American Sign Language in the Classroom, what are the benefits?

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Teaching Context

My classroom is comprised of twenty first and second graders. I have thirteen first graders (six boys and seven girls) and seven second graders (five boys and two girls). One of my students is African American, one student is Asian and eighteen are Caucasian. My students come from a variety of backgrounds, including different family situations and economic statuses. There is a wide range of parent involvement in my classroom. We have parents who are able to come into the classroom to volunteer and parents who are rarely able to sit down with students to do homework at night. Parent communication is mostly positive. Parents often call the classroom or email to discuss problems, questions, and concerns.

There are four reading groups in our classroom and the two grades are mixed according to reading ability. Each group works with appropriate reading material for their level with attention to writing, reading, and comprehension. For part of my inquiry, I focused on the academically lowest reading group which is comprised of all first graders; three girls and one boy. These four students have been receiving Title One support all year. Two of these students have very involved parents who remain in almost constant communication with the classroom teacher and volunteer regularly.

As a classroom community, all of my students live and work very positively together. We have a morning meeting every day which provides all students an opportunity to greet each other and participate in a cooperative activity. My students are all supportive of each other and include everyone during morning free play and casual conversations.
I have an educational minor in hearing and deafness studies and have a deep interest in American Sign Language (ASL). I introduced my students to sign language in the fall. I started by teaching them colors and dismissing them to wash their hands by the color of their clothing. I was pleasantly surprised by how quiet and attentive my students were while I signed. The alphabet came next and I taught this to my students using their names. I taught each child his or her own name. I passed out folders at the end of the day by signing students’ names. Sign was also incorporated into our morning meeting. I taught my students greetings and days of the week that they were able to use with each other.

Main Wondering
What impact will knowing American Sign Language have on first graders’ academic success?

Sub-questions
1. Does American Sign Language tap into the creativity of my students?
2. What effect does using sign regularly during the school day have on my students?
   On their concentration? On their behavior?
3. Can signing instructions and directions help students comprehend better what is expected of them?
4. Can in-school instruction of American Sign Language support student-parent communication?
5. How does the use of American Sign Language change the dynamics of my classroom?
6. What personal effect does sign language have on my students?

Data Collection

There were many ways in which I collected data during my inquiry process. I completed a spelling pre-assessment with all of my students, informally assessed my students’ understanding by using conversational sign language during the day, surveyed students and parents, took observational notes, videos and pictures, and administered a post-assessment. I analyzed my data in different ways, looking for evidence to answer my wonderings.

Written Assessment

On February 5, 2008 I administered a pre-assessment (Appendix A) with all of my students during center time. My students were in their small reading groups of four to six students each. I asked my students to spell forty “no-excuse” words. These are common words used quite often in writing and they are also posted in our classroom. At this point, students were only signing their names. They did not have enough mastery of the ASL alphabet to sign “no-excuse” words.

During center time in late March, each student was asked to spell approximately ten words. Following the written test, I quizzed students two at a time on their ability to finger spell those same words. Finger spelling is the ASL term used to describe the use of hand shaped letters to spell an English word. All students were able to finger spell at least
two words. Errors occurred because students were unsure of the finger shape of a certain letter or the actual spelling of the word.

Analyzing my assessments was very mathematical; I was able to total the number of mistakes made by my students in the pre and post assessments. There was an improvement overall from the February pre-assessment to the March post-assessment. I also counted the number of mistakes in the signed assessment. The analysis of these assessments helped answer my main wondering about the impact of ASL on a student’s academic success.

Conversational Sign

Since beginning my inquiry, in the first week of February, I have done at least one signed greeting during Morning Meeting every week (Appendix C). We began by doing a whole group *good morning* signed greeting and progressed all the way to students walking around greeting each other with one-on-one signing conversations. This included sentences such as *what is your name?*, *how are you?*, *what month is it?*, *what day is it?*, *have a good day*, and *nice to meet you*.

I also designated at least one day every two weeks when my students could not verbally ask to use the restroom or get a drink of water. On these days, students had to sign their requests. If they forgot, I would remind them by signing *sign please*. The student would smile and every time, they would use sign correctly.

When my class and I returned from lunch, I signed my instructions for everyone to put their lunches away, put coats on, and sit on the carpet inside. My students responded to my directions by using the sign for *yes*. 


My students got sign practice with our fourth grade book buddies as well. My students had the opportunity to teach their buddies some signs including their names and the question, *what is your name*? My students appeared excited to be able to teach something to these older students and the fourth graders responded really well. They smiled and asked questions of my students if they were unsure of a sign.

Every day, I analyzed my students’ progress in conversational sign. I knew how to proceed in my teaching based on my students’ understanding. At the beginning of my inquiry, most of my students only knew how to sign their names. My students can now have conversations with each other in sign. This answers many of my sub-questions about the effects of daily sign use on my students’ behavior in the classroom?

**Survey**

In the beginning of April, I surveyed parents and students (Appendix D). I asked two sets of questions about interest in writing and interest in signing. The parent survey consisted of five “yes or no” questions and a space available for additional comments with each question. My student survey had seven questions and the answers were noted by coloring in a happy, neutral or sad face (😊 😊 😊). I read this survey out loud to each of my twenty students.

In one of my sub-questions, I wondered if in-school instruction of American Sign Language would support student-parent communication. My analysis of the parent survey showed a lot of communication between parents and students. I do not know how much students communicated with their parents prior to my inquiry, but I had more than fifteen parents inform me that their child was teaching them sign at home. Ten of these parents
made a comment to me about their positive feelings towards my introduction of ASL. My analysis of the student survey answered my question about students’ feelings towards learning sign. I wondered what personal effect sign might have on my students. I learned from reading twenty student surveys that my students enjoy sign language.

*Personal Notes / Video*

I have gained a lot of information about my students’ progress through informal assessment, note-taking and capturing signing progress through video. When I introduced sign to my students in the fall, they did not show much confidence. I had to repeat things a few times before anyone understood what I wanted. Over time, my students learned a lot without much direct instruction on my part. They began to sign with each other without my prompting and in multiple settings. I was able to track these occurrences through taking notes and video clips.

My personal notes and video footage helped answer many of my questions. I analyzed my personal notes and saw evidence of student growth and understanding. More and more students were using sign voluntarily and without my prompting. I recorded instances when a student mastered particular phrases that had given them trouble. I also recorded student reactions to sign; students verbally told me they did like learning American Sign Language. I saw improvement in my students’ sign through video clips. I also captured students using sign during many parts of the school day.
Explanation of Findings

*Claim 1:* A student’s mastery of sign grows at a similar rate to their academic ability.

I have seen progress among my students with their ability to sign that mirrors their progress in academic areas. “Bobby” has shown a lot of difficulty in writing and the alphabet, but he is extremely strong in memorization. A sample of student work from the end of November (Appendix E) shows considerable trouble forming any recognizable words and even producing correct sentence structure. Another piece of Bobby’s work from late March shows a wonderful improvement in sound spelling, letter shapes, and sentence structure. I have also been able to note a change in his ability to sign. Due to his extraordinary memory, Bobby caught on to sign quickly with things like his own name, *bathroom* and *please*. Spelling words was more difficult because he does not know how to spell many words, but he has improved. I have seen a consistent and parallel improvement between his academic growth and ability growth in ASL. I have seen a similar trend in seventeen other students.

I administered a spelling test at the start of the inquiry process in anticipation of a spelling test at the end of my inquiry. I wondered if learning sign would benefit my students in the areas of spelling and writing. I saw improvements in spelling and most of students’ acquisition of ASL in the span of two months. I was not able to make a strong connection between their written improvements and sign language. There were a lot of variables that went into my students’ growth, including teacher support, maturity, and daily use and practice. I did see achievement in both areas in my students. I recognize that further investigation into this wondering could show new and different findings.
Claim 2: Students enjoy learning sign language.

Although simply stated, this claim runs quite deeper than my students just having fun using American Sign Language. I focused my inquiry on sign language because I saw my students’ interest in the fall and thought it would be worth it to look into benefits of using sign in the classroom.

My students appear to enjoy music, art, math, and computer but my students rarely mention these subjects during other parts of the day. I have seen sign language permeate all parts of our academic day. On February 14, 2008 I made the rule that students could only sign their request to use the restroom or get a drink of water. The week of April 7, 2008 my students were still using these signs without my prompting. I had a parent write a comment on their survey, returned on April 9, saying, “(Our daughter) spells our names out, when she goes to the bathroom she says, ‘mom I have to go to the bathroom’ she will sign it.” During a physical education class that I visited on April 4, my students learned the dance for the YMCA and I saw one student signing the letters instead of using both his arms. During the same class period a young girl sat out because she did not feel well and signed the entire alphabet. I was able to capture these two instances on video. I have had students ask to do a morning meeting greeting in sign language and some have even practiced signing with each other after a spelling lesson or during independent reading. I have spotted students signing waiting in line for lunch and outside on the playground.

All of this information has shown me how much my students really enjoy American Sign Language.
Claim 3: My students’ use of American Sign Language has strengthened them as individuals.

I have used sign language in classroom social settings to make it more conversational. I did not want my students to see ASL as a job or something they needed to learn. I adapted many of my morning meeting greetings to use sign language (Appendix C) and saw so much enthusiasm from my students. The more phrases I taught them, the more they were able to say to each other. In January, I had each student sign good morning to the person sitting next to them in the circle. I did not want them to sign just each other’s names because I knew that would take too long and not all students were able to do that. It is now April and my students are able to stand and walk around, greet each other and ask what day it is?, what is your name?, and how are you?. I used to sign my students names to have them wash their hands for lunch and now my students are able to come in front of the class and sign their friends’ names. They have to concentrate more and really look at each other. My students are learning a new language and I have told them that it is an accomplishment. Along with the knowledge of a new language, my students can now interact with each other more thoughtfully and really look at each other during a conversation.

After picking my class up from the lunchroom, I often sign to them whether or not we will go outside for recess. I use sign to ask them to put their lunches away and get their coats. My students answer me by signing yes. There are still some students who do not pay attention or did not understand every word I signed, but when they ask me, I tell them to ask one of their classmates. Those that did listen emphatically say, “She said put
your lunches away and get your coat. We’re going outside!” They are now able to understand my signed directions. The amount of confusion after lunch and after my signed instructions has decreased over the past two months.

I received many parent comments and answers saying that their child taught them sign. The survey (Appendix D) showed that my students go home and share sign with their parents. From student surveys I found out that my students like to share sign with their parents. I watched my students sign with their book buddies and saw that positive interaction as evidence that they wanted to share their ability to sign. First and second graders do not often have the opportunity to teach others information. I was very proud of my students and their ability to teach others a new language.

**Implications for Further Teaching**

Prior to completing my inquiry I would have planned to use Sign Language in my future classroom out of interest. I now see so many benefits including a stronger classroom community, academic support and the knowledge of another language and culture. Through completing my inquiry, I found that a student’s mastery of sign grows at a similar rate to their academic ability, students enjoy learning sign language, and the use of American Sign Language strengthens my students as individuals.

I will continue my wonderings that surround sign and its effects on emergent readers and writers. As I mentioned in my first claim, I saw spelling and sign ability increase over time but I was not able to identify any distinct connection between the two. I plan to look into any possible correlation between learning sign and writing words during my future career as a teacher. I want to introduce the fundamentals of sign early in
the year including the alphabet, sentence structure and numbers. At the start of my inquiry process, I had a concern that sign would distract my students and use it to communicate with each other during work time but this was never an issue. I allowed enough time during the day for sign that my students were able to use it with each other. I will continue to use sign with my students next year and in years to come.
Appendix

Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C
Appendix D

Appendix E

11/21/08

3/28/08