

Language and Communication at American School for the Deaf

American School for the Deaf is a developmental bilingual program in which ASL and English are the two languages used for instructional purposes. We aim to preserve and build upon students' abilities in both languages with the goal being fluency in both. ASL and English are separated to ensure that students receive the best modeling of each. When discussing ASL and English we are looking at them from a multi-modal approach and we work to provide students opportunities to utilize all language possibilities. In ASL, this refers to viewing, watching, and signing. In English, this refers to reading, writing, fingerspelling, finger-reading, speech reading, speaking, typing, and listening. In situations when a lesson is focusing on speaking and listening in small groups, a teacher might add some signs to support a students' understanding and minimize frustration. If a student is unable to participate in activities with only spoken English without frustration, it may be determined that such activities discontinue for that student. In all areas of instruction teachers work to develop students' metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge helping them to understand that they are users of two languages and that they make choices to use each throughout their day.

American Sign Language

American Sign Language is a visual language complete with grammar, structure, syntax, and nuances similar to any other language. It is language of the Deaf community and it is the language that creates full accessibility for all students in our setting to gain content information in all subject areas and social experiences. Students at American School for the Deaf receive large group instruction in all subject areas in ASL with printed English support. Our teachers will be required to achieve Advanced or better ratings on the ASLPI to ensure that they have the skills to model ASL and explain high level concepts to our students. Students not only receive content instruction in ASL, but they take ASL classes to learn the grammar and syntax of ASL in the same way that students take English classes. Students are encouraged to also creatively use ASL as a form of artistic expression in projects across the curriculum as this is an important element of Deaf culture that we work to encourage at American School for the Deaf. Pride in their culture and language as members of the Deaf community is an added element of being a bilingual program.

Relative to Language Planning and ASL, teachers will:

Be attentive to all 4 possible ASL language abilities ASL, this refers to viewing, watching, signing, and seeing and make sure that all are addressed throughout each unit.

Make conscious decisions to bridge English grammar and principles with ASL structures to help create greater meaning and understanding.

Ensure that instruction in ASL is supported by printed English.

Incorporate assessment strategies for content that is not only in English but also in ASL i.e. video homework, tests, etc... to ensure that our assessment and instruction match.

Incorporate elements of Deaf culture and appreciation for creative ASL expression whenever possible in projects, activities, through video, etc...

Spoken English

In terms of Speech/Language Services for our students as determined by IEPs, SLPs use a variety of strategies to support development in both languages. They also work to keep ASL and English separate. Again, there are times that sign supported speech may be incorporated to clarify, reduce frustration, and assist in understanding. Some of their time with students will be pull out and sometimes they may provide support through a push in model that has them as a part of classroom language time, working with small groups of students to support what is currently happening in the classroom.

For our students to maximize their abilities in English, those who wear amplification are supported to do so by all our staff. Our audiologists, speech/language pathologists, and teachers work together to check hearing aids, replace batteries, check implants, and teach students how to become independent, responsible users of this equipment. Parents play a large role as well in ensuring that amplification is used. Parents need to send students with their equipment. When problems with equipment extend beyond that which our audiologists can support, parents need to take the responsibility to get things repaired in a timely manner. If students do not have working equipment and parents are not supporting the repair of equipment, it may be determined that pull out speech services be removed until working equipment provides students the access necessary to maximize the benefit of speech services.

We recognize that while for most of our students ASL is the preferred language, we also acknowledge that students need tools to operate in a hearing society. English vocabulary development across the curriculum is a large part of this and we believe that in addition to the definition and use of vocabulary, assisting students with maximizing their mouth movement and lip reading skills is also important. We will work to assist them with this as a natural part of vocabulary building in all settings and this is not the sole responsibility of the SLP.

Phonemic Awareness is a research based critical element of reading fluency. It is understood that this provides deaf/hard of hearing students with a unique challenge. We use Visual Phonics as a part of our instruction during speech time for some of our students and we are looking at how to provide training to teachers in the younger grades so they can utilize some of these strategies and help in providing our students with some of the basic building blocks of letter sounds, syllables, etc...that are critical for later reading. This can then serve as a useful tool for reading comprehension and fluency as students grow.

One of the most important elements of teaching our students to become successful bilingual students is the meta-cognitive awareness that there are in fact two languages that are used in purposeful ways throughout their day. We are committed to thoughtfully looking at each lesson and activity we do in our planning and considering which language we will use and which language possibility we will emphasize. We will provide a variety throughout each day and week and we will discuss it with students so they become aware and can better understand the differences.

Relative to Language Planning and Spoken English, teachers will:

Consider when during their week students are provided opportunities for spoken English experiences. For some students this may be set time during lessons throughout the week and for other this may be purely social i.e. last 5-10 minutes of class chat with friends in English-either written or spoken.

Identify times on weekly plans where spoken English will be the focus for students who are able to communicate using it.

Be attentive to all possible English language abilities: Listening, Typing, Speaking, Lip reading, Finger reading, Fingerspelling, Writing, and Reading, and make sure that all are addressed throughout each unit.

Include spoken English (mouth movement, phonemic awareness, listening) when introducing vocabulary. By increasing the number of trials students hear and see the English, we create the ability for them to generalize that vocabulary.

General Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

We work hard to make our environment a fully accessible one for our deaf and hard of hearing students and staff. We believe that out in the world, challenges with accessible are inevitable.

In a school for the deaf, those challenges should be significantly less. We also work to create a culture of respect and care. That said, there are some basic understandings:

A hearing person may need to have a private spoken conversation in a work room on a phone no different from a deaf person on a VP that is clearly signing small, and making their conversation as private as possible. VPs are essentially in private spaces for the most part, making it clear that it is not an open conversation for others to watch. It is inappropriate for staff to walk around on their cell phones and to be chatting on cell phones in public spaces. If you are in a work room, sit in a corner of the room and talk in a private way. If you are making a cell phone call that is essential, take it to a private space with reception or outside in an alcove or corner. There are respectful ways to have private conversations.

Staff need to be signing at all times in all spaces where there are Deaf people. If two hearing people are having a conversation it needs to be a signed conversation or it needs to move to a private location. If a hearing person needs to make a phone call, they need to move to a private location. We all need reminders about this from time to time, and we can't get upset when someone reminds us. We also need to be respectful and kind in how, when, and where, we remind each other.

There are times that we have visitors tour American School for the Deaf who do not have any ASL ability or times that we have students who have been using only spoken English visit with an interest in joining our bilingual environment. As we work to be welcoming to new individuals in our setting and introduce them to our environment, we often use interpreters but there may be times that people will utilize sign supported speech to ensure understanding. We recognize that this is not a method of instruction but a contact language situation out of an immediate necessity.

Lastly, we understand that language and culture change and grow over time. We recognize there are highly emotional and personal feelings associated with language and culture. American School for the Deaf is committed to being an environment of respect and appreciation for language and culture. We operate under the assumption that when people break linguistic and cultural "rules" it is not malicious but rather due to a lack of understanding. We are committed to helping all members of our community learn and grow.