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FACING TRANSITIONS: LEARNING ASL IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

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Engagement with native language models is essential for second language acquisition. Social distancing mandates made this interaction nearly impossible for students learning American Sign Language (ASL), at a small rural university in western Oregon. COVID-19 brought with it many challenges, including a hurried transition from face-to-face to online learning. Not all courses can easily shift to an online platform without facing some degradation to both content and instruction. Without access to community events where native language models were present, ASL students had less opportunities for incidental learning, legitimate peripheral participation, and connection within Deaf communities of practice.

Introduction

The introduction of COVID-19 brought with it far more than just a sweeping pandemic that left the whole world reeling in its wake. All of us in the field of academia likely got the same email, “Dear faculty, effectively immediately, and until further notice, all courses must transition to an online format.” Educators from all disciplines faced an unprecedented challenge and had very little time to make the changes needed to offer all courses remotely. As instructors raced to transition everything online, many students struggled to move out of dorms, find a new place to live, get the technology needed for remote learning and figure out how to create a new normal—while simultaneously trying to cooperate with social distancing mandates, and find essentials like toilet paper, eggs and hand sanitizer. One must only revisit Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to realize that the devastation caused by COVID-19 will have far reaching implications for our

students, colleagues, and the field of education. No physical contact, lack of food and a sense of foreboding are enough to challenge even the most motivated and tenacious student.

Many institutions of higher education, and some K-12 programs, offer online courses in addition to their face-to-face classes. The idea of a student completing coursework from their couch, or a teacher delivering a class while wearing pajama pants—strategically angling their camera away from their piles of laundry—is not novel. Online learning and remote instruction have been around for many years. This has led some people to question why the mandatory transition to online learning and instruction is problematic. What they fail to realize is that the problem is born out of a lack of choice or alternative. While it is true that many students have successfully completed entire programs online and received their high school diploma, GED, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees, it was their choice to do so. In contrast, the transition to online learning due to COVID-19 was mandatory. This has left students and instructors with no other option than to dive into the realm of virtual instruction.

American Sign Language in American Education

Western Oregon University (WOU) is a small university situated in the rural town of Monmouth, Oregon. Our university prides itself in serving a diverse group of individuals, including many first-generation, international, and non-traditional students. The faculty genuinely care about the students, and we all cultivate a sense of community and family. WOU offers a range of academic programs and disciplines to meet the needs of students preparing for their professional lives after graduation. One of the most popular programs on campus is the American Sign Language (ASL) Studies Program, which offers a major or minor in ASL Studies at the undergraduate level. WOU offers three years of ASL instruction, including core language classes and content-based electives, which is rare because most programs across the United States offer only two years of instruction.

Many students who major in ASL Studies go on to work directly with members of the Deaf community in various settings and environments, while others choose to pursue graduate degrees in ASL Interpreting, Deaf Education (teaching), or Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. Access to additional ASL courses, as well as Deaf faculty who serve as language models, better prepares students for the level of ASL fluency required to be effective in their chosen fields.

American Sign Language in a Virtual Environment

ASL is a visual-spatial language that is linguistically and grammatically distinct from English and other spoken and signed languages (Emmorey, 1993). As a 3D language, ASL incorporates handshapes, non-manual markers (facial expressions), eye gaze, and the use of space, which are all intricately connected and follow a specific structure. According to the Modern Language Association's 2013 report, ASL is the fourth most studied language in the United States (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015) and while there are some programs that offer ASL courses online, the majority are taught face-to-face. The nuances of language are easy to miss in typical classrooms, and this is only made more complicated by slow internet, freezing video, dimly lit rooms, and cats jumping on laps for an afternoon snuggle.

The complications of learning ASL online are further confounded by a lack of opportunity to engage with native language models. The closing of common event hubs—such as coffee houses or college campuses—and social distancing mandates disconnect students from the Deaf community. Most ASL courses require students to complete a minimum number of hours immersed in the Deaf community, with the expectation that students practice the skills they learned during classroom instruction. Cornell-Swanson (2001) found that getting involved in activities or events where there are native language models present is a key component of learning ASL. Classroom instruction, especially when relegated to a 2D platform, does not provide students with the incidental learning opportunities that are essential for language acquisition and development.

Some platforms, such as Zoom, offer a variety of tools meant to simulate a smaller, group-based experience (e.g., breakout rooms) but the teacher cannot be in every room at the same time. The goal of small group activities and discussions is to practice new language constructions. Without the instructor present, students are unsure if they are using their new skills with one another correctly. Face-to-face learning allows for teachers to quickly scan the room as students practice in small groups and offer instant feedback that supports learning and language acquisition. A shift to online learning means that students have fewer opportunities to receive feedback, because instructors can only be in one virtual breakout room at a time. This is a challenge for students who are unsure about new content, and for instructors who are trying to assess students' progress with only limited glimpses into their practice sessions. Access to instruction and feedback from native language users are essential for second language acquisition, but online learning hinders opportunities for both.

Engaging in a Community of Practice

Students choose to learn ASL for many reasons. Some students take ASL only to satisfy a language requirement for high school or a post-secondary program, while others want to become involved in the community for employment or social connection. Learning ASL online might work for the former, but it is the latter group that needs more exposure to native language models and rich language environments to develop fluency. According to Radford (2012),

Researchers have found disadvantages to online learning of ASL. Most obviously, it is a challenge to create a sense of community in an online course when students and instructors never meet one another face-to-face (Lim & Kim, 2003; Sloan Consortium, 2010; Allen & Seaman, 2010). Research shows students are not as satisfied with online courses compared to face-to-face because of lack of interactions with classmates and instructor (Hara & Kling, 2001; Sikora & Carroll, 2002; Lim & Kim, 2003; Ehrlich-Martin, 2006). This is particularly troublesome in an ASL classroom where learning occurs through interaction among students and the instructor. In a face-to-face classroom the environment is already established for communication and collaboration (p. 5).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimate peripheral participation occurs when an individual engages in a community of practice and connects with leaders within that community. A community of practice is defined as a group of people engaging with one another for a shared purpose, goal, or desired outcome (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This temporary shift to online learning, due to COVID-19, has had a devastating impact on students' opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation within various Deaf communities of practice. For example, students who were supposed to complete student teaching, internships, or a practicum in Deaf schools—or classrooms with Deaf students—have faced cancellations or have had to complete their required hours remotely. This is not an ideal learning environment for students who are training to become teachers, because they do not have access to information that is typically gleaned incidentally through a face-to-face, hands-on experience with members of that community. For example, students learn culturally appropriate attention-getting techniques (e.g., flashing the lights, tapping a student's shoulder, waving their hands in the front of the classroom) in their ASL courses, but many of those techniques do not work in a virtual environment.

Students who are interested in the field of interpreting also require solid foundations in ASL. For language development and fluency, it is essential that

students engage with native language users in Deaf communities of practice in various settings (e.g., medical, legal, religious, recreational). In addition to language acquisition, other important skills such as turn taking conventions, interrupting a conversation, or matching a specific register (formality) are all impacted by this online experience. There are more conferences, trainings, workshops and gatherings online due to COVID-19, but many are admitting an increased number of participants to accommodate the lack of typically available face-to-face events. This shift leads to less reciprocal conversation and engagement among participants, making it difficult for students to practice their emerging skills. These decreased opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation within Deaf communities of practice may have a long-lasting impact on students' language acquisition and eventual acceptance into the Deaf community.

Impacts on Foundational Language Acquisition

It is important to note, students who are ready to transition into Deaf-related careers or graduate programs are not the only ones impacted by this shift to online learning. There is also an impact on students who are just learning the foundations of the language. Less opportunities for 1:1 engagement with instructors, less access to small group conversations, and an inability to attend Deaf/ASL social events all make learning ASL more difficult. Students who take ASL courses face-to-face are accustomed to seeing their instructor from many different angles. This aids in students' receptive skills and impacts their own sign production and language acquisition. In an online environment, the amount of space used is dictated by the camera and screen width, not by the grammar and rules of ASL.

All reciprocal languages have supportive feedback or backchanneling, so the speaker knows the listener is paying attention to the conversation. In spoken English, the listener might nod or shake their head, mutter, or use sounds to indicate their reaction, and that they are following along. ASL has its own system of backchanneling. Head shakes or nods, facial expressions, and certain signs indicate the listener is paying attention and shows their emotional response. This means there is a lot of movement on the screen, and for new ASL users, it is hard to keep track of what is going on. Their eye gaze often flits around their screens as they try to keep up with who is signing. Even if instructors try to manage turn-taking during synchronous courses, the need for reciprocal engagement and backchanneling necessitates movement from all students almost constantly.

Even if students can track all of the nuances of language, access to a computer, the appropriate software and high-speed internet are privileges that not all students are able to afford. Prior to COVID-19, some students completed their homework in libraries or coffee shops, where they had access to free Wi-Fi. They

could take advantage of resources such as printers, power outlets, and library staff who could troubleshoot connectivity issues or help them log into an online account. Now, students are trying to connect from home, and often have to share their Wi-Fi with others, which slows upload and download speeds making their video choppy. This is not conducive to learning a visual language. Faced with the dilemma of whether to run synchronous classes that might be inaccessible for various reasons (e.g., slow internet speed, outdated technology, or a modified work schedule) or asynchronous classes that inherently provide less opportunity for peer engagement, instructors find it difficult to make a decision that benefits all students. What is evident in these trying times is there is no system or approach that works for everyone.

Impacts on Deaf Professionals

Students are not alone in their struggle with technology or lack of access to resources; some instructors face the same plight. While universities, colleges, and K-12 schools have tried to provide these critical resources, some of the technology is outdated and instructors may not have the ability to download needed programs—or there are not enough computers and hotspots to meet high demands. Additionally, instructors who are accustomed to teaching in a face-to-face environment may have had little experience with online platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Skype. Almost overnight, they have had to learn how to navigate various programs and be able to help students troubleshoot when faced with challenges. Many hearing professionals turn to YouTube for tutorials and tips, but most online videos are presented in spoken English and do not offer captions or a transcript for Deaf individuals to be able to access the content. Having access—to what seems like unlimited resources at the click of a button—is a privilege that Deaf people go without.

It is important to note that teaching ASL classes is not the only way that Deaf instructors are impacted by the transition to working remotely. Meetings, trainings, and other events are being held online, which adds additional struggles for Deaf people who rely on ASL to communicate. In general, hearing faculty can connect on a phone line, and even when their video freezes, they still have full access to the content of the meeting. This is not the case for Deaf faculty who rely on an ASL interpreter, or who use ASL to present or respond to questions during the meeting. Asking for repetition or admitting that one missed something can be difficult and requires a developed sense of autonomy and agency that many people do not have. Interpreters might not want to admit they missed content for fear of losing the opportunity to work during a time when many are unemployed. Faculty may feel uncomfortable speaking up in front of their colleagues, so they might not notify anyone of the challenges they are facing during meetings or

when teaching their classes. For example, if the interpreter's video feed keeps disappearing during a Zoom meeting, they may miss important information while trying to scroll through many screens to find it again. Mental health counselors might not be sure how to respond to their Deaf clients who are frustrated with a lack of access to news and updated health information, or who are forced to use remote interpreters even when they have difficulty accessing the video screen due to connectivity issues or confounding factors. Teachers have to engage with Deaf children whose parents do not know ASL, and due to frustration and lack of communication at home, both are struggling more than normal, and needs are going unmet. One can only imagine, then, if experienced professionals are struggling with these changes and the impact they have, just how many students must be feeling this heavy burden with very little recourse or opportunity for control.

Short-term impacts brought by the shift to online learning during COVID-19 are already being felt by students and faculty around the world. If students go back to face-to-face classes in the fall of 2020, perhaps long-term impacts will be minimal. If, however, students and instructors are forced to continue remote learning, especially of ASL, the long-term impacts may be much more dire. Students who intend to work in the Deaf community will have less opportunity to engage with native language users and participate in incidental learning. They will be forced to attempt to acquire language through a medium that presents challenges and barriers, even in the most opportune times. Fluency, cultural norms and opportunities for apprenticeship and peripheral participation will be limited, and the ramifications will impact members of the Deaf community in many ways. Less opportunities to engage with mentors, adapted internship assignments and constant uncertainty all create an unease for students that cannot be dismissed. Pre-COVID-19, students could look to their instructors for guidance, support and encouragement for ways to face the challenges of their chosen professions, but with many post-graduation unknowns, even instructors can only offer their best guesses.

Conclusion

What the future holds for the academic year 2020-2021 remains to be seen, but if current trends offer any prediction, most programs will be forced to offer their courses online in the fall. At a time when students should be thinking about their futures, preparing to start their professional careers, and moving up Maslow's hierarchy of needs toward self-actualization, many are faced with additional hardships. Students may be navigating a loss of employment, the decision to move back home, a lack of childcare, food and economic insecurities and the

constant fear of contracting a deadly virus. These all serve as constant reminders that the world is different now than it was eight months ago.

Many instructors are facing the disappointment that fall term will not bring with it a return to face-to-face instruction. Even with more time to prepare for the transition, learn how to effectively use online learning platforms and revise course materials to meet the needs of students, teaching ASL online will remain a challenge for many. Decreased opportunities for students to actively engage with their instructors, peers and native language models will continue to present challenges for second language acquisition and the development of fluency in ASL.

For all who were hoping that the transition to online learning would only last one term, the harsh reality of an unknown return to face-to-face instruction is hard to bear. Learning ASL remotely presents many challenges for students who are already struggling to get their psychological and safety needs met. Perhaps the move toward self-actualization will not be achieved during 2020 or 2021, but rather simply surviving it, remotely, will be the goal.

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