

*Deaf children who enter school monolingual in ASL must learn written English as a second language. Unlike hearing ESL students, however, Deaf children are regarded by the educational establishment not as budding bilinguals but as language-impaired.*

### **The Real Meaning of “Hearing Impaired”**

*Angela Stratiy, 1989*

For centuries, hearing people in the field of education have labeled Deaf children (aka hearing-impaired, deaf mute, deaf dumb, and hard of hearing) as retarded or delayed in their language development. Charts are frequently developed which compare the language development of hearing and Deaf children and adults. Frequently noted are the low scores of Deaf children and adults in the areas of negatives, conjunctions, question forms, verb conjugation, pronominalization, relative clauses, nominalization, and sentence completion.

As a Deaf teacher of American Sign Language (ASL) as a second language to hearing students, I thought it only appropriate for Deaf people to develop a chart noting the deficiencies of hearing students of ASL (aka severely to profoundly hearing, signing impaired, hard of fingerspelling, etc.).

Hearing students of ASL frequently have problems with usage. Syntactic errors include: (1) noun-verb pair discrimination (how often have you had to show blow-by-blow the difference between AIRPLANE with a short restrained double movement to TO-FLY-BY-AIRPLANE with a single continuous movement?), (2) over generalization of sign usage (using the same sign for lose in TO-LOSE-A-GAME and TO-LOSE-A-CAT), (3) poor sign execution (WHY NOT? Is often executed to look like two separate thoughts- WHY?? NOT??), (4) weak pluralization (did this student read one book for a long period of time or did this student read a number of books? Was the item shown to one person or was it shown to a crowd?), and (5) inaccurate temporal aspect (did s/he GO somewhere once or did s/he GO-frequently to a place? Did s/he CRY-continuously, or CRY-HARD?). This poor performance has led to the classification of many severely and profoundly hearing students as *sentence impaired*.

A less severe problem, but one that is common among ASL-as-a-second-language (ASLSL) students, is that of inappropriate or inconsistent time markers- a disability which we may refer to as *hard-of-timing*. Errors in this category include the failure to properly produce number incorporation in such semantic items as PAST-WEEK, EVERY-SATURDAY, and ALL-MORNING for example. IN addition, hearing students do quite well with expressive fingerspelling, but score miserably on reading it (*hard-of-fingerspelling*).

*Locus confusion*, a common syndrome among the severely to profoundly hearing, frequently results in misenunciated and misperceived locatives. How

often have you wondered when looking at your ASLSL students whether the event being described happened on the side, in front, or in back of the building? This syndrome also causes confused pronominalization.

It is difficult for a *pronoun deprived* hearing person to properly indicate or understand (1) who is speaking to whom, (2) pronouns including or excluding the signer (US-TWO, THREE-OF-THEM...), and (3) static location on referent nouns. This area of weakness is also reflected in numerous subject/object errors particularly when it is linguistically appropriate to use directional verbs which incorporate subject/object information. We might classify this type of handicap as *misinformed*.

Classifiers are another inherent weakness in the hearing ASLSL student. Due to *dexterity disability* and *sentence-impairment*, a hearing person frequently errs in the selection of handshape when attempting to use classifiers. Such an error results in a toothpick being described as having a diameter of a telephone pole or a group of people moving in all directions rather than a mass of people gathered in one location. Another common error is the failure of ASLSL students to shift between real-world and abstract classifiers, resulting in an overuse and over-generalization of such classifiers as a 1-CL (*person moving*) and 3-CL (*vehicle moving*). This error often results in an increased number of prayers by ASL teachers to Saint Viterous Humor for ophthomological strength. Since this serious deficit is so common to the profoundly hearing, we label those who suffer from this disability as *misclassified*.

It is the author's opinion that severely to profoundly hearing students produce fingerspelling with approximately 60 percent accuracy (second-third grade level), comprehend ASL at about a 50 percent level of accuracy (second-third grade level)- an overall level of performance of second-fourth grade level- far below acceptable levels! IT is time for Deaf people to unite and provide ASL and visual discrimination remediation clinics for these poor hearing handicapped individuals. Unless we do, teachers will continue to be hired who have only second to third grade Sign Language proficiency and deaf children will continue to suffer under their instruction.

From- *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Coursebook*, Edited by Lois Bragg 2001. Pages 203-204.