Bridging the Communication Gap: Using ASL to Improve Communication with Students with Disabilities

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What is ASL?

American Sign Language (ASL) is a linguistic system in which “handshapes, movement, and other grammatical features combine to form signs and sentences” (p.15). It is the natural language of members of the North American Deaf community which accounts for between half a million to two billion people. (Valli and Lucas, 2000) Similar to other languages, ASL varies from region to region and across social groups. It is used as an identifier for individuals belonging to different groups, in other words a marker of “group solidarity”. (Reagan, 1995) Users of ASL range from the Deaf member of a Deaf family whose primary language is ASL to late-deafened individuals who learn ASL later in life to hearing people who learn ASL as a second language. (Lucas and Valli, 2004)

Communication Barriers

Autism:
- Children may have difficulty developing expressive communication skills such as vocalization.
- Children may be more confused when using pronouns in their speech.
- Nearly 50% of children with autism receive language and speech therapy.
- Some children may have difficulty moving the required muscles needed for expressive communication.
- Delays in language development can hinder social interactions.

Down Syndrome:
- Children have problems in phonological memory and/or auditory processing.
- Children may have difficulty coordinating the movements for the lips, tongue and jaw to express communication.
- At least 80-90% of children suffer from conductive hearing loss and auditory discrimination difficulties.
- Many children struggle with word meanings in order to produce a sentence.
- Strengths in social development and social understanding but a weakness in spoken language.

Technology

Recommended apps: ASL America
- Recommended apps: Baby Signers
- Uses ASL handshapes
- Includes interactive colorful flashcards and quizzes
- Features animated video demonstrations

Recommended apps: Baby Sign and Sing
- Recommended apps: Sign Language
- Uses ASL handshapes
- Includes interactive games
- Animal Dictionary - each animal sign is demonstrated in an animated character and includes the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for the name of the animal.
- Vocabulary list with animals including vocabulary, penguins, dogs, and fish.

Recommended apps: ASL Nursery Rhymes
- Recommended apps: ASL Kids
- Uses ASL handshapes
- Includes interactive games
- Animal Dictionary - each animal sign is demonstrated in an animated character and includes the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for the name of the animal.
- Vocabulary list with animals including vocabulary, penguins, dogs, and fish.

Conclusion

Many students with disabilities typically develop communication barriers that hinder social interactions and language development. For example, students with Autism may generally have difficulty with expressive communication skills and will typically require language and speech therapy. Students with Down Syndrome will have difficulty with phonological memory and will struggle with word meaning to form formal sentences. Language and speech intervention is required to facilitate communication development for students with disabilities. American Sign Language (ASL) is an effective and inexpensive therapy resource. Using ASL in the classroom will bridge the communication gap that students with disabilities tend to face. Teachers should implement ASL into the classroom because it will increase language and speech skills for students with disabilities. There are a number of resources that teachers can use to assist students with disabilities including apps on tablets, phones, computers, etc. These apps include ASL Kids—Sign Language, Baby Sign and Learn, Baby Sign and Sing—ASL Nursery Rhymes, and Baby Sign Animal Fun Time. Implementing ASL into the classroom and reinforcing it at home will further improve a child’s communication skills which are required to communicate with peers and adults.

Bibliography


