looney and Lusin 48). In this piece, we take Clemson University, a comprehensive land-grant research university with nearly 26,000 students and our home institution, as a case study to glean insight into the ways in which studying ASL can provide important cultural, critical, and professional opportunities for students of modern languages (Oropesa). As we will discuss, contrary to many widely held beliefs, ASL is not an easy way out of the language requirement, nor should ASL be seen as a communication disorder or disability or through the lens of special education or rehabilitation.

In an ongoing reconsideration of what *foreign* might mean when applied to language study in the United States, a generative usage of the word transcends nation and geography and centers the lived experiences and cultural diversity of students. In an effort to address the underlying assumptions about foreignness and language, we choose to define *modern language* as study in a language foreign to the student rather than how it reads otherwise, as foreign to America. Nothing, for example, puts the word *foreign* into starker contrast than considering indigenous and First Nations languages studied in the United States and Canada. This scrutiny of the word *foreign* is also welcome when considering American Sign Language pedagogy and scholarship. Kristen Harmon, professor of English at Gallaudet University, writes that “students find that studying an indigenous American language gives them another perspective on American life and culture” (qtd. in *New MLA Survey Report* 3). This renewed perspective on the intertwining histories of languages other than English in America, like ASL, can foster a language-learning perspective that encourages learners to examine the world and how it functions from another cultural lens.

Harmon concludes that “the increase in studying American Sign Language is linked with a growing awareness that ASL is a fully developed, autonomous, human language” and, in turn, “those who receive advanced training and certification in sign language interpreting will also find that there is demand for highly qualified

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interpreters” (qtd. in *New MLA Survey Report 3*). In our faculty at Clemson, ASL is linguistically recognized as a distinct language with its own specific syntax and visuospatial channels and phonology (e.g., hand shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and nonmanual expression). Its study raises many important questions about the limitations as well as the importance of the universal properties of language. The scholarship around ASL exposes some of the fascinating work to be done on its language variations (different ways of signing the same thing, which vary over time, location, and culture), metanotative impressions by language users (expressions, gestures, etc., that guide interactions in ASL), second language acquisition, and the neurological housing of language (i.e., regions of the cerebral cortex responsible for motor, sensory, language, or other cognitive processing).

The origins of ASL can be traced back to the eighteenth-century French philanthropic priest and educator Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who built upon and restructured the language already created in Paris by the signing Deaf community. From there, Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet brought French Sign Language (LSF) to America in 1817 (Lane et al.). The blending of LSF and what has come to be known as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, or the signed language of the early 1600s used by both hearing and Deaf English settlers, formed the linguistic skeleton for modern ASL. ASL has been passed from one generation to the next in the Deaf community—one of the criteria for modern languages. Though it was not linguistically recognized as a distinct language until the mid-1960s, as with all languages, ASL has the infinite potential to state new things (productivity), limitless nesting abilities of syntax (recursivity), and the ability to communicate about things that are not immediately present (displacement; see Saussure). More narrowly, ASL meets all the criteria for most definitions of *language* in that it is a “systematic use of symbols, to express and perceive information, between members of a community,” also implicating that ASL is “intergenerational, and changes over time” (Cerney 32). Important for considering ASL under the guise of a foreign language, or, as we have amended it, a language foreign to the student, “ASL has an autonomous linguistic system and it is independent of English” (Valli et al. 14).

Language study at Clemson University is housed within a dynamic and diverse department with over fifty faculty members teaching nine different languages—including ASL. Since 2010, Clemson is the only public university in South Carolina to offer a modern languages baccalaureate degree in ASL. Clemson offers three distinct, interdisciplinary undergraduate degrees in modern languages for our current moment: Languages and International Business, Language and International Health, and Modern Languages. While the first two programs combine an applied study of language, the addition of the ASL (English) Educational Interpreting program emphasizes a national shortage of interpreters for Deaf students attending public schools.

ASL has been offered at Clemson University since 2000, and Clemson is one of 172 other four-year institutions, including Brown, Harvard, and Yale, that accept ASL in fulfillment of foreign language requirements (Wilcox). The Modern Language Association's language-enrollment survey indicated that nationwide enrollment in ASL courses increased 6,583% from 1990 to 2016, making ASL the

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third-most-studied language on college campuses in the United States as of 2013 (Looney and Lusin 9, 6). Since 2000, this same sharply rising trajectory can be observed at Clemson, where enrollment in ASL has experienced an increase of 1,285%. Nearly all beginning-level ASL courses are filled to capacity long before registration windows close and have extensive waiting lists. While ASL ties with French for the second-most-studied language at Clemson, we believe that with additional faculty members and resources ASL would actually surpass French in popularity with students and the percentage would be much higher. One thing is certain: for many good reasons, there is public desire to study ASL. All ASL majors at Clemson take twenty-four credit hours of upper-level arts and humanities courses, methodology, and theory while also taking service-learning course work in which students connect their language learning with the needs of the Deaf community (Hernández-Laroche). Students can work with Deaf students at the residential school for the Deaf, tutor Deaf students across the state in various subjects, and work with the South Carolina Association of the Deaf and South Carolina Beginnings through outreach activities.

To “diversify the curriculum” (Tang) while also providing a postgraduation career pathway, Clemson launched the Educational Interpreting program, which focuses on educational interpreting and ethics, the specialized study of finger spelling and numbers, and interpreting in both elementary and secondary school settings. In addition to course work, students of ASL have to attend three credit hours of field observation, working with credentialed educational interpreters in the field. This combination of classroom emphasis and experiencing what interpretation looks like in action provides a solid foundation for ASL praxis. Students also take three to six credit hours of practicum or participate in internships in which they interpret for Deaf children in a public-school classroom, again under the supervision of a credentialed educational interpreter. Finally, to assure postgraduation career opportunities, all students take the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment, which ensures that their interpreting skills are up to par, alongside a written examination before graduation. The mean score for students is 3.7 (out of 5.0) on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment, and one hundred percent of students pass the written test. These credentials permit students to gainfully work in all but three states, and students’ experiences in the internships, classrooms, and mentorships with credentialed educational interpreters encourage and allow them to see this through.

A challenge that we have observed in offering ASL as a language foreign to the student is the mistaken belief that ASL is an easy language course. ASL is a difficult language to master. While it is entirely impossible to quantify the level of difficulty in learning individual languages, some individuals have a better knack for acquiring spoken languages. Similarly, kinesthetically oriented students notice a similar knack factor while learning ASL. That said, to reach a high level of proficiency in ASL, a category 4 language, requires over 1,320 hours of learning (Jacobs 186–87). It has been argued that the modality and syntax differences make ASL, not a manual code of English, more challenging to learn than other languages (Jacobs; Kemp; Locker McKee and McKee; Valli et al.). Regardless of experience, ASL should not be dismissed as easy simply because it has more physical components—as we discussed

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earlier, these kinesthetic components still model syntactic complexity in their properties of productivity, recursivity, and displacement.

Another challenge is moving institutional attitudes away from notions of deafness as a communication disorder or disability and from viewing ASL through the lens of special education or rehabilitation. For this reason, Clemson entirely views Deaf individuals as a linguistic and cultural group. Our efforts to refer to an ASL community, as opposed to a Deaf community, have led colleagues on campus to further appreciate this perspective. The specific presence of Deaf faculty members also begins to change the stereotypical perceptions of students and colleagues alike. Of course, this brings up another unfortunate challenge of finding sufficient qualified Deaf faculty members to teach language-acquisition courses.

Relatedly, and optimistically, due in part to the critical shortage of educational interpreters and the rigor of Clemson's programs, most students receive job offers before graduation, ultimately adding to this workforce. As Lydia Tang notes in her article about the successful reimagining of the humanities through language programs, "all students profit from increased attention to transferable skills and career pathways." The idea is to create "a curriculum designed to prepare majors and minors for a range of fulfilling careers" in the hope of recruiting a broad array of students. We find this to be true at Clemson as well. With the addition of a specialized program in educational interpreting, we provide students with an applied use of their bilingual (ASL-English) skills. By approaching language from an applied linguistics lens, students are exiting the Clemson ASL-English Educational Interpreting program able to pass national educational interpreting exams and immediately acquire educational interpreting positions throughout the country. These efforts bolster the numbers of students choosing to study, major in, and pursue professional opportunities in the modern languages. In turn, the consideration and embrace of ASL as a language, and one foreign to the student, not only expands definitions of what languages are and can do but also equips these students, when trained effectively, to address the national shortage of qualified educational interpreters and increase modes of accessibility in secondary and higher education.

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