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Inclusion, Signing, Socialization, and Language Skills

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Abstract

21st-century education finds schools challenged to increase the inclusion of students with widely varying learning abilities, language backgrounds, social diversity, and skills. Educators and administrators acknowledge a need for interactive learning that engages visual, auditory, linear, spatial, tactile, and kinetic learning styles. Students' styles for learning vary in combinations and intensity and teachers need to combine flexibility and creativity to present material and practices that will build enthusiasm for learning. Adding sign language to a classroom of heterogeneous learners that includes English language learners (ELL) will aid in generating a positive learning environment, inclusive and interactive for varied learning needs and styles.

Keywords: inclusion, social, diversity, interactive, heterogeneous, learning, sign language, English language learners (ELL)

Inclusion, Signing, Socialization, and Language Skills

Educational reforms along with changing needs and diversity in elementary classrooms call for varied and effective teaching methods to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. Specifically, inclusive settings demand attention to more than whole-class learning. Students on individual education plans, English language learners (ELLs), and native speakers with a wide range of abilities and interests in any one classroom require teachers to extend and blend educational strategies to meet student learning needs. Rowsell, Kosnick, and Beck (2008) found that more teacher education in multi-literacies could engender gains for students in social and linguistic skills, particularly effecting learning with diverse language forms. Discovering methods that build connections, comprehension, and communication forms a challenge for teachers of heterogeneous classes with inclusion and ELLs. Barr, Eslami, and Joshi (2012) reported that poor reading instruction in a classroom that includes ELLs reveals a teacher's lack of comprehension of concepts needed to expand student vocabulary and reading skills. Honigsfeld (2009) reminded researchers, administrators, and educators that one format will not fit all classrooms and programs that include disparity in abilities and ELLs. This paper presents the practice of signing in heterogeneous classrooms with ELLs as a way to foster inclusion, build social connections, and advance language skills for all class members.

Sign language, gestures, and communicative expressions occur around the world in advanced and developing cultures. Signs through motions help people build rapport with one another. Mortensen (2011) examined the energizing and influential aspects of effective use of gestures. Caring about others, persuasion, motivation, and even one's credibility can increase with effective use of gestures and expressions, and Mortensen stressed the ability to read and understand nonverbal clues stands as an essential life skill for success. Brereton (2008) revealed

that in recent decades educators have understood that language is more than speech, and hearing children can develop literacy skills, positive self-concepts, and communication connections through learning sign language. Adding a level of visual understanding through signing, whether Signing Exact English (SEE) or using American Sign Language (ASL), with varied ethnicities, languages, and cultural patterns opens new avenues of communication for all class members.

When one considers that the U.S. Census Bureau (2003) identified at least 380 different languages spoken in the United States, it is easy to understand how promoting the value of signs, gestures, and expressions would advance socialization and communication in a class with students of diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Lo's (2012) study of the challenges faced by teachers of students with little knowledge of English recommended consideration, training, and collaborative efforts, including the use of gestures and expressions. Teachers who help students to understand the common expressions, signs, and gestures used in the United States, aid in the socialization process within the classroom and within the culture.

Often in heterogeneous classes with inclusion and ELLs, students with traditional linguistic and linear learning styles appear as successful role models. However, Brereton's (2008) study affirmed that students can become empowered when they see that communication does not have to exist only in spoken words. In teaching students of different ages, languages, ethnicities, cultural patterns, and academic abilities, the two authors of this article found that incorporating signs into a class builds a cooperative environment, enthusiasm for expressions, quick assessment of focus and comprehension, exploration of language combinations, scaffolding for words and concepts, possibilities for acceptable motions that add a sense of fun and freedom to the classroom, and consideration for people from other cultures, particularly the deaf culture.

Considerations for Heterogeneous-Grouped Inclusion Classes with ELLs

Mertzani (2007) reflected on the ways sign language provides opportunities for visual stimulation and manual dexterity. The knowledge that the Internet and videos support autonomous learning of signs as much as practice and activity centers in a classroom provides even more encouragement for teachers who want students to advance in communication skills and independent learning. Inclusion students with disparate learning challenges and ELLs can view and practice with videos that have both signs and text. The combination of hearing the language, seeing the language in text, seeing language in signs, and forming the vocabulary with signs builds connections, layering knowledge, comprehension, and possibilities for application.

Students in a language-layered classroom built on multiple expressions will understand facets of communication better than students who have only one mode of language expression. Subapriya (2009) emphasized that the dynamic power of language presented nonverbally, verbally, and in writing increased student abilities. Expressions of enthusiasm, humor, motions, and reinforcement of skills combining verbal and nonverbal cues strengthens comprehension and communication (Subapriya, 2009). Sibbet (2008) showed how language patterns with visual clues aided students in building cognitive skills. After 30 years of using graphics to help learners, Sibbet rediscovered and affirmed that visual images help individuals move through the confusing fields of language.

Research and studies of lower reading scores among deaf students can help educators consider broader needs and learning styles in regard to inclusion and ELLs in heterogeneous classes. Marschark et al. (2009) showed that students who do not perform as well as peers in language arts, reading and writing have a disadvantage and lack knowledge and experience with formal and informal language. For ELLs especially, but also for general heterogeneous groups,

coding and decoding words, scaffolding new concepts, and skills to efficiently focus on important concepts emerge stronger with visual and active symbols and images.

Speaking and signing in a classroom gives students the opportunity to consider words, parts of words, sentences, and parts of sentences from linguistic, visual, and spatial perspectives. Working only in a single modality, whether speaking or signing, leads to a fleeting grasp of a concept (Marschark et al., 2009). Vallotton and Ayoub (2010) discussed Vygotsky's theory that symbols provide tools for children to think and interact and emphasized the naturalness of using gestures in interactions. Signing incorporates a blend of learning activities that enhances scaffolding and aids students of wide ability levels and diverse language abilities in building communication, comprehension, and language skills.

Teachers who can consistently blend visual, auditory, and kinetic interaction with letters, words, concepts, and sentences will reinforce multiple learning modalities and provide more complete opportunities for grasping knowledge and advancing in language skills. Lee (2007) found a blend of delivery methodologies and promotion of student self-efficacy in choices for learning links the possibilities for mastery and lifelong learning. Dunn et al. (2010) cautioned educators and administrators to avoid the trap of doing what has always stood as classroom practice rather than adapting and blending new modes of learning that could meet a wider variety of student needs.

Heslinga (2012) reviewed the experience of teaching in a city middle school with a class of 26 students who came from 20 different countries and had 16 different languages.

Incorporating signs let the class of globally different backgrounds and languages see, hear, experience, and cooperate on topics with a sense of fun, motion, and drama. By speaking and

using ASL to incorporate gestures, body positions, and facial expressions, a teacher can address the needs of students with different levels of English language knowledge.

Young people need help processing information to build vocabulary, comprehend concepts, read body language and expressions, and communicate in an energetic and interactive method. Dunn and Honigsfeld (2009) affirmed that multiple reviews of necessary material through methods that incorporate action and game qualities help struggling students, particularly at-risk students. Heslinga (2012) advocated adding signing as a way to keep challenges high while lessening stress. Using sign language allows learners to adapt to content via a preferred modality, to provide support through blends of action, symbols, and speaking. Signing encourages exploration, reinforcement, and comprehension.

Nevenglosky, a second grade teacher, found signing a most effective method because it allowed opportunities to meet student accommodations, support ELLs, and develop the language skills of general education students in a heterogeneous classroom. Students not only embraced the ideas, actions, and practices but excelled in areas of vocabulary development, spatial awareness, and social development among peers. The assertions, instructional practices, and perceived benefits of ASL for students seen and demonstrated in Nevenglosky's and Heslinga's years of teaching experience received additional support through existing research by Brereton (2008, 2010) and Toth (2009).

Using ASL in an inclusion setting helps students with difficulties communicating and provides an alternate means to share and communicate with peers. In addition, ASL benefits those students who are often socially excluded by providing them with opportunities to engage in a language activity that is fun and builds academic development with peers (Brereton, 2008, 2010). ASL acts as a language connector for students experiencing language delays by creating

an environment conducive to learning. Toth (2009) found that socializing increased with signing regardless of impairments and that ASL served as a means for self-expression, successful communication, and meaningful connections with peers and educators. Toth's study also supported evidence that hearing children benefitted from ASL because existing language received reinforcement through student use of multiple modalities while thinking and attempting to communicate with others.

Instructional Practices

In their years of working with elementary students, sharing methods, and refining strategies with elementary educators, Heslinga and Nevenglosky found that the introduction of sign language into the classroom meets the teacher's desire to teach all students with active, visual, and auditory connections. Multeity in expression can help students' inner speech emerge. Vygotsky (1986) showed that children who participate in connections that do not clash with logic build complex thinking skills. Repetition in classroom practice, and in this case in the use of language signs, expands connections for learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

Students learning the same material during a specific block of instructional time share a common active engagement and focus. Dennis and Azpiri (2005) advocated the use of ASL in hearing classrooms as a natural aid to grab the attention of students and help them focus on the teacher. Teachers using sign language in predominantly hearing elementary classrooms find effective possibilities for building comprehension with signing in circle time, centers, collaborative learning groups, and content area instruction. Using sign language provides instructional opportunities to support topics, skills, and illustrated instructions in accordance with benchmarks, frameworks, and standards.

As described by Brereton (2010), ASL allows students to develop bilingual skills, use various senses, and become more conscious of language as a grammatical system. Using ASL during planned daily times creates a forum for learners to express ideas, needs, and relationships in different ways. Dennis and Azpiri (2005) explained how sign language helped students to focus, make eye contact, and learn to distinguish facial expressions and body language along with words.

The importance of expression aligns with the styles and intelligences that blend to enable students' learning, affirming Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and the necessity of differentiating instruction based on individual needs. In addition to communication reinforcement, teachers using ASL in heterogeneous classrooms with inclusion and ELL students realize a stronger retention of concepts when ASL accompanies instruction. Nevenglosky, Heslinga, and other elementary teachers who studied and used ASL in heterogeneous classrooms found that the use of ASL consistently enriched the learning environment. Both teacher and students learned and practiced together. Discovery was mutual, and students realized teachers needed to practice and study to learn something too.

Incorporating ASL into the classroom does not have to be a costly investment of resources. Just two ASL dictionaries and two student-friendly books on ASL can equip classes for learning about communication, vocabulary, and expression. Heslinga and Nevenglosky used *American Sign Language: The Easy Way* (Stewart, 1998); *Signs for Me: Basic Sign Vocabulary for Children, Parents, and Teachers* (Bahan & Dannis, 1990); and *You Can Learn Sign Language!* (Kramer & Ovadia, 1999). The integration of patterns into the classroom took only days, fit into existing curriculum, and enhanced the methods used to meet state language arts standards.

Signed motions provide reinforcement and open another path to express known concepts, verify connections to prior knowledge, and scaffold information. The use of ASL presents advantages for diverse students and children learning English (Brereton, 2008). ASL creates opportunities for quick communication among learners and promotes communication and social skills by providing another method to speak with peers. Daniels's (1996) study confirmed that the simultaneous presentation of words in oral, visual, and kinetic ways enhanced a child's vocabulary development by engaging linguistic modalities to support language acquisition. Flora (2007) explained that sign language in an early childhood classroom enriched the literacy skills of all students—hearing, special needs, and ELLs.

Circle Time

Heslinga and Nevenglosky identified circle time, a regular time when the class gathers for group instruction, as the best opportunity to introduce topics for ASL, model signs, and practice new words, sentences, sayings, and signs. Circle time allows the entire class to be present, thus involving students generally absent for multiple services according to individual education plans. During circle time, students first learned the alphabet and chose a sign with which to identify themselves. The teacher led students in the alphabet, and each student would simultaneously sign his or her name while saying it. As time progressed, the teacher introduced a new topic each week, such as nouns, verbs, a poem, the pledge of allegiance, or a song. The teacher first modeled the ASL sign. Next, the children demonstrated the sign with the teacher. The topic changed each week and served as a review opportunity and a social bond in the classroom during different aspects of the day, such as small groups or centers.

Marigliano and Russo (2011) found that using circle time as the primary opportunity for introduction permitted peers to practice with each other while fostering communication and

social skills. In public schools children often have times of separation from peers during instruction time because of services geared to special needs. The authors found that the use of ASL during circle time promoted positive relationships between students as well as an increase in ownership and responsibility toward each other. Brereton (2009) described examples of positive changes in student behavior with affirmation, attention, and motion improved through ASL options. Students began to help one another with learning ASL and showed enthusiasm to teach, model, and practice with students struggling with different signs and words. Lukenbill's (2011) review of teaching young children showed that support tools from puppets to any other activities that support anti-bias can help build a community in a classroom of diverse learners.

Gajus and Barnett (2010) found circle time most appropriate for building Letter Naming Fluency (LNF). Activities for LNF from preschool Head Start programs through upper elementary aid at-risk learners, disadvantaged learners, and ELLs in strengthening literacy skills. Instructional times need active and interactive involvement and opportunities for students to participate in making choices for expression and socialization.

Centers

Centers exist as areas in a classroom where students practice skills and explore possibilities. Centers provide a forum for review and practice for specific concepts related to benchmarks and standards. Adding ASL to center options engages students with concepts and with one another. Centers, even if only occupying a portion of a table, allow the choices and practice necessary for students to master a concept. For example, parts of speech and vocabulary development remain a benchmark for students in grade two. The authors have created center games in which students read the words, match the written word to the sign, and demonstrate the sign to the group of students working at the center.

Another sign language activity for centers used by Heslinga and Nevenglosky incorporates flashcards. Students worked with partners within center groups. One student held up a flashcard with nouns, verbs, or other vocabulary words from the week's story from the reading series. The student demonstrated the sign for each vocabulary word and defined each word as it related to the story. O'Donnell and Hitpas (2010) studied at-risk learners in heterogeneous classrooms and found the use of learning centers strengthened student motivation and academic and social abilities.

An additional center activity included learning and identifying colors through ASL using such games as *I Spy*. Students enjoyed using ASL for colors to identify various items chosen by students. ASL added extra reinforcement to skills for benchmark mastery as well as provided a separate opportunity for students less likely to participate or express themselves to communicate with peers. Kyle (2011) determined students with learning challenges, impoverished backgrounds, and little expectation for success did better when the elementary teacher created a caring learning environment that included varied strategies for success and student contributions. Learning centers that allow students to combine actions with word study and enthusiasm for personal progress create areas that increase self-direction and enjoyment (O'Donnell and Hitpas, 2010).

Math centers also allowed occasions to integrate ASL into the classroom. The authors found that students enthusiastically participated in these signing activities, which supported concepts for learning skip counting, even and odd numbers, addition, and subtraction. A center game called *Blast Off* required the center group, usually between five to eight students, to stand in a circle and skip count by twos, fives, or tens. When the student reached the magic number of 50, he or she yelled *blast off* and sat down. The game continued until the last student was

standing. Using ASL during the game created a quiet method to reduce distractions for the other students during center time. Students would sign each number when his or her turn came and additionally signed *blast off* while waving. This game helped students build skills for skip counting that benefitted the later unit of counting money. Practice for even and odd numbers using ASL helped students to sign numbers for grouping objects and identify a number as even or odd. Students signed the numbers as well as the words for even and odd. In addition, students quizzed each other and answered using ASL.

Students particularly favored a math activity that required creating math problems with a partner. One student signed numbers while the other student wrote the number down to create problems for other group members to solve. The activity required students to think carefully about the sign, transfer it to paper, and use ASL to further demonstrate an answer. Though the activities may appear to be simple, the added method of ASL supported further retention of topics while allowing students with different learning styles a new form of communication. Number sense and place value along with other math concepts gained attention and support while using ASL in the classroom. In their studies of second- and third-grade classrooms, Tobin and McInnes (2008) found that centers build literacy, comprehension of content areas, and allow dynamic opportunities for learning with a differentiation that meets the needs of diverse learners, particularly at-risk learners.

Collaborative Learning Groups

Similar to centers, collaborative learning groups are a useful forum in which to use ASL to support skills and concepts reinforced in the classroom. Approximately five to seven students participate in each small group while the teacher uses formative assessments to monitor progress on a given topic. For Heslinga and Nevenglosky, small groups, like centers, provided

opportunities to review and reinforce previously studied topics. The primary difference between centers and collaborative learning groups is that the latter has a student-led aspect where centers typically involve a game or a simple review activity. In addition, utilization of centers took place once a week whereas small groups occurred at least four days a week. Collaborative reasoning in elementary classrooms, as discussed by Zhang and Dougherty Stahl (2011), reveals that when students have more time to practice communication skills, their socialization and learning increases.

The use of ASL supported small-group instruction through different activities focused on the main skills for a week. One favorite small-group activity among students involved sentence building. Each student wrote a sentence on a strip of paper and placed it in a bowl. Students pulled a sentence out of the bowl and worked to translate the sentence into sign using ASL dictionaries such as *Signs for Me: Basic Sign Vocabulary for Children, Parents, and Teachers* (Bahan & Dannis, 1990). Students would then sign the sentence and other students worked to translate and figure out which student wrote the sentence. This activity developed communication skills in addition to grammar and sentence structure.

Another commonly used activity during small-group time includes retellings with story aprons or other props created by students. The students used ASL in this activity by substituting sign language for each vocabulary word. As the student retold the story, each time the vocabulary word came up, the student signed the word and the rest of the group said it aloud. This activity got the entire group involved in the retelling, which created opportunities for active and responsive listening skills and the fostering of connections between ASL, the spoken word, and the written word. The importance of that relationship supports spatial awareness as well as

connections for students who learn best visually (Brereton, 2008, 2010; Daniels, 1996; Toth, 2009).

Content Areas

Heslinga, Nevenglosky, and coworkers who chose to integrate ASL into major units found that it aided student comprehension and interest throughout every content area. In the science curriculum, one major project included the solar system. Students completed a model and a report on one planet that most interested him or her. The teacher integrated ASL into a science center using planet and ASL flashcards. Students learned the sign for the different planets and practiced signing two sentences to describe the planet chosen for the assignment. Students demonstrated ASL to other classrooms while presenting the planet projects. Students enjoyed using ASL to describe the planets and reported being very proud of the skill.

Santau, Secada, Maerten-Rivera, Cone, and Lee (2010) examined and described the need for science teachers to know their subject, vary practices that promote understanding, advance scientific inquiry, and use supportive practices for ELLs. The integration of ASL into science and other content areas creates many openings for vocabulary development and enhancement in elementary classrooms. Using ASL in the content areas further supports the varying learning styles of students and continues to build connections among peers who perhaps had difficulties communicating and connecting with one another. Content areas provide more opportunities in which the entire class participates together, allowing for the building of camaraderie, communication, and meaningful connections.

Student Progress

The authors monitored student progress through diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. ASL fit into the area of assessment as some students chose to demonstrate

knowledge of vocabulary and content area by signing to the teacher and the class. Students who have verbal and linear language challenges find signing allows them to communicate, speak, and review concepts along with their peers (Papafragou, 2010). Some students, especially students learning English, chose to use ASL to communicate simple questions or feelings. ASL helps students to communicate, increase vocabulary development, and expand spatial awareness (Brereton, 2008, 2010; Daniels, 1996). ASL also benefits special and general education students placed in inclusion classrooms by providing opportunities to understand and accept differences as well as social interactions that boost self-esteem (Brereton, 2009, 2010; Daniels, 1996; Toth, 2009).

Professional Development

In a professional development session involving 80 elementary teachers from four different schools within a rural Pennsylvania district Nevenglosky shared best practices for incorporating signing into classrooms. Throughout the session, educators listened to ideas and participated in activities to increase collaboration and incorporate signing into daily learning opportunities. Many educators expressed interest in learning more about the benefits of ASL and its positive effects on students.

Heslinga teaches undergraduate and graduate education students how to use ASL to build language skills in heterogeneous inclusion classes with ELLs. Over five years these students have reported how the inclusion of even simple ASL signs, such as the alphabet, polite words, frequently encountered nouns, and common verbs, have immediately increased enthusiasm for learning. Participants ranging from toddler day care staff to middle school teachers of language arts, science, and music told how the use of signing invigorated students, caused students to pay attention to the person giving directions, and created a more positive classroom environment.

Conclusion

Using sign language in heterogeneous classrooms with ELLs meets learning needs, clarifies concepts, and engages students in action that decreases stress while building language and thinking connections. Brereton (2010) showed that students with behavioral challenges can find success in the active participatory options that enter a classroom via signing. Teachers and students report many benefits of using ASL in an inclusive setting for the instruction of non-deaf special and general education students. The introduction of ASL into small-group instruction through professional development allows for the sharing of best practices along with assessment measures and proof of student progress, as supported by research. Educators from classroom teachers to speech pathologists note the social and intellectual bridges that arise through the use of signing in inclusive heterogeneous-grouped classes, as described by Toth (2009). Bridges to social acceptance, confidence, comprehension, and communication appear in classrooms that scaffold learning, layer language, and promote active and interactive learning that includes signing.

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