

A Brief History of ASL

For over 250 years, ASL has evolved in the U.S. and Canada as the means for Deaf people to express and share their ideas, needs and thoughts. Although it is primarily Deaf people who use ASL, hearing people around them acquire and use the language also. They are children born to Deaf parents, siblings of Deaf children, other family members, neighbors, friends, co-workers, supervisors or employees of Deaf people. Since the mid-1960s when linguists recognized ASL as a distinct language (something that was true all along, but only “discovered in the 1960s), a growing number of hearing people have elected to learn ASL in major colleges, universities, and high schools throughout the country.

The origins of ASL can be traced to a couple of major historical influences. There is evidence that in the 1600s some of the inhabitants of Martha’s Vineyard off Cape Cod had a genetic pool that resulted in a large number of Deaf people in the community. This in turn resulted in naturally formed signing communities on the island. Likewise, on the mainland, various indigenous signs were used where Deaf people were members of villages. These regional sign languages were brought by the students to the first school for the Deaf founded in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817.

The second major influence was French Sign Language, brought by the school’s founders, Laurent Clerc, a Deaf teacher from France, and Thomas Gallaudet, a hearing American minister. The blending of the indigenous sign language and French sign language formed the basis for ASL today.

Similar to other language minority groups within the U.S., it is common for the native language to be acquired within the family. This process is true for only 8-10% of Deaf children who are born into families with Deaf members. A larger percentage of Deaf children, around 70%, are raised in hearing families that do not sign. The remaining 20% of Deaf children have hearing families who use ASL and embrace Deaf culture. For Deaf children, the Deaf residential school has been the primary venue for learning ASL. The constant exposure to signing Deaf peers, Deaf teachers and dorm counselors has made it possible for the children to develop fluency in the language. For Deaf children, the Deaf residential school has been a primary venue for learning ASL. The constant exposure to signing Deaf peers, Deaf teachers, and dorm counselors has made it possible for the children to develop fluency in the language.

Bilingual Education and Oralism

The early 19th century saw ASL flourish through residential schools, which had immense success in Deaf education utilizing ASL and written English. Gallaudet University was founded in 1864 with a charter signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Gallaudet University was (and still is) a bastion for using signing in higher education as well as contributing to the standardization ASL among Deaf people in other states where many graduates returned home to teach.

From there, highly evolved Deaf signing communities formed complex networks all across the country. The communities maintained constant contact through organized sports, conferences, social and political events, and the arts.

However, a pivotal moment in ASL and Deaf America's history occurred in 1880, with repercussions that are still being felt today. At the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf Conference in Milan, Italy, educators who supported oral instruction for Deaf students successfully blocked the influence of educators supporting Sign language. The congress voted in favor of oral education for all Deaf children. In a span of 40 years following the conference, the percentage of Deaf children being taught by the oral method grew from a very small percentage to an astounding 80%. Before that, Deaf teachers constituted 45% of all teachers of the Deaf, but that figure went down to only 11%. In many parts of Europe, Deaf teachers were dismissed because they were unable to teach speech. The oral approach to Deaf education became a contentious issue for the next century and a half, reflecting the broader society's misplaced belief that spoken language is superior to sign language.

Fortunately, during that time, Deaf children lived most of the year at schools. Despite not understanding much of what went on in the classroom, after school, in the dormitory and on the playing fields, ASL was still used to exchange information, to share understandings and learn other life lessons. Generally, at best, ASL was tolerated by the staff in the dormitories. This approach (banning signing in the classroom, and tolerating it outside the classroom) took its toll on the general Deaf community. Deaf people's perception of ASL and themselves as capable human beings diminished drastically. Confidence and pride waned as the quality of education declined for Deaf people. What carried them through those

years was the ability to continue networking with each other at the Deaf clubs, Gallaudet University, and other social events.

The 1960s and Onward

In the 1960s, linguists at Gallaudet University proved that ASL is a fully developed independent language unrelated to English. From there, a resurgence of a positive view of ASL and Deaf culture empowered Deaf people to reclaim control of the institutions that impact their lives. In 1988, when the Board of Trustees at Gallaudet University selected a hearing president who didn't know ASL, the students staged a weeklong protest and succeeded in appointing the first Deaf president of the university.

Interestingly, while Deaf people have struggled for decades to bring ASL back to the classroom as the language of instruction in Deaf education, ASL enjoys tremendous popularity among hearing parents and their babies. Literature shows that learning signs early in infancy has a positive effect on general language development and enhances the parent-child relationship. Studies further show that signing babies understand more words, have a larger vocabulary and engage in more sophisticated play than non-signing babies. Yet the language has not been systematically made available to many Deaf babies.

Issues surrounding ASL and Deaf education continue to be contentious, but the resiliency of ASL in the face of many obstacles is a testament to its value in meeting the powerful human need for communication.